

The Daily Tribune (dailytribune.com), Serving Southeastern Oakland County

---

News

## OU at vanguard of 911 text service

Tuesday, December 7, 2010

By Chris Hagan  
For the Daily Tribune

---

ROCHESTER HILLS — Much of the late 1960s was dominated by free love, war protests and unforgettable music. But in 1967, amid a heightening Vietnam War, government officials were conjuring up a way for one single number to be used nationwide to report emergencies.

A year later, the standard 911 number was implemented by phone company AT&T and is still the first method of reporting emergencies.

Just as iPods and smartphones have replaced LPs and rotary phones, Bob Dylan's "the times they are a changin'" is ringing true.

The FCC said Tuesday it is "taking steps to revolutionize America's 911 system by harnessing the lifesaving potential of text, photo and video in emergencies."

FCC spokesman Robert Kenny said the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech was a big wakeup call to the emergency dispatch community because students were sending text messages to 911 that were never received.

Now, with nearly every cell phone equipped with photo and video capabilities, the FCC is looking to harness those technologies and incorporate them into the system that, in large part, has remained a phone-calling system.

"Most cell phone contracts today incorporate data packages that include text, photo and video messaging," Kenny said. "That would give dispatchers and first responders much more information about an emergency or a crime."

The Oakland County Sheriff's Office has been keeping a close eye on the developing changes of the "Next Generation 911." Lt. Curtis Childs, who's in charge of emergency preparedness and communications, says the sheriff's office is waiting on further technical information from the FCC.

"We replaced our dispatch communication system this year and it's next-generation ready," Childs said. "We're just waiting for the FCC to develop standards on the new texting system.

Childs said the system will drastically benefit the law enforcement and emergency response world.

"If a picture is received and you're able to recognize a landmark, even with having the crossroads, you're able to visualize more of the scene before you arrive," he said.

One organization that was quick to react to the Virginia Tech incident was Oakland University. Two years ago, OU's police

department began brainstorming and developing ideas for students to text the university's dispatch department about crimes or other emergencies.

"We began looking into it in 2008, and after looking at our options, we realized it wouldn't be that hard to do," said OU police Capt. Mark Gordon. "We developed an e-mail account because a majority of phones can convert text messages into e-mail format."

Because of time delays, text messaging systems — like those many radio stations have for their listeners — were not acceptable for emergency response. OU police Officer Ken Kiley, who's a key figure in OU's text-savvy dispatch, said it's been a well-received system on and off campus.

"We've been able to use it quite often," he said. "We've even helped Oakland County Sheriff because of a text we got involving a barricaded gunman."

Emily Jackson, 18, an Oakland University freshman from Clarkston, said her school's incorporation of the text system could be a life saver.

"I think it's a great idea because if you're in a situation where you can't talk, like a hostage, then texting may be the only way," she said.

Although several students reacted positively to the text system, some were skeptical of its practicality in a real-life setting and were content on calling during an emergency.

"In theory it sounds good. I can see how it would be a good tool," said senior Anna Turkington from Clawson. "I just think I wouldn't find myself in a situation that would call for it."

Gordon and Kiley both agree that public education is key for a countywide text system to work. Public knowledge was just one area among many that had to be addressed.

"It's still a 911 call, it still requires immediate response of some sort," Gordon said. "For something countywide, you'll have to reallocate your staffing levels and dedicated someone to that."

Childs agreed, noting that the sheriff's office will be ready whenever the technology becomes operational. He added that he anticipates some public concern whether or not the message will be received by the police, because "when you send a text you never really know if the person on the other end will get it."

On Dec. 21, FCC officials will go before a board proposing a plan for a nationwide, multi-level public survey involving citizens, governments and public safety organizations. If approved, the survey would look at the general feasibility of introducing broadband to 911 systems.

"In order to really get this moving, the most important thing would be to have all levels of government and public safety working together."

Kenny said the survey would further examine other hindrances, like installation and cost. He added that it would be two to four years before it became operational.

The "Next Generation 911" looks to decrease response times for emergency personnel, while giving them real-time information on the ground. With more people acquiring a greater texting literacy, the FCC said it hope texting can become a form a crime stopping.

"We wanted to try and bring everybody into the broadband world including public safety," Kenny said. "It would give people more flexibility and options when calling 911."

---

URL: <http://www.dailytribune.com/articles/2010/12/07/news/doc4cff07e2ae128165414090.prt>

© 2010 dailytribune.com, a **Journal Register** Property