AT&T rolls out cutting-edge 911 call tracking technology

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When someone calls 911, seconds matter. That's why the first question a 911 dispatcher asks is, "What is the address of the emergency?"

A decade ago, if someone called and didn't know the address, emergency call centers would send out police officers with their sirens on and tell the caller, "Tell us when you can hear the siren."

That's because the call center could base a caller's location only on cell towers, which can cover an area of up to 10 miles. Not only did police and rescue have trouble finding people, but calls also got routed to the wrong call center.

Now, with the advent of cellphone GPS data, carriers are teaming up with call centers.

Dallas-based AT&T says by the end of this month, all emergency calls made through the wireless carrier will be routed to emergency call centers based on phone GPS data rather than cell tower data. With GPS data, a caller can be located within 50 meters of his or her actual location—about the length of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

"It's a pretty big game-changer," said Terry Goswick, executive director at North Texas Emergency Communications Center, which serves Addison, Carrollton, Coppell and Farmers Branch.

AT&T customers don't need to do anything to receive the service, which AT&T worked on with cloud-based solutions company Intrado of Omaha, Neb.

Previously, if you called from Addison, your call might have been incorrectly routed to a nearby center in Carrollton or Dallas based on cell towers, meaning your call would need to be transferred. Rerouting calls can take 25 seconds to 30 seconds, an amount of time that's critical when it comes to fires and medical emergencies.

Rerouting calls isn't a rare occurrence.

Intrado said about 10% of wireless calls and up to 50% of calls in public safety areas where state, county or city boundaries overlap need to be transferred to a different call center.

The North Central Texas Emergency Communications District, which serves 13 counties in Dallas-Fort Worth, has more than 40 public safety answering points that might answer your call.

AT&T's rollout will be lifesaving for someone in a traffic accident or someone caught in a fire at a hotel with an unfamiliar address, Goswick said. And then there are medical emergencies in which someone calls but can't talk, such as when they're experiencing a heart condition or seizure.

"Now when they call 911, we're going to be able to find them," Goswick said.

Finding people used to be easier when all calls came from a stationary landline. But now, 80% of 911 calls are made on wireless phones, according to the National Emergency Number Association. And there are a lot of emergency calls each year—240 million in the U.S. each year, with 20 million coming out of Texas.

John Snapp, vice president of technology at Intrado, said AT&T's new technology means emergency calls are getting to the right call center quicker and more often.

"The seconds really are the difference sometimes between life and death if you think of a person who may have had a heart attack or a shooting or a fire," Snapp said.

A company sharing location data often brings up concerns about data protection. AT&T says the processing is triggered only when a caller places a 911 call, and the location data is shared directly only with public safety call centers.

Chris Sambar, AT&T Network's executive vice president, said the process happens automatically in the background. AT&T sends the phone's information to Intrado and Intrado gets the information from the device and sends it to the call center. Neither AT&T nor Intrado sees a caller's location.

While other carriers have rolled out similar technology, AT&T's nationwide tech can be used without requiring call centers to upgrade their systems, Sambar said.

For example, Verizon says on its website that it offers enhanced 911 services, including someone's estimated latitude and longitude, to centers that have upgraded their equipment. In 2020, T-Mobile launched location-based routing on its network in Texas and Washington state.

"AT&T typically leads the charge when it comes to 911," Goswick said.