

TEXT-TO-911 ROLLOUT IN IOWA

Blake DeRouchey, 911 Program Manager

Iowa Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

CLIP ONE: ROLLING OUT TEXT-TO-911

RUN TIME: 38 seconds

The process for rolling out Text-to-911 has really been about four or five years now. And that really started with our network, which is a “NextGen” 911 network. It’s a broadband, Internet-based network that was put in place back in 2011 [or] 2012 and finished up around then. The network has been capable of receiving texts since then, but getting the other moving pieces on board has kind of been the delay in the rollout of the service. There’s a lot of moving and coordinating pieces with Text-to-911: the equipment that resides in all the answering points, as well as the wireless providers. Coordinating all those pieces has been a challenge over the last couple years.

CLIP TWO: EQUIPMENT PROVIDERS IN THE 911 CALL CENTERS

RUN TIME: 30 seconds

There’s about six different equipment providers that have different equipment at each of the answering points. And while the protocols and standards are in place, there’s just little differences between each of those vendors and the look and the programming behind that technology. There’s about six that we have to work with within the state that are in the state’s 113 answering points. Some of those have rolled out faster, some of those have had some technological challenges. But we’re still working towards that with all of them.

CLIP THREE: WHAT TOOK SO LONG?

RUN TIME: 42 seconds

I think a lot of people wonder why this is just now coming about. And when you think about it, it’s fairly easy to text one dedicated number to another dedicated number. Text messaging has been around for 15, 20 years, but Text-to-911 is still in its infancy. And that’s because instead of going one number to another number, you’re going one number to this universal number that is 911 and you have to have it routed correctly. So if you’re texting 911 it goes to the right answering point not just based on your area code. That’s been the technological challenge – with the location and getting it to the right place – but also to the development of the standards to make sure that text can be deciphered at the call-taker’s screen correctly, as well.

CLIP FOUR: IOWA COMPARED TO OTHER STATES

RUN TIME: 48 seconds

Iowa is really far along in the process compared to other states. Texas and California have more answering points capable of receiving Text-to-911, but of course those are really big states as well. The other thing that Iowa has done a little bit differently in its implementation of Text-to-911 is we’ve taken the approach that it should be integrated, which means embedded on the call-taker’s screen just like an incoming call – no different for a telecommunicator [or] dispatcher to have to learn a new screen or a new method of dealing with incoming calls. And the other thing that we’ve done is we want all of the answering points – all 113 of them – to be able to answer their own jurisdictions’ texts to 911. Some states have taken the approach where maybe they’ll only have two or three answering points receiving texts to 911 on behalf of the entire state.

CLIP FIVE: TESTING AND IMPLEMENTATION, AND MOBILE PROVIDERS

RUN TIME: 1 minute, 4 seconds

The testing and implementation of Text-to-911 is kind of a lengthy process. We confirm the connectivity most generally through Verizon or a single cell-phone provider. And then there's additional testing down the road with the other providers. The providers right now in Iowa that have the [Text-to-911] service are AT&T, iWireless, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular, and then I already mentioned Verizon. The map that's depicted on our website indicates that at least one of those carriers has confirmed connectivity for Text-to-911. Now, in a lot of them, it's all of the providers that I just listed. But it's at least one of those. If you are curious about if your provider is ready for Text-to-911 in a certain location, please just get in touch with your wireless provider and they'll be able to answer it for you.

A lot of the smaller, more regional [wireless] services use some of the technology or towers of the larger, national carriers and it might be the case that you're good on Text-to-911 as well. But I would recommend that you check with your provider first.

CLIP SIX: LOCATION SERVICES FOR TEXT-TO-911

RUN TIME: 1 minute, one second

Location on Text-to-911 unfortunately is not very good at this point. If you remember when wireless first came around in the '90's, location was also very poor on that and throughout time, technology and requirements and standards have improved. I expect the same to happen with Text-to-911 but for right now, we're encouraging people [that] one of the first messages you send when you're texting 911 needs to include your location to the best of your ability to provide that. Even if that's a county or a town – hopefully it can be more accurate than that down to an address. But that is what we're educating folks about. Just due to the fact that location accuracy is fairly poor at this point on Text-to-911.

Because the location is so poor, there are instances where [the call] could be misrouted and [the location of the caller] could be identified early on in the texting conversation so the right responders can get involved and be able to respond successfully to the right location.

CLIP SEVEN: DON'T “TEST” TEXT-TO-911

RUN TIME: 1 minute, 11 seconds

The other thing that we want to make sure to convey is to not “self-test” Text-to-911. It's no different than faking a call to 911. It is actually against the law. I know it might be a little bit nerve-wracking to just text 911 in an emergency and trust that it's going to work. But unfortunately, that is what you need to do. Do not test, yourself, your ability to text 911. Which is why we're also saying, “Call if you can, text if you can't.” Text is very useful for cases of domestic abuse, home invasion, and really specifically for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. There's a huge benefit to Text-to-911, but at the same time a voice call is much more accurate – you can tell tone of voice, you can relay a lot of information quicker and it's more concise. But again, there's definitely a benefit to texting in certain situations and we've seen a number of those in Iowa already.

If you're currently in an area where your wireless provider is not Text-to-911 capable, you'll receive a “bounce-back” message relatively quickly – probably within about 10 or 15 seconds – that says, “Text-to-911 is not available in this area. Please make a voice call.”

CLIP EIGHT: MULTI-MEDIA, GROUP TEXTS, HOW TO TEXT 911

RUN TIME: 1 minute, 17 seconds

At this time, the technology does not exist from the wireless providers to be able to send multi-media – pictures or video – to an answering point. That’s coming down the road. Again, the Iowa Next Generation 911 network will be able to accommodate multi-media, but at this point wireless providers are incapable of sending the multi-media and having telecommunicators receive it. Along that line, we ask that there is no jargon and especially emojis. That won’t be translated correctly onto the call-taker’s screen.

One more thing that I’d like to mention: a lot of times you might think it’s a time-saving measure to be able to do a group text – to be able to include 911 as well as your spouse or loved ones. At this point I would not recommend doing that. I’m not saying it won’t be possible down the line, but at this point if you are going to text 911, ONLY text 911. It won’t go through if you do a group text. It won’t transmit at all if you try to do a group text. So only text 911.

You literally type the digits “9-1-1” into the “To” line of your text-messaging app. It’s opening up your phone, opening up your text-messaging app, and starting a new message TO 911. And then you would just type your message and hopefully include your location to the best of your ability at the same time.

CLIP NINE: LAST COUNTIES TO GET TEXT-TO-911

RUN TIME: 43 seconds

The few remaining sites that exist to get “turned up” on Text-to-911 – we’re still working on those. A lot of those, especially, for instance, Pottawattamie County and Scott County, are more technologically complex because of their redundancies that they’ve built in with their neighbors across the river. And that’s great – we’ve added redundancies as well. It makes 911 more robust, and more “strong” – more “public-safety grade,” as they describe it in telecommunications. But that’s also introduced some complexities which has made getting Text-to-911 in those areas a little bit more challenging. But we are still working with both the local answering point as well as the vendors that represent their equipment to get Text-to-911 just as soon as possible to those locations.

CLIP TEN: THANKS TO ALL INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTING TEXT-TO-911 IN IOWA

RUN TIME: 33 seconds

We talked earlier about how long the process has been in the state and I kind of referenced all the way back to the development of the Next Generation network in Iowa. More specifically, the [Text-to-911] rollout plan in Iowa has been going on for about a year, a year and a half and it’s been a lot of coordination and a lot of hard work between a lot of different levels of government, but also the private sector, the vendor community, and the wireless providers. There’s a lot of coordination that has gone on there and we’d like to thank those that have participated and been able to assist.