Social media and the 9-1-1 dispatch center

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This is the fourth installment of GovWin's **blog series** recognizing National Public Safety Telecommunications Week.

Frequent readers of the GovWin B2G Blog may have noticed several postings related to the rise of social media and its implications on both government services and the government technology marketplace. (I recommend taking a look at postings by **Kyle Ridley**, **Kate Tussey** and **Evan Halperin**.) Today, I continue that theme with a look at how the rise in requests for emergency assistance via social networking platforms affects operations in public safety answering points (PSAPs).

Despite the fact that I cover the 9-1-1 industry, I never really considered the public's increasing reliance on social networking would result in a small percentage of the public utilizing these networks as a means to request emergency assistance as opposed to the traditional means of dialing 9-1-1. In February, my eyes were opened at the **2011 Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) Western States Regional Conference and Exposition** in Ontario, California, when Communications Manager for the San Bernadino County Sheriff's Office Ron Dun gave a presentation titled "The Social Media and 9-1-1." This session featured many comments from the audience of dispatchers who have faced difficult situations in responding to requests relayed to them via social media.

There are plenty of **examples** of how this practice has saved lives, but what is often overlooked is how these requests are received and handled by dispatch centers. The biggest hurdle that dispatchers face in dealing with these requests is that they are forced to work based off a second-hand interpretation of an emergency. Remember, Twitter tweets are limited to only 140 characters.

What many people do not realize is that in order to limit distractions, many PSAPs restrict Internet access at their workstations. This prevents dispatchers from logging on and verifying or requesting additional information from the individual in need of help. Jurisdictions that choose to allow unrestricted access will have to craft standard operating procedures for responding to and investigating social network-generated requests to ensure they are handled appropriately without compromising the dispatcher's time to assist with other calls.

This new era of social media influencing so many aspects of life does not change the job of the dispatcher for better or worse, but it surely impacts the role. PSAPs still trying to keep up with determining the location of cell phone calls and texts messages (while managing tight budgets) are being pulled in a new direction by the power of social networks. Currently, there are more questions than answers about how this will unfold, but it surely will be interesting to observe.

What's Next?

At the local level, the first thing that dispatch centers can do to aid operations is engage with the public to help bridge the gap between the technology-savvy public's sometimes uninformed expectation of 9-1-1capabilities. On a very basic level, this would involve reaching out to schools and community organizations to make the public aware of the PSAP's ability to receive certain types of calls for services. Some people are simply unaware that they cannot text 9-1-1 in most jurisdictions, or that a tweet should only be used if calling directly is not an option.

At the national level, establishing and maintaining a relationship between industry associations such as APCO and NENA and the top social networking platforms will be a key factor in pushing companies to educate their users on their systems' capabilities. This wouldn't necessarily involve encouraging or discouraging users from requesting emergency assistance via their social networks, but could help users understand what information they should include if they are left with no other options than to seek help from their social network.

One of the biggest unanswered questions is what role, if any, 9-1-1 technology solutions providers will play in bridging the gap between the public placing requests for emergency assistance via social networks and the PSAPs ability to receive them. While it is by no means an easy task, any vendor that incorporates a means to process and investigate social network-generated requests for assistance in their solutions will create a great differentiator for their product.

In the spirit of embracing social media, I encourage any dispatchers who might be reading this blog to post any

comments they might have or connect with GovWin's JPS team via Twitter at **(@GovWin_PubSafety)**.