

911 system a way of life

As of noon Wednesday, help's a mere 3 digits away

By Molly Kavanaugh
Post staff reporter

In Haleyville, Ala., where the first emergency 911 phone system went into operation 20 years ago, dispatching hasn't changed much.

One emergency phone line still runs into City Hall, connected to a red phone. A dispatcher answers the phone, which rings about 10 times a day. There are no computers, no charge to Haleyville's 5,300 residents for the service. The biggest headache is wrong numbers from the neighboring town, which has a phone exchange that begins with "921."

The 911 system which begins operation at noon Wednesday in Hamilton, Clermont and Butler counties in Ohio and Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties

in Kentucky, is an altogether different animal.

Greater Cincinnati's 911 system:

- **Is computerized.** Every call is routed through a computer which tells the operator who answers the address and phone number of the caller. Children, stroke victims, and callers frightened to the point of temporary amnesia, won't have to say anything to get help.

- **Is enormous.** Two states, six counties, a major metropolitan city, 1.5 million people, 170 public safety agencies, 21 locations where 911 calls are answered. It is believed to be the largest single 911 system to go into operation.

- **Isn't free.** Unlike the residents of Haleyville, Cincinnati

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Bell telephone customers will pay for 911 but the service is inexpensive. The cost ranges from 12 to per 17 cents per month.

About half of the country's 250 million people already can call 911 for help, says Dave Yandell, who recently stepped down as president of the National Emergency Number Association. "One nation, one number" is the association's motto. Its goal is to have 911 nationwide by the year 2000.

The technological end of 911 is "a piece of cake," says Yandell. "The political and financial are the stumbling blocks."

Both Ohio and Kentucky legislatures had to pass laws before their counties could approve the system. Those approvals came in the mid-1980s. Although parts of Indiana have 911, neighboring Dearborn County does not. It will not be included in Cincinnati's network because the majority of its residents are not served by Cincinnati Bell.

About half of the states still do not have 911-enabling legislation, while other states, such as California and Oregon, have mandated that all their counties implement 911.

Dr. William Gates, a Cole-rain Township physician, volunteer firefighter and tireless crusader for 911, told audiences years ago that 911 would cost each person about "three packs of cigarettes" a month. Then, that added up to about \$1.50.



Dr. William Gates

Now, since state and local taxes are funding the installation, it will cost Ohio customers only 12 cents a month, or if you will, about two cigarettes. In Kentucky, the cost is 15 cents in Boone and Kenton counties and 17 cents in Campbell County. The fees will appear on phone bills beginning Sept. 1 and are fixed for at least five years.

In Cincinnati, the largest city in the six-county system with 380,000 people, starting up 911 has been a mammoth undertaking.

At one time, the city of Cincinnati had 25 people working on 911-related projects, said Da-

vid Rager, the assistant safety director. "It's been a complete change in our dispatching operation, from the kind of chair a dispatcher sits in to how they do their job and where."

In early 1988, fire dispatchers moved from the Fire Tower in Eden Park and joined police dispatchers on the third floor of the Cincinnati Police Administration building at 310 Ezzard Charles Drive. In late March, dispatching procedures were changed. Police telephone operators began taking all the information from callers, and the operators passed that information via computer to either a fire or police dispatcher.

In June, delays in dispatching surfaced when Taylor Cornett of Mt. Washington complained to City Hall that his wife was put on hold at 3 a.m. when she called to report their camper was on fire.

Safety officials reviewed records and found that she could have been on hold up to 2.7 minutes. They also found that about 15 percent of all callers were answered by a recording, which comes on after four to five rings, or 20 seconds. Last month, city officials agreed to hire 13 more operators, which will reduce the number of callers put on hold to about 1 percent. Those operators won't be on the job until the end of year.

The state capital was the first area of Ohio to begin 911. Problems have been minimal since Franklin County and the Columbus area switched on the system on July 1, 1987, said county coordinator Ken Borrer.

Over a six-month period, Borrer said the three biggest problems were calls incorrectly routed by the computer to the wrong dispatcher, calls which did not generate a phone number and address on the operator's computer screen and misdials. The first two have been corrected, and the third — specifically why phone numbers which have 911 in them ring in the emergency center — is being worked out.

In Cuyahoga County, which has had 911 since October, two incidents last month in Cleveland have resulted in changes. Instead of the usual 80 to 90 fire runs, on July 4 the runs totaled 372 and the system could not handle all the fire runs. Two phone lines are being added.

And on July 26 a woman calling for an elderly woman who collapsed at a mental health

911 history

1937 — Great Britain established 999 as its emergency phone number.

1967 — A U.S. Presidential Advisory Commission recommended that a common emergency phone number be implemented nationwide.

1968 — Haleyville, Ala., population 4,000, installed the country's first 911 system.

1973 — Chicago became the first city to implement Enhanced-911, a technological advancement that automatically identifies the location of the caller on a computer screen without the caller talking.

1982 — A Cincinnati Bell survey found there was overwhelming support for 911.

1984 — Kentucky legislature authorized 911.

1985 — On June 18, Ohio House Bill 491 was signed into law, giving 911 the needed go-ahead. A five-member planning committee was formed on Nov. 13.

1986 — A public hearing in April followed with the needed approval by governments representing 60 percent of the population.

1987 — In June, a 911 network was agreed to by Hamilton, Butler and Clermont counties in Ohio and Kenton, Campbell and Boone counties in Kentucky.

1988 — In January, Cincinnati fire dispatchers were moved to the Cincinnati Police communications center. On March 27, fire dispatchers started dispatching via computer.

home and later died said she got a busy signal for 20 minutes. Ohio Bell said there was a power failure for about six hours, which affected 70,000 customers.

City officials here say that after months of testing 911, they are confident that the system will work. So is Taylor Cornett, the Mt. Washington man who wrote his first complaint letter ever this summer.

"This may be the only emergency call in my life," he said. "But my neighbors and friends might need to call. Now they have a chance."