

# Cell calls often don't send location to 911

**Adam Rodewald**, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 2:41 p.m. CST February 23, 2015



(Photo: File/Press-Gazette Media)

It took rescuers from four departments more than two hours to find a man whose boat had capsized on Lake Winnebago last fall.

Dispatchers tried to pinpoint the man from his cellphone, but all they got was a general location five miles northeast of a cellular tower in downtown Oshkosh, according to the police report.

With no other information to go on, a team of first responders, sheriff's deputies, the U.S. Coast Guard and state Department of Natural Resources officers all raced against the setting sun to find the man. They didn't know if he was injured or drowning.

The initial call had come into the Winnebago County 911 dispatch center at 6:45 p.m. Authorities eventually located the man at 9 p.m. on top of his overturned catamaran.

**USA TODAY:** [911's deadly flaw: Lack of location data \(/story/news/2015/02/22/cellphone-911-lack-location-data/23570499/\)](/story/news/2015/02/22/cellphone-911-lack-location-data/23570499/)

He was not harmed.

Situations like this incident in Winnebago County, where authorities did not easily find a person in distress, remain common in Wisconsin and elsewhere even as Google maps, Facebook and other cellphone apps can track your every move with amazing accuracy.

The problem spans the state and nation, where millions of 911 calls placed from cellphones each year do not give dispatchers the caller's location, according to a review of hundreds of pages of local, state and federal documents by the Gannett Wisconsin Media Investigative Team and USA TODAY.

Some 911 calls show only the location of the nearest cellular tower. Others display nothing at all. Emergency communications dispatchers can retransmit a location request, but that requires the caller to remain on the line long enough to complete the process.

Dispatch centers in central and northeastern Wisconsin said they don't keep statistics on location accuracy. The state doesn't track this, and neither does the Federal Communications Commission.

In other states that do report on location accuracy, the likelihood of 911 getting a quick fix on a person can range wildly from as low as 10 percent to as high as 95 percent, according to the review of documents.

"What that means is you have this huge area to search to find out of that call needs or doesn't need help," said Cullen Peltier, director of public safety communications in Brown County.

Peltier said the location of a person placing a 911 call from within the Brown County dispatch center on Green Bay's east side will show up as the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay campus more than a mile away.

"The reality is you can send an officer to the area of where the call is coming from, but that officer is never going to find anybody," he said.

In Winnebago County, where rescuers struggled to find the capsized catamaran, it's estimated that as many as half the 911 calls from cellphones don't give an accurate location, said Capt. Mark Habeck, who oversees the county's public safety communications division.

Gary Bell, vice president of the Wisconsin Association of Public Safety Communications Officers, said he estimates similar rates across the state.

"We don't want location just delivered when they system is capable. We need it delivered on demand," Bell said.

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## Technology

Today's smartphones are powerful handheld computers with built-in geographic positioning systems and the capability of transmitting big data at high speeds.

But 911 communications systems are still primarily based 1960s infrastructures designed for land line telephones. Land lines, which are at a fixed address, can deliver a location almost instantly. Cellphones, on the other hand, are always moving and don't necessarily relay precise GPS coordinates back dispatchers.

"Cellphones keep getting better with GPS, but our equipment hasn't really changed," said Lori Heideman, dispatch manager for Wood County.

Between 70 and 80 percent of 911 calls now come from cellphones, according to dispatchers across the state.

"A lot of people think that if they call (911) and, even if they don't say anything, we know exactly where they're at. That's not always the case," Heideman said.

Cellphone companies and the federal government say it will be 2017 before they can assure useful location data is sent from a cellphone to 911 dispatchers in 40 percent of calls. They say it will be 2021 when they can assure location data for 80 percent of calls.

In other words, even after six more years, 911 may not be able to find one in five emergency callers throughout the country.

Meanwhile, cellphone carriers are working with public safety officials to find callers as quickly as possible, said Kathy Whitbeck, director of network management for Green Bay-based Cellcom, which provides cellular service in Wisconsin and Michigan.

Every time a call is made with a cellphone, the location is triangulated using cellular towers and pushed into a database. Dispatchers can access that database and pull the location into their own system, Whitbeck said.

Cellcom touts location accuracy within 50 meters of a caller in 100 percent of calls, Whitbeck said.

Wisconsin's 911 dispatchers say the best way to quickly help someone remains speaking directly to them.

"When I talk 911 accuracy, I always want to stress the point that the best way for us to know your location is to have a true live conversation with the individual," said Bell, of the Wisconsin Association of Public Safety Communications Officers. "Let's use technology as a tool ... but just like anything else, if you put all your eggs in one basket, poor outcomes can happen."

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<http://www.documentcloud.org/public/search/projectid%3A%2018346-911-location-problems%20>  
<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1674211-steven-mael-wisconsin-capitol-police-officer.html>  
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