



When the ubiquitous isn't Getting ahead of infrastructure failures

"You don't know what you have until it's gone."

It's a phrase we've probably all uttered at one time. Often because we take something for granted and assume it will be there when we want or need it. The phrase could easily apply to infrastructure—utilities, communications, and transportation. Because infrastructure is ubiquitous (everywhere around us), we tend to take it for granted.

But its failure can definitely have an impact on business continuity. We need only to look back to December 2018, when an internet outage disrupted the nation's cellular 911 system for 36 hours. Counties across the United States—including in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Minnesota, New Mexico, Missouri, Arizona, Massachusetts, and California—reported that their call centers were down. Some 911 services in Canada were also affected.¹

When 911 results in a 404

The most basic step to include in any crisis plan is activating the emergency response system. An individual (or individuals) should be responsible for contacting law enforcement in the event of a threat, or the fire department in the case of a fire, or the ambulance service for a medical emergency, and so on.

But what happens when the ubiquitous system isn't available—when dialing 911 results in a 404, so to speak? Do you have a fallback plan in place that includes:

1. Alternative 10-digit phone numbers for your local 911 center?
2. Telephone numbers for the various public safety departments?
3. A hard copy of directions to the nearest fire station or police precinct, so someone can be dispatched to activate the emergency response system?

Chances are, the answer is no.

During the widespread outage in 2018, public safety departments took the initiative to close the information gap. The Boston Fire Department posted on social media pictures of its fire alarm boxes at various

locations. Public safety departments broadcasted their 10-digit phone numbers over the radio and other media channels. And 911 centers texted their 10-digit phone numbers to individuals who had proactively registered for emergency alerts.

But in times of crises, you shouldn't rely on others to fill these gaps.

New pages for your crisis plan

The 2018 disruption of the cellular 911 systems is a powerful reminder to review your crisis plan. And to add new pages that incorporate the following steps:

1. Print out a map and directions to the nearest fire station, police precinct, and emergency medical provider, and include those directions in your crisis plan.
2. Identify alternative phone numbers and methods for activating the emergency

response system in your community. (If the system is monitored by a central station, fire alarm boxes will notify someone.)

3. Determine how quickly alternative activation methods can be deployed if the ubiquitous emergency response systems aren't working. Practice using those alternative activation methods when rehearsing the crisis plan.

And then consider running through the same exercise for other services and resources your organization might take for granted.

There's nothing wrong with depending on ubiquitous systems and technologies. Just don't abdicate your responsibility to provide for your own and others' safety should those ubiquitous systems and technologies fail.

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1. Catalin Cimpanu, "CenturyLink outage takes down several 911 emergency services across the US," ZDNet, December 28, 2018. [Article updated December 30, 2018] <https://www.zdnet.com/article/centurylink-outage-takes-down-several-911-emergency-services-across-the-us/>.

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