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USVI Launches Text-to-911 Service for Emergencies When Calling Isn't Safe or Possible

Residents can now text 911 for police, fire, or ambulance help. Supported by Viya, Liberty, and T-Mobile, the new feature is especially useful for the deaf or in situations where speaking may increase danger.

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Residents of the U.S. Virgin Islands now have a new way to contact emergency responders: by texting 911 when calling isn't possible.

On Tuesday, Daryl Jaschen, director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), announced that all 911 operators in the territory are now able to receive emergency text messages directly at their workstations. The service is currently supported

by Viya, Liberty, and T-Mobile.

The development has been a year in the making, Jaschen said, and could be especially helpful to deaf or hard of hearing individuals, as well as people in situations where speaking out loud is unsafe or not possible.

While encouraging residents to review official guidelines online, Director Jaschen provided a brief overview of how to use the text-to-911 feature. “Enter ‘911’ in the ‘To’ or ‘Recipient’ field,” he explained. “The first message should be short. Include your address, specify whether you need police, fire, or an ambulance, and be sure to press send.”

Jaschen added that operators may respond with additional questions via text, and users should be ready to reply. Standard text messaging rates apply and are subject to users' service plans.

At this time, the system only supports messages in English and can only accept SMS text messages—no multimedia, such as photos or videos, can be sent. Messaging apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are not compatible with the system, and texts from Wi-Fi only devices or non-initialized phones may not go through.

Jaschen also urged users to avoid abbreviations, slang, and emojis, emphasizing the need for clear communication in emergencies. “We request no abbreviations, no slang, and please—no emojis,” he said.

He warned against adding others to the texting chain and discouraged sending “test” messages. However, if a 911 text is sent by mistake, users should follow up with a message indicating the text was accidental.

Despite the new feature, voice calls remain the preferred method for contacting emergency services. “If you can safely make a voice call to 911, please do that as your primary means,” Jaschen said, noting that calls provide faster, more detailed communication.

Still, the text-to-911 service is expected to be a vital tool for residents who cannot speak or call in critical moments.