



Durham 911 Center

Texting Option for Emergency Help

Frequently Asked Questions



Effective January 2017

What is “text-to-911” technology?

Durham residents and visitors who are also Verizon, AT&T, Sprint, and T-Mobile customers can send a text message to 911 for emergency help. Sprint customers only may also attach a photo to their 911 text.

The texting option is specifically designed for two types of emergency scenarios – potential victims who don’t want for someone to hear them make a 911 voice call as well as deaf or hard-of-hearing residents and visitors who may be unable to speak to a telecommunicator. Since the way people communicate is evolving and 911 centers across the nation are evaluating how to adapt to the digital age, Durham is offering multiple ways for people to reach out to 911 when they need help.

What are the limitations of “text-to-911” technology?

Texting technology is specifically designed for two types of emergency scenarios – to help potential victims who don’t want to be heard making a 911 voice call as well as for deaf or hard-of-hearing residents who may be unable to speak to a 911 operator. Please keep the following in mind if you send a text to 911:

- Customers should use the texting option only when calling 911 is not an option. It can take longer to receive a text message because someone must enter the text, the message then goes through the system, and the 911 operator must read the text and then text back. Picking up the phone and calling 911 is still the most efficient way to reach emergency help. Texting is not always instantaneous, which is critical during a life-threatening emergency.
- Providing location information and the nature of the emergency in the first text message is imperative since the 911 operator will not be able to access the mobile phone location or speak with the person who is sending the text and photo.
- Text abbreviations or slang should never be used so that the intent of the message can be as clear as possible.
- Do not use emoticons or emojis since this will scramble text messages.
- Customers must be in range of cell towers in Durham County. If customers are outside or near the edge of the county, the message may not reach the center.
- Only Sprint customers have the ability to send a photo attached to their text message.
- You must have a mobile phone that is capable of sending text messages. Any text message to 911 will count either against their messaging plan or be charged in accordance with their wireless plans.
- The texting function should only be used for emergency situations that require an immediate response from police, fire, or emergency medical services. Non-emergency issues should be communicated to the Durham Emergency Communication Center’s non-emergency line at (919) 560-4600.

Why can Sprint customers send a photo, but other customers can’t?

At this point, Sprint is the only national carrier to offer this service to its customers. Customers of non-participating carriers, such as Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile, should contact their service providers directly to request this service be provided in their area.

Is Durham the first community in North Carolina to try this new technology?

The Durham Emergency Communication Center was the first 911 center in North Carolina, as well as the one of the first 911 centers in the United States, to enable “text-to-911” technology using 911 digits and live-call takers. The Durham Emergency Communications Center is the first center in North Carolina that is able to accept attached photos with emergency texts from Sprint customers.

What is next-generation 911 technology and how does it support “text-to-911” capabilities?

The August 2011 installation of next-generation 911 technology provided the Durham Emergency Communication Center with the building blocks necessary to support additional services beyond text messaging, such as receiving mobile phone pictures from Sprint customers. At the end of the day, the Center is going to be able to provide faster and better service, not only to Durham residents and visitors, but to emergency response departments as well.

If I need more information about this technology, or just want general information about the Durham Emergency Communications Center, where can I go?

- Visit <http://durhamnc.gov/435/Emergency-Communications>.
- Contact the Durham Emergency Communications Center Director James Soukup at (919) 560-4191 or by email at James.Soukup@DurhamNC.gov.
- Follow the Durham Emergency Communications Center’s Facebook page at <http://www.Facebook.com/Durham911>.