

Iowa 911 call center becomes first to accept texts

August 5 2009, By PETER SVENSSON , AP Technology Writer

An emergency call center in the basement of the county jail in Waterloo, Iowa, became the first in the country to accept text messages sent to "911," starting Wednesday.

Call centers around the country are looking at following in its footsteps, as phone calls are now just one of many things phones can do.

"I think there's a need to get out front and get this technology available," Black Hawk County [police](#) chief Thomas Jennings said.

He said 911 texting should be of particular help to the county's deaf and hard-of-hearing residents, who have had to rely on more cumbersome methods to reach 911.

There have also been several cases around the country of kidnap victims summoning help by surreptitiously texting friends or relatives, who then called 911. With direct texting to 911, they should be able to get help faster.

John Snapp, senior technical officer of Intrado, which upgraded the call center, said calling should still be the preferred way to reach 911, but [texting](#) is a useful complement. A lot of kids already think they can text 911, he said.

For now, only subscribers to i wireless, a local carrier affiliated with T-Mobile USA, will be able to use the service, and only within Black Hawk

County. Those on other carriers will get a reply saying they need to call 911 instead.

Snapp said Intrado is working with other carriers to help them handle 911 texts as well. As a future upgrade, call centers may be able to receive photos and video from cell phones, which could help [emergency](#) responders prepare for an accident scene or identify a suspect.

While most 911 call centers can now get a rough location for callers, that is not yet possible with texts. That means i wireless subscribers who text 911 will get a reply asking them for the city or ZIP code they're in. If the response corresponds to the Black Hawk County call center's area, the text messages goes through to an operator. Otherwise the texter is told to call 911.

The call center's operators are able to text back from their computers to conduct a conversation with the texter.

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