

Survival app aims to help drivers in winter storms

January 6 2012, By DAVE KOLPACK , Associated Press



In this Dec. 29, 2011, photo, a woman poses with a smart phone displaying the Winter Survival Kit, a smart-phone application developed by Myriad Devices, a startup company in the North Dakota State University's research and technology park, in Sioux Falls, S.D. The bright red "I'm Stranded" button helps motorists more quickly reach out for help in emergencies, and the app also provides winter preparation tips, such as what to include in a survival kit to keep in your car. (AP Photo/Amber Hunt)

When a powerful blizzard ripped through North Dakota last winter, hundreds of drivers were stranded as white-out conditions shuttered interstates spanning the state. Snow whipped up by wind marred the lines between pavement and grassy drop-offs, leaving some scared motorists unsure what to do.

Two local software developers figured they could help.

Bob Bertsch, an employee with the North Dakota State University Extension Service, and Jake Joraanstad, an NDSU computer engineering major, had just finished developing an app to help residents during floods when the blizzard hit in March, convincing them to shift their attention to winter disasters.

Winter Survival Kit was born. The free program, available for iPhones and Android smartphones, is both a primer to help motorists prepare for winter driving and a beacon when things go badly.

It can pinpoint a motorist's location, call 911, notify friends and family, and monitor how long the gas will hold out. The app also gives potentially life-saving alerts when users tap a big red button on its simple home screen that reads, "I'm Stranded!" Among the advice: stay with your vehicle and keep the tailpipe clear of snow, since a backup can cause carbon monoxide poisoning.

"It's our sincere hope that no one ever has to use it," said Bertsch, an NDSU Extension Service web technology specialist who led the team that developed the app. "But if one person does have to use it and it keeps them in their car or keeps them from succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning, then it is definitely worth the time and effort that was spent on the app."

The app also helps drivers prepare for bad weather by inputting phone and policy numbers for insurance and roadside assistance, and designated emergency contacts. And it gives guidance on putting together a physical survival kit to keep in vehicles in case of emergencies.

"Any tools developed which arm people with information that will help keep them safe is of value," North Dakota Emergency Services spokeswoman Cecily Fong said.

The app does have limitations. Joraanstad said some especially rural areas of the country - particularly in the Great Plains - have shoddy cellphone coverage that could impede some features such as GPS. At that point the app would tell users that their location couldn't be pinpointed and instruct them to call 911.

Still, the app has emergency numbers handy, allowing users to send text messages for help. Text messages often can be sent by weaker signals than are needed for clear phone calls. And the app would give emergency advice on braving the elements - even telling users how to use parts of a vehicle to keep warm.

The Midwest hasn't seen much heavy snowfall in the last few months, so the app's developers haven't heard of any success - or horror - stories yet. But they're convinced that when the time comes, their app will help.

"This app can literally save someone's life. We take great pride in that," said Joraanstad, the 22-year-old chief operating officer for Myriad Devices, a startup company in NDSU's research and technology park that produced the app.

Bertsch, Joraanstad and two colleagues who teach at NDSU have become experts in disaster apps. Last year they developed a program to help residents deal with flooding that has overwhelmed North Dakota in the last few years. The H2O app provides news feeds, river levels, road closure maps and other information.

Winter Survival Kit, which works in the U.S. and Canada, joins several apps from other developers that were designed to help smartphone users in a bind, such as Help I Crashed My Car, Emergency Radio, iMapWeather Radio, iTriage, Close Call and pMonitor. As of this week, there didn't appear to be other winter survival-specific apps in either iTunes' or Android's app stores.

"I think we hit a particular niche," Bertsch said.

About 12,000 people downloaded the app in the first week it was released, and Joraanstad said that at last check, there were another 3,000 downloads. The early returns have been mostly favorable. Out of 16 user reviews on the Android website, 13 gave 5-star ratings. "Practical ... yet simple," reads one review. It had a 4-plus average rating among Apple iPhone users.

People posting lower ratings reported trouble with the app crashing. Joraanstad said those glitches are being addressed as they arise with updates.

The app is being promoted by Texas, where it can be downloaded directly from the Texas Extension Disaster Education Network website. In an unusual climate swap, Texas saw snow this winter before much of the rest of the country.

"With the amount of snow and ice during winter in the Panhandle and North Texas, plus the possibility of unusual cold weather occurrences elsewhere in the state, we felt it would be helpful to many Texans to make this app accessible," said Joyce Cavanagh, Texas extension service spokeswoman.

"People here aren't used to driving in that kind of weather. It gives some peace of mind while traveling," she said.

Cavanagh also said she felt more at ease knowing that many students traveling for the holidays had downloaded the app before hitting the roads.

College student Jessica Rush said she could have used such an app in March. The 21-year-old and a friend were traveling in separate cars in

North Dakota when the fast-moving storm left her so blinded that she was on the highway's left shoulder when she thought she was driving over the warning bumps on the right. She figured she was about a half-mile from her friend's car.

"I called my dad and told him I was going to get out and walk to her car and he said, 'Do not leave your car. You don't know where she is,'" recalled Rush, who had cellphone coverage where she was stuck.

Rush stayed in her 2000 Oldsmobile Alero for four nerve-racking hours until she was rescued by a truck driver, and she came away with a new appreciation for the dangers of winter driving.

"When your parents tell you not to go somewhere you should probably listen," Rush said. "I guess this app is the next best thing."

©2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Survival app aims to help drivers in winter storms (2012, January 6) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-winter-app.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.