

Apple sets up iPhones to relay location for 911 calls

June 18 2018, by Michael Liedtke



In this Sept. 22, 2017, file photo, customers look at iPhone 8 and iPhone 8 Plus phones at an Apple Store in San Francisco. Apple is trying to drag the U.S.'s antiquated system for handling 911 calls into the 21st century. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

Apple is trying to drag the U.S.'s antiquated system for handling 911 calls into the 21st century.

If it lives up to Apple's promise, the iPhone's next operating system will automatically deliver quicker and more reliable information pinpointing the location of 911 calls to about 6,300 emergency response centers in the U.S.

Apple is trying to solve a problem caused by the technological mismatch between a 50-year-old system built for landlines and today's increasingly sophisticated smartphones.

An estimated 80 percent of roughly 240 million emergency calls in the U.S. this year will come from mobile phones, most of which are capable of precisely tracking where their users are.

Emergency calling centers, however, don't get that detailed location information from mobile 911 calls. Instead, they get the location of the cellular tower transmitting the call, and must rely on other methods to figure out where the caller is.

That can take up precious time and often isn't very accurate, especially when calls come from inside a building. Emergency responders are sometimes dispatched a mile or more away from a caller's location.



In this March 15, 2018, file photo, a dispatcher works at a desk station with a variety of screens used by those who take 911 emergency calls in Roswell, Ga. Apple is trying drag the U.S.'s antiquated system for handling 911 calls into the 21st century. If it lives up to Apple's promise, the iPhone's next operating system will automatically deliver quicker and more reliable information pinpointing the location of 911 calls to about 6,300 emergency response centers in the U.S. (AP Photo/Lisa Marie Pane, File)

Apple's upcoming 911 feature relies on technology from RapidSOS, a New York startup. The approach developed by Apple and RapidSOS sends location data from an iPhone to a "clearinghouse" accessible to emergency calling centers. Only the 911 calling centers will be able to see the data during the call, and none of it can be used for non-emergency purposes, according to Apple.

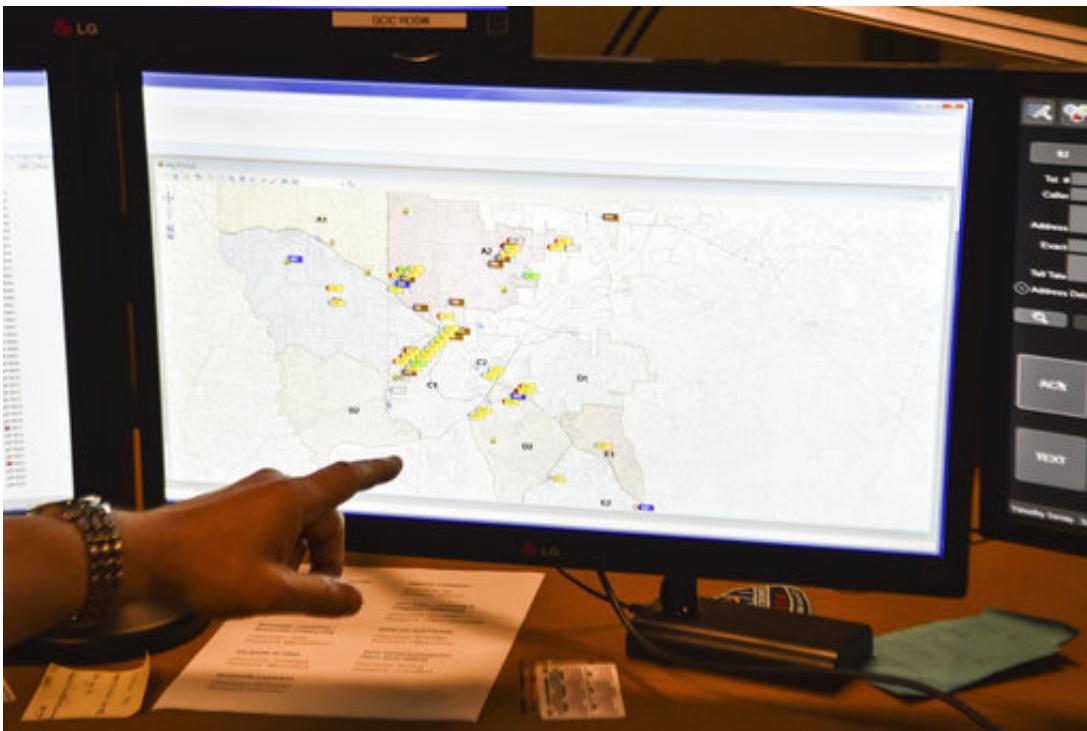
Individual call centers will each have to embrace the technology required to communicate with the RapidSOS clearinghouse. Some centers already

have the compatible software, according to Apple, but others will have to install upgrades to their existing software.

Apple expects calling centers for large metropolitan areas to upgrade more quickly than those in rural areas.

Tom Wheeler, a former chairman for the Federal Communications Commission, believes Apple's new approach for locating 911 calls will set a new industry standard. "This is going to save a lot of lives," said Wheeler, now a visiting professor at Harvard University. He said he hopes other phone makers will follow Apple's lead.

The planned changes were announced Monday in Nashville, Tennessee during a 911 convention. They'll be part of iOS 12, the next version of Apple's iPhone software, which the company will release in September as a free update.



In this March 15, 2018, file photo, a supervisor shows one of the maps used by dispatchers at a 911 call center in Roswell, Ga. Apple is trying drag the U.S.'s antiquated system for handling 911 calls into the 21st century. If it lives up to Apple's promise, the iPhone's next operating system will automatically deliver quicker and more reliable information pinpointing the location of 911 calls to about 6,300 emergency response centers in the U.S. (AP Photo/Lisa Marie Pane)

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