

## Be a Link When Calling 911

Communication is a key to properly resolving any emergency situation. Look at communication as being a chain with various links that make up the chain. With any emergency, the first link is the person who picks up the phone and calls 911. The second link is the dispatcher in the county communications center who takes the 911 call and then alerts the proper emergency service to handle the situation, whether it be for police, fire, or EMS. The third link is the response by the emergency service such as the fire department. If any of the links fail, the chain is broken.

Today I want to look at the first link, the person who makes the 911 call. Information that the caller gives to the dispatcher is important to get the process started off on the right foot.

Technology usually makes life easier, but sometimes, too easy. That can be the case when using a cell phone to report what is “perceived” to be an emergency.

There are times that I believe a cell phone should be like a pack of cigarettes and come with a warning label. The warning could say something like “Caution: Using this device requires common sense and the willingness to become involved”.

We receive numerous false reports every year due to people calling from their cell phones without having full knowledge of the situation. When we are paged, and the first four words out of the dispatcher’s mouth are “A passing motorist called...”, it usually will be a false alarm. It’s too easy to just pick up the phone and keep on motoring. Dispatchers have certain pieces of information that they need to know. Often important information is not known because the caller failed to stop.

We’ve been paged for house fires that turn out to be just smoke coming from a chimney or a burn barrel in the backyard. The callers have picked up their cell phones and called 911 without stopping. I don’t know about you, but if someone thought my house was on fire, I’d want them to stop and let me know.

Then there’s the age-old misconception of reporting a car fire when it’s just steam coming from an overheated car. Again, the call always comes from a passing motorist who will not stop. If someone’s car is on fire, they will either be calling 911, or if they do not have a cell phone, they will flag down someone to call for help.

Another common false alarm is people reporting an odor of natural gas somewhere outdoors. Quite often, the caller does not know the origin of the odor. And quite often, it’s not even natural gas. We have found that there is a propensity for people to assume that every odor out of the ordinary is natural gas. We have had numerous calls for “natural gas” odors around the city that is not natural gas at all, but instead, an odor from area businesses that is a part of their business processing.

On the lighter side, we even had a call for a natural gas odor that we traced back to an area dairy farm. It was “natural gas” alright, but natural gas coming from cows is not hazardous.

The bottom line is this... If you’re going to call 911 to report an emergency, please stay at the scene and become a strong first link in reporting what you are seeing, hearing, or smelling. True emergencies can be handled better and false alarms can be reduced.