



Shelby County adding 911 texting option

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(AP) — BIRMINGHAM, Ala. - You just snapped a photo of a car that tried to run you off the road, and you want to get it to the police fast enough to have the driver caught.

Or you need to report a crime, but making a phone call might tip off an assailant. Can you secretly text 911?

You may be able to do both in Shelby County a year from now.

There's a move on across the nation to get 911 centers equipped to receive increasingly popular forms of communication such as text messaging, and Shelby County says it will be prepared to do that with a new system it is installing.

The system will allow Shelby's Enhanced 911 agency to receive Internet-based communications, possibly next year, along with landline, cellular phone and voiceover Internet protocol phone calls it receives now.

Under an initiative known as Next Generation 911, there is a push for Public Safety Answering Points, such as Shelby E911, to have the ability to receive text messages, videos, pictures and other data.

John Ellison, executive director of Shelby E911, expects the Next Generation networks to be available this time next year. Once the networks come online, Shelby will be able to receive pictures from cell phones, videos and text messaging, and alerts from alarm companies, Ellison said.

"It will let us starting getting data, where now we just get telephone calls," he said.

Police, hospitals and health agencies will be able to communicate to 911 centers on private Internet protocol networks. "We want to be able to send them a picture, and say here's the car you're looking for," Ellison said.

However, Ellison stressed that even when the technology is available, making calls will be the preferred method for reaching 911, unless a person is speech-impaired.

Shelby E911 has picked Huntsville-based CallWorx to put in its new system at a cost of \$300,000.

The state will seek some of the \$40 million in federal grant money being made available to equip centers across the state with Next Generation networks, he said.

About five or six 911 centers across the state have purchased systems since last year with the capability to connect to Next Generation networks, he said.

Shelby County hopes to have the first part of the new system installed at the Sheriff's Office in Columbiana by the middle of next month, Ellison said. The system will then be installed at 911's main headquarters at the Shelby County Services Building in Pelham. The Sheriff's Office will serve as a backup location.

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