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Counties try new 911 systems

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Two counties are trying new 911 dispatch technology that foreshadows the advances promised by Next Generation 911 systems. The new systems enable emergency personnel to precisely locate cell phone calls and operate 911 services jointly from separate locations.

Lewis County, Tenn., completed construction of a \$500,000 emergency center in August and furnished it with \$250,000 in new equipment that eventually will allow law enforcement, fire and EMS agencies to use one system to map the locations of wireless calls, dispatch resources and send information to first responders. "We wanted to be as updated as possible in our new 911 center," says Howard Moore, director of the new center that bears his name.

Moore estimates that 25 percent of the county's 911 calls are from cell phones, which is a problem because, while the 911 center automatically knows the locations of landline calls, locations of cell phone calls are not as easily identified. "Land lines are dropping like flies, even though our cell phone service is terrible because of the rolling country and woodlands," he says. "Right now we try to keep people on the line as long as possible so we can find out where they're at, but sometimes they hang up."

A new system in Shelby County, Ala., is targeting the latitude and longitude of incoming cell phone calls and sending the information to the county's existing computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system, resolving an issue that many 911 centers are facing of integrating new and existing equipment. According to Shelby County's Executive Director of 911 Services John Ellison, the new system also will accommodate non-traditional communications, such as text messages, photos and videos.

Shelby County's new software will allow the county to locate 911 centers in two places 20 miles apart in the towns of Pelham and Columbiana, Ellison says. That arrangement should help the county better respond to emergencies. "Even if one center is completely blown down or burns down, we won't lose service. The citizens of our county will still be able to make 911 calls. They won't even notice the difference," Ellison says. "A lot of rural places don't have that luxury, but in the newer system, it becomes financially possible to split the system."

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