

RSF resident sounds alarm about problems with 911 cellphone call accuracy

BY KAREN BILLING

If you're using a cellphone to call 911, you'd better know your address.

As Rancho Santa Fe resident Linda Leong knows all too well from tragic personal experience, the system has not caught up with modern technology, and there are troubling location accuracy issues for first responders.

Even more troubling to Leong is that the funding to properly upgrade the system is questionable.

"Our 911 system is broken," said Leong, who testified at the California State Assembly's Select Committee on Local Emergency Preparedness hearing on April 9 in Sacramento.

In November 2007, Leong was at the Rancho Santa Fe Soccer Field when her husband, Richard Scuba, suffered cardiac arrest while playing soccer, and emergency services could not locate them. Her two children, Daniel and David, were 5 and 3 at the time and witnessed their father's death.

"My boys lost their father that day, and the 911 delays might have factored into Richard's lower chances of survival," Leong said. "I want them to know that I'm doing my best to help fix the 911 system so unnecessary delays will not take place in a true emergency such as ours."

The 911 system was developed in the 1970s for use with landlines and has not fundamentally changed since then, even though 40 percent of all households nationwide are wireless and more than 70 percent of 911 calls originate from cellphones.

At least four members of the eight-member Select Committee on Local Emer-

gency Preparedness have had constituents die because emergency responders could not find them after dialing 911 from a cellphone.

The committee chairman, Assembly member Freddie Rodríguez (D-Pomona), speaks for Michelle Myers, a 26-year-old from his district who was shot in her San Bernardino apartment in July 2014. She called 911 to report injuries, but because she couldn't talk, she could not give her address. It took more than 20 minutes for emergency services to locate her in her apartment complex, and by the time they found her, she had died.

Rodríguez, who has a background as an emergency medical technician, said the lack of a reliable system has resulted in too many Californians being denied timely care and is "unacceptable and must be resolved immediately."

Back in 2013, Leong went to share her concerns about the 911 system with Assembly member Brian Matsenschein as soon as he took office, his name plate not even on the door yet. Now he sits on the emergency preparedness committee and introduced Leong before she spoke on April 9.

"Our 911 system is aging, and it needs to be closely examined to determine the best way to incorporate the cellphone technology that most of us carry with us all day," Matsenschein said. "It is extremely worrisome that using a cellphone in times of crisis may lead to disastrous delay in emergency resources reaching the scene."

As Leong testified, shortly after Scuba fell to the ground that day, she called 911 on her cellphone and was put on hold for



Linda Leong
Photo by Jon Clark

one to two minutes.

"That's a long time when you're dealing with life or death," she said.

When the dispatcher got on the line, she asked for the address, which neither Leong nor the 25 other people on the field knew. She informed the dispatcher she was in the middle of an open soccer field, the only field in Rancho Santa Fe.

They were a mile from the fire station, and although Leong gave the street name and cross

streets, the dispatcher said she could not send an ambulance without the address.

Leong asked her to triangulate her location from her cellphone, which the dispatcher also could not do. Leong then asked whether she could transfer the call to the North County Dispatch JPA or North Com, the local dispatch next to the fire station on El Fuego — but the dispatcher said she could not make the transfer, either.

Leong was frantic. She said her husband was turning purple, and she began to administer life-saving efforts.

An ambulance eventually reached Scuba after someone called the Rancho Santa Fe Patrol, whose personnel ran next door to the fire department. It was nearly 20 minutes after Leong placed the first 911 call before an ambulance finally arrived.

Leong said she often wonders what would have changed if her call had been routed directly to the North Com PSAP (primary service answering point) instead of to the California Highway Patrol.

Five years later in 2012, Leong would experience another situation with 911's location problems when she was hit by a car while riding her bike. She was in front of R. Roger Rowe School, at Avenida de Acacias and La Granada, when she was struck by a car, smashed into the driver's windshield and knocked back 20 feet into the street.

Two good Samaritans stopped to assist her, and one called 911 from his cell. He was placed on hold. After a second call was put on hold, he got in his car and drove the two blocks to the fire station, knocked on the door and asked them to send an ambulance.

"On both occasions, the 911 system failed me. If this could happen to me not once, but twice, it could happen to anyone," Leong said.

At the hearing, Assembly member Das Williams (D-Car-pinteria) said the committee benefits from the knowledge that these delays happened to Leong twice — even though, as he said, she is "cursed with it."

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"It is particularly alarming to me that even after that tragedy, there is no mechanism to ensure (that a call sent to) that tower so far from the freeway is not being routed to local PSAP," Williams said.

Williams said he had "empathy and alarm" that this is happening to people in his district and to people all over the state.

"It is the state's responsibility to bring the 911 system into the 21st century and provide reliable, accurate location information," he said. "We have responsibility to the constituents of California to preserve life and public safety, and we are not doing enough to do that."

When a 911 call is placed from a cellphone, the signal goes to the closest cell tower to process the call. The tower determines to which PSAP dispatch center the call is redirected. If the tower sends the call to CHP, but the person hasn't been in a freeway accident, CHP has to redirect to a local dispatch, which can take seconds or minutes — or not happen at all.

"People die if 911 calls are not accurately located," Williams said. "It's happened in my district and others too many times."

In the late 1980s, Leong worked for San Diego County Emergency Services as an analyst tabulating all statistical results for 911 calls in San Diego. The crucial information that was not collected then or now, she said, includes: when the call is made to the PSAP to determine where to route the call, how many calls are put on hold, how long that hold time is, and whether the call is transferred or not.

"When you call, there's a 50-50 chance that the tower-routed call is to the correct PSAP," Leong said. "Why can Uber find you quicker than an ambulance can?"

The car service Uber uses a device's Internet protocol (IP) address to locate riders who call it.

Leong's big concern is that not only has the 911 "legacy system" based on landline calls not evolved with the times, but neither has the funding model, based on an "antiquated code" for assessing fees on interstate calls.

She was encouraged that Assembly Bill 911 resulted in the 911 fund assessment of prepaid phones in 2012. But in the meantime, wireless carriers have sold "family" packages that can combine four lines into one, so there is one bill versus four bills paying into the 911 system. Leong said that must change.

The state's Next Generation 911 plan, which will provide for better cellphone accuracy using IP addresses rather than cell towers, as well as allow uses such as 911 texting, will cost \$300 million to \$500 million to make necessary upgrades.

Leong said the missing piece is the mechanism to pay for it.

In 2011-12, the total resources for the state's emergency telephone number account were \$153 million, and in 2013-14, that number dipped to \$118 million. The reserve for economic uncertainty was at \$54 million in 2012 and in 2013-14, it was \$2 million.

By 2016-17, the fund will be running a deficit.

"The more I look into it, the more I realize how precarious our 911 system is today," Leong said.

She is not alone, as the Assembly committee continues to address the 911 deficiencies that put every Californian using a cellphone in an emergency at risk.

On April 8, the day before the hearing, the Assembly Committee on Governmental Organization passed Assembly Bill 510, co-authored by Rodríguez and Williams, which seeks to eliminate these unnecessary delays in 911 calls.

"It is a sad commentary on our ability to summon emergency aid when Uber can find you faster than 911," said Rodríguez in a statement after the hearing. "It's unacceptable."