

TEXAS COUNTY & DISTRICT RETIREMENT SYSTEM

HORIZONS

A NEWSLETTER ESPECIALLY FOR TCDRS MEMBERS

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Text your emergency

Anita Pitt and Brazos Valley Council of Governments launch the nation's first integrated text-to-9-1-1 system. Page 2

Social Security myths debunked

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On the cover...

Anita Pitt of Brazos Valley COG led the charge to implement the nation's first integrated text-to-9-1-1 system in six Texas counties.



Text-to-9-1-1: Brazos Valley COG makes 9-1-1 more accessible to those in need

Story and photos by Kelly E. Lindner

If you are in an emergency situation in the Brazos Valley region, you can send a text message to “9-1-1” and get an immediate response.

“A lot of times in rural areas, a text message will go through when a voice call won’t,” says Anita Pitt, 9-1-1 Program Manager for the Brazos Valley Council of Governments (BVCOG). “There are also times you need to be silent, like in an abduction, a house break-in or domestic abuse.”

Texting may also be a better option for callers who are hearing impaired.

In June 2015, the BVCOG launched the nation’s first integrated text-to-9-1-1 program. By May 2016, the integrated text-to-9-1-1 program was fully implemented in Burleson, Grimes, Leon, Madison, Robertson and Washington Counties.

Integration is key

Though other regions have deployed various forms of text-to-9-1-1 in the past, BVCOG was the first to implement an integrated solution.

“Integrated’ means that it’s answered on the same equipment we use to answer a 9-1-1 voice call,” Anita says. “So the call-takers can answer a text message just like they do a voice call with the same equipment.”

Anita, who’s been involved with the BVCOG 9-1-1 program for 29 years, has

probably installed, changed and upgraded every 9-1-1 system in the BVCOG’s service area. She started as a coordinator in 1988, and has served as the 9-1-1 Program Manager since 1995.

“I thoroughly enjoy the industry and the people who are involved in public safety,” Anita says. “The call-takers, the men and women who answer our calls every day, are just tremendous folks.”

In 2014, Anita was approached by Airbus DS Communications, her equipment vendor, about beta-testing an integrated text-to-9-1-1 solution.

She said she was interested, but asked if she could think about it. Then the Commission on State Emergency Communications asked if she was interested in using her existing network, which delivers location information, for texts sent to 9-1-1 as well.

“Once they said that, it made sense to me,” Anita says. “I could picture it. I said, ‘Yes, that’s a project I could get behind.’”

So Anita contacted Airbus and got to work on an integrated text solution that could also deliver an approximate location.

“It took a lot of folks to pull it off,” Anita says. “Sometimes we’d have 20 people on

a conference call. It also took about nine months to take the solution from a test environment to a live 9-1-1 environment.”

“I think it’s just a matter of time before we have it throughout the state of Texas,” Anita says.

The 4-1-1 on texting 9-1-1

When call centers receive a 9-1-1 call from a landline, the exact address is displayed on a map for a call-taker. When calls to 9-1-1 come in from a wireless phone, the call center receives a location on a map that’s about 100 meters in diameter. Texts can provide embedded location information as well, though it’s much less accurate.

“Locations for wireless calls are getting more and more accurate because the FCC is requiring that the carriers have a certain level of accuracy,”



Jerod Hartfield serves Washington County as a dispatcher and day shift supervisor. He received the first 9-1-1 text in the region.

text message will “ring” on all positions so any available call-taker can answer it — just like a voice call.

“It has a different ring than a voice call, so we know that it’s a text, but we answer it with the same priority as we do a voice call,” Anita says. “Then you’ll be connected to a call-taker and you just text back and forth.”

“It looks like a big cell phone screen basically,” says Jerod Hartfield, Dispatcher and Day Shift Supervisor

for Washington County 9-1-1, who received the very first

9-1-1 text in the region. “We have a big window and messages pop up.”

When the text conversation concludes and the responders are on the way, Anita says, the texter will receive a message that 9-1-1 has disconnected and to contact them again for further assistance.

“A lot of times in rural areas, a text message will go through when a voice call won’t”

Anita says. “With text messages, those requirements are not there yet, but it’s just a matter of time.”

To text 9-1-1, all you have to do is create a new text message, enter “9-1-1” into the recipient field, type in a message and hit “Send”.

“If you’re in a region that has deployed [text-to-9-1-1],” Anita says, “you should get an auto message asking for the location of your emergency.”

In the Brazos Valley region, your 9-1-1 text will travel from your phone to a cell tower, and then route through a mobile switching center. The switching center will send the message to a text control center that then routes it to the proper 9-1-1 call center based on geographic location.

“It’s a very simple process and it happens quick,” Anita says.

At the 9-1-1 answering center, the

Currently BVCOG’s integrated system only supports “text only” messages and it doesn’t currently support group messages. In the future, Anita wants texters to be able to send pictures and videos to 9-1-1 as well. She thinks this capability could be added as soon as 2020.

Life beyond 9-1-1

Though Anita isn’t ready to retire, she says she’d like to do it while she’s “still young enough and healthy enough to enjoy it.”

In retirement, she plans to garden, spend time with her children, Jared and Jessica, and continue pursuing a goal that she and John, her husband of 40 years, took on five years ago.

“We like to play 42 — a Texas game played with dominos.” Anita says. “We’ve set a goal of trying to play 42 in all 50 states. We’ve made it to 32 of 50 states so far.”

When she is ready to focus on those final 18 states, she knows her TCDRS benefit will be there waiting.

“It’s a great benefit of working at Brazos Valley COG,” Anita says. “We had a 401(k) program before, so we’re really glad to have a true retirement program.”

See text-to-9-1-1 in action in our video: <http://bit.ly/2HIqFvB>. ★



WHEN TO TEXT 9-1-1

A voice network can be overwhelmed in certain situations such as with disasters or active shooters. Texting may offer a viable option for seeking emergency assistance.

- Text-to-9-1-1 should only be used in an emergency situation, when someone is unable to speak or hear, or when speaking out loud would put the citizen in danger.
- Provide 9-1-1 with your exact location.
- Use simple language and no abbreviations or slang when texting 9-1-1.
- Do not text while driving.
- Call 9-1-1 if you can... text if you can't!