

Wireless: Cellphones saving lives

By Eric Sylvers International Herald Tribune

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MILAN Since last year, a call from any phone in the European Union to the number 112 has connected the dialer for free to a local emergency services hot line that can send out the police, medics or firefighters.

While that was a hard-fought accomplishment that had been 15 years in the making, experts as well as the EU itself have said that more must be done, specifically concerning cellphones, if the unified emergency number is to reach its full potential for saving lives. The EU estimates that when its recommendations for 112 are fully implemented, as many as 5,000 lives a year will be saved in its 25 member countries.

The EU, beginning this year, has required that the same technology that lets cellphone companies tell clients about the closest theater or restaurant be used for emergency responses, but some countries have yet to comply, citing problems with compatibility and privacy.

Sometimes information given by cellphone companies to emergency services is unusable because the two are using different systems for reading and processing data, experts said.

The European Commission in April began infringement proceedings against 11 member states - Greece, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia - because their cellphone companies were not providing emergency services with caller location information or because emergency agencies could not process the data. The commission will decide in September or October whether the countries have succeeded in getting their phone companies and emergency services to comply, according to a commission spokesman.

The obstacles to compliance that the different countries face can vary. In some cases, like those of the poorer countries that recently joined the EU, the emergency services are using antiquated equipment that must be replaced by expensive new systems to be able to read the data supplied by phone companies.

In other cases, the phone service providers are not supplying the data, according to Olivier Paul-Morandini, the founder and president of the European Emergency Number Association, a nonprofit organization that pushes national governments and the EU for a better functioning 112 system.

The commission could issue one more warning and then move on to the European Court of Justice if its requirements have not been met.

Some industry experts have argued that it is not enough for the EU just to start infringement proceedings.

"The EU must step in to ensure there are standards across the region for how 112 data is transmitted and processed," Paul-Morandini said. "Without standards, there is confusion, and that has happened to some extent with caller location and 112."

In 2002, when the EU had 15 members compared with 25 today, it estimated that 40 million nonprank calls were made each year to emergency services from cellphones. While the vast majority of those calls worked successfully, inaccurate location information delayed the response for 3.5 million of them, and for 2.5 million other calls, no emergency response team could be dispatched because there was no location information, according to the EU estimates.

Viviane Reding, the European commissioner responsible for information society and media, last October cited three areas in which many member states needed to improve their 112 services. At the top of the list was making caller location information available, but she also said that operators taking the calls should speak more than one language and that countries must increase general awareness of the universal 112 number.

How quickly emergency services find dialers who call in distress from their cellphones without giving their whereabouts will depend on the technology in the phone. Cellphones integrating the Global Positioning System can be tracked much more closely than a phone tracked by locating the cell tower it is using. A GPS phone can be tracked to within a few meters, the other phones to within about 500 meters, or 1,600 feet, said Kenneth Hyers, a North Carolina-based analyst with ABI Research.

"If you don't have a GPS phone and you have a heart attack, you will have other things on your mind, but you might want to find a street sign so you can give that information when you call for an ambulance," Hyers said.

"And if you have a heart attack in a basement, you will want to hope you don't have a GPS phone, since GPS doesn't work too well through cement."