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In Case of Emergency, Dial ???

The best course of action in any type of emergency is to dial 911 from a land line; but what if you only have a cell phone? Orinda: 925-284-5010; Lafayette: 925-284-5010; Moraga: 925-228-8282 (284-5010 also works from Moraga); alternate number for all Lamorinda communities: 925-646-2441; alternate number for a fire or medical emergency: 925-933-1313. Please see article for details.

By Lee Borrowman



Lafayette Parks and Recreation Director Jennifer Russell had signage installed at the Community Center last week advising people of the number to call from a cell phone in the event of an emergency Photo Andy Scheck

Two weeks ago, we received a disturbing email from a reader, Ashley Coates: "Last night, a man in my exercise class at the Lafayette Community Center suffered a life-threatening medical crisis. We tried to call 911 on cell phones but could not get through. Out of all the people in class, no one knew the quickest way to reach our local dispatchers rather than the CHP dispatch that gets 911 calls from cell phones. I hope you will research the issue of how to contact emergency services when you have a choice between land line vs. cell phone, and how to contact our local emergency services when all you have is a cell phone." Coates says she contacted us "in the hope of getting information to as many people as possible."

Sadly the victim, a 56-year old husband and father of two young boys, who was described as an avid fisherman and exercise fanatic who always had a friendly smile and greeting, died that night.

As it turned out, the answer to the question "Who Do You Call?" is not as simple as one might hope.

All of Lamorinda's emergency responders agree: The best course of action in any type of emergency is to dial 911 from a land line. Moraga's Interim Chief of Police Bob Priebe explains why: "A land line is the preferred method of communication in an emergency because it automatically displays where the call is originated and allows help to be sent to that location, even if the caller is unable to speak."

Dialing 911 from a cell phone is strongly discouraged by all of Lamorinda's emergency responders. Priebe lays it out: "When a cell phone is the only available device, calling 9-1-1 can (cause a delay of) several minutes because it is received by a California Highway Patrol (CHP) office, then the call has to be transferred to the correct responding agency.

As you know, in a medical emergency, lost minutes can be critical. This is why we urge all local citizens to program their cell phones to call the local number; it speeds up response. I would also urge readers to program cell phones with local agency numbers where they work or visit regularly, if out of the area."

Depending on where you are, the central CHP dispatch office that is reached by calling 911 from a cell phone is in either San Ramon or Vallejo, both of which receive a high volume of emergency calls and callers may experience difficulty reaching a dispatcher. If you do dial 911 from a cell phone, you must provide the dispatcher with your location.

The one exception to this advice, according to Contra Costa County Sheriff's spokesman Jimmy Lee, is if you are calling in an emergency from a cell phone while on the freeway: "In that case, 911 is the correct number, because it's the CHP that responds to incidents on the freeways."

After that, the consensus begins to break down.

Lafayette Police Chief Mike Hubbard says if you must use a cell phone, "The correct number for the Lafayette Police Department would be (925) 284-5010. An alternate number would be (925) 646-2441."

Bill French, Orinda's Chief of Police, concurs with Hubbard: "The best number from a land line is 911 and from a cell phone it is (925) 284-5010."

Moraga's Priebe said in a written statement: "This past week quite a bit of interest has been raised regarding cell phone use to emergency services. The preferred number to use, as given to me today (02/09/09) from our dispatch center is 925-228-8282. I have always encouraged citizens to use our local 925-284-5010 number instead of the 9-1-1. From now on, I will advise everyone to program their cell phones to use the above preferred number (228-8282)."

But Jimmy Lee of the Sheriff's Dept, which handles police dispatch for all three communities, says, "The problem with those two numbers (284-5010 and 228-8282) is that they are single lines (no rollover if the line is busy). The best number to call is 925-646-2441." Although this number is not officially designated as a priority line, Lee advises, "That is a direct dispatch number which will always be answered."

The Contra Costa County Fire District (CCCFD) also recommends calling 911 from a land line in an emergency. If there is no land line available, CCCFD recommends calling its dispatch center directly for a fire or medical emergency if you only have a cell phone. That number is 925-933-1313.

But wait, there's more.

"That number (933-1313) will work from a cell phone for a fire or medical emergency," says the Moraga Orinda Fire District's Fire Marshall Mike Mentink. However, Mentink was clear and firm in stating his opinion that just as everyone should use 911 from a land line, "Citizens should be given one and only one number to dial (from a cell phone) for any type of emergency. If someone calls the Sheriff's dispatch center, the first question they are asked is, 'What is the nature of your emergency?' If it's a fire or medical emergency the caller is immediately transferred to the County Fire dispatcher; it's seamless."

But what should that one number be?

"I think we may need to work on that," concludes Mentink.

(Editor's note: After spending several days trying to track down a single best number to call from a cell phone in case of an emergency, we are inclined to agree with Mentink; Lamorinda's emergency responders should discuss this and present the public with one emergency priority number that rolls over when busy and will always be answered. We will let you know when and if that happens.)

Many of us have multiple entries in our cell phone contact lists, which are often automatically alphabetized. Hence this suggestion from Moraga's Richard

Olsen, a former Fire Commissioner: "I have put 'aaa' in front of my 'Moraga Fire Emerg.' and 'Moraga Police Emerg.' entries, in order to make sure those are the first numbers that appear whenever I pull up my cell phone's Directory (perhaps there's an alternative way to prioritize the listings, but I haven't yet discovered it.)"

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