

With the tap of a button on their cellphone screen, the UT deaf community will soon be able to reach 911 emergency services.

Texting 911 enhances the emergency system by allowing text conversations to take place between police and residents in certain counties. The UT Police Department will install Texting 911 by the end of 2016. The Capital Area Council of Governments, who provides the funding and equipment for Texting 911, hopes this will benefit those with speech or hearing disabilities. This council will launch the new project in Austin's 10 counties after a series of tests.

Training police officers to use Texting 911 will ensure a smooth and safer communication exchange, Peter Scheets, UTPD assistant police chief, said.

"If the police can't communicate with a particular community, we're not going to have a safe community," he added.

Instead of using complicated devices like a Teletypewriter, members of the deaf community will now independently be able to send a text for help. The Gallaudet University Library reported in 2012 that 2.3 percent of Texans were deaf. Austin is especially affected by this project because 8.8 percent of its residents are deaf or hard of hearing, according to the Mayor's Office Reports. This makes the city home to both one of the largest deaf populations in the U.S. and to the Texas School for the Deaf.

Other Texas cities, including parts of Dallas and Houston, have already installed texting emergency services into their 911 system.

Special education major Sidney Snow is a deaf student who hopes Texting 911 is "only the beginning" of future projects that will benefit those who are hearing impaired. Snow is a student at Dallas Baptist University, and is able to text 911 from her home near Cedar Hill.

"I feel much safer," Snow said in a text message. "My needs can be addressed with some more privacy without the need of an interpreter or person speaking for me."

According to the Pew Research Center, smartphone users in the U.S. between the ages of 18 to 24 in 2011 exchanged an average of 109 texts a day. The norm is to have a phone in hand everywhere you go, especially for deaf people, because of the convenience, Lauren Kinast, associate director at Services for Students with Disabilities, said, who is deaf.

"We are very reliant on text communications with our mobile devices, and for years we have asked why this (texting 911) could not be done," Kinast said in an e-mail.

Texting 911 will also allow people to contact the police in situations that are dangerous or impossible to make a phone call in. Potential reasons someone would text 911 instead of calling them would be situations like: an active shooter, a house intruder, a stranger is following them or if one simply cannot communicate over the phone.

Some people might not understand the point in being able to text 911, said Mark Bernstein, associate professor in communication sciences and disorders. Bernstein said he believes the biggest challenge facing the deaf community is the lack of awareness and understanding on the part of hearing people.

"In a good society, all citizens should have equal abilities to ask for emergency help in a simple way," he added.