

LOST IN GARDEN OF THE GODS

Geographical knowledge in the wilderness helps PSAP's resolve emergencies

By Matthew Schreiner

There is no moment more nerve-racking for a telecommunicator than the moment a caller's phone cuts off and she realizes no location has been established, or when a caller from out of town simply does not know their location. It is at moments like these that the telecommunicator's true skill, character and temperament come through. The ability to remain calm and draw on knowledge of local geography and how location technologies work is often the difference between life and death.

Here, we'll present a couple of situations in which a telecommunicator's creative, out of the box thinking about how to use location-based technology made all the difference.

SALINE COUNTY 9-1-1, ILLINOIS

Saline County 9-1-1 is a PSAP located at the southeast side of the state of Illinois, near the confluence of the Ohio and Wabash Rivers, where Indiana, Kentucky and Illinois all meet. Saline County, Illinois, manages calls for over thirty police, fire and EMS agencies in both Saline and Gallatin Counties, as well as calls from Pope and Hardin Counties to the south. In addition, calls from Indiana and Kentucky pop into the Saline County PSAP. The county covers a mostly rural area including much of the Shawnee National Forest and the area known as Garden of the Gods. There is wide range of terrain, from flat farm grounds to the wilderness hills and hollows of the Shawnee National Forest. There are also several miles of riverfront known as the Port of Shawneetown. Any call from these areas is directed to the Saline County Illinois 911 PSAP.

Some of these areas are remote, with large rock formations, high cliffs and gorges within the confines of the National Forest. Throughout the year, thousands of tourists explore these natural wonders and, from time to time, they'll simply get lost meandering along the winding trails and deep forests. Sometimes, they stay too long and, before they know it, the sun has gone down and it becomes very dark.

To add to the confusion, cellular coverage in these areas is spotty at best and, while the county is working to improve it, tourists phoning 9-1-1 will often drop mid call. Even when callers stay connected, it's not always clear which tower the call is locked onto.

"We have well-developed protocols for managing these lost tourists," says Lt. Tracy Felty, Saline County 9-1-1 Director. "It comes down to our telecommunicators being trained on how to 'walk' them literally 'out of the woods,' knowing the geography and knowing what questions to ask tourists who are not familiar with the area to locate pre-defined landmarks."

In the dark, it would be easy for anyone unfamiliar with the area to walk right off a

cliff with little warning. Once a caller's location has been determined, telecommunicators have been trained to direct callers toward landmarks that are in the opposite directions of natural obstacles or threats to safety, such as the cliffs. Sometimes, if a call has dropped, text messaging is still possible; in these cases it takes longer, but at least they can still get the citizen to a safe location, where first responders can meet them and bring them home to safety.

In these scenarios, it is the telecommunicator's knowledge of the local geography that enables them to think out of the box and ensure a positive outcome.

OUT FOR A SWIM

Felty says that sometimes it's the citizen who takes the actions that result in a positive outcome, with the assistance of telecommunicators and first responders, of course.

As stated earlier, Saline County is located in the tri-state region of Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky, with the Ohio River to the east. He relates one story in which a young couple on the Indiana shore of the Ohio River, feeling

