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Low awareness of 112 emergency number



by John Paul Cordina - editorial@di-ve.com
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Just 42 per cent of Maltese citizens think of calling 112 in case of emergency, while 39 per cent could not think of any number to call, an EU survey shows.

Seven EU members have adopted the EU-wide emergency number 112 as their sole emergency number, including Malta. In the other 6 countries – Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Romania and Portugal – 81-96 per cent of respondents said that they would call 112, far higher than the proportion of Maltese respondents who would do so.

The survey, published on the second edition of European 112 Day, shows that a further 13 per cent of Maltese respondents would call Malta's old emergency numbers – 191 for police, 196 for ambulances and 199 for civil protection – although they would still be catered for as callers are automatically redirected.

Seven per cent provided a wrong number, while the proportion of those who did not know of any number was the second highest in the EU, following Cyprus at 46 per cent.

With 17 per cent doing so in the last 5 years, the Maltese were less likely to contact emergency services than their European counterparts, of whom 27 per cent made a call. Just 72 per cent called 112 – the lowest among countries in which it is the only emergency number – although the figure has increased by 10 per cent over the last year.

Across the EU, awareness of 112 as an EU-wide emergency number has slowly increased over the past 2 years: from 22 per cent in 2008 to 25 per cent this year. However, respondents who knew that 112 was available as an emergency number in their own country did not necessarily know that the number could be used anywhere within the EU: just 4 in 10 did.

Maltese authorities, meanwhile, seek to raise awareness about proper use of the emergency number. Justice Minister Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici lamented that people often called for trivial reasons, and pointed out that the service should only be used for legitimate emergencies – including serious accidents, fires, or spotting a burglar breaking into a house.

The minister pointed out that another freephone, 119, existed for people who wanted to report crimes which did not constitute an emergency.

Police Commissioner John Rizzo added that, unfortunately, the service was frequently used from prank calls. Although the police could trace a call's origin, pranksters often used phone boxes to evade detection. He stressed that hoax calls were a criminal act, and that people have been jailed over bomb hoaxes in the past.

Around 22 per cent of calls to 112 currently go unanswered, although this has gone down from 45 per cent in 2007. The number of lines has recently been increased to 6 to handle a greater volume of calls, while calls which are not answered are diverted to civil protection, hospital or other relevant services.

An SMS service, on 7977 7119, exists for people who may find themselves in a situation where they could not phone, such as in cases of domestic violence, and Mr Rizzo said that the police were also seeking to introduce an online service.

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