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EU Promotes Common 112 Emergency Helpline

The EU introduced a common emergency helpline in 1991, but technical issues and lack of awareness made it less than efficient. Brussels is trying to change that by declaring February 11 the "day of emergency number 112."

Only one thing can ruin a European vacation getaway -- an accident. What number should you call for help, for instance, when alone on alpine slopes? And more importantly, will the person on the other end of the line speak your language?

EU bureaucrats in Brussels say the answer lies in its Europe-wide emergency number service. Anyone in Europe should be able to dial 112 and receive emergency help -- in their own language.

The number has existed since 1991, but since then, there were often technical problems that prevented it from gaining Europe-wide recognition. Until recently, many people who dialled 112 were greeted with the message: "Number not in service." And that, says EU Commissioner for Information Security and Media Viviane Reding, was a disservice to all Europeans.

"All citizens have a right to travel throughout Europe as if they were at home," she said. "Europe is a space without boundaries, and as a home for its citizens it should create ways for these people to move throughout it in a safe way. And it's much easier to remember one universal emergency number than 27 different ones."

Language barriers

Emergency number 112 has since become fully operational in all 27 EU states. But there are still issues threatening its usability. According to Reding, a major problem is posed by the diversity of languages spoken in Europe.

"There are still certain European countries where languages and dialects are spoken that aren't used officially," she said. "I hope this emergency number 112 will help to make these specific languages official in government agencies."

Another problem facing the emergency service is that not all Europeans know about it -- not even close. An EU survey revealed that only 24 percent of all Europeans are even aware of the number. Here in Germany, a mere 16 percent of the population had heard of it.

For this reason, the European Commission, together with the European Parliament, has declared Wednesday, Feb. 11 the first annual "European Day of Emergency Number 112."

"This is so citizens are aware that they have the ability to call one number, anywhere, anytime, for fast emergency aid in Europe," Reding said.

But one question remains. What happens when help is needed, but those in need of it don't know where they are? To solve this problem, the EU has also introduced a technology that determines the exact geographic location of all 112 calls made by cell phones.

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