

In case of emergency, dial...

Founder Olivier Paul-Morandini urges a Member States intervention to effectively implement 112 – the emergency number for Europeans...

Almost 10 years ago while in Canada, I was confronted with the question “We have 911 all over North America, where is Europe with 112?” Although living in Brussels, the Capital of Europe, I was not aware of the existence of 112, the single European emergency call number. Back in Belgium, I decided to create a non-profit association, the European Emergency Number Association (EENA), to promote the knowledge and efficient use of 112. EENA acts as a discussion platform bringing together emergency organisations, enterprises and individuals interested in the development and implementation of 112. On its website (www.eena.org), citizens who faced a problem when calling 112 (and survived) can introduce complaints to be transmitted to the authorities in view of improving the 112 service chain. EENA has organised three conferences on 112, published numerous articles and interviews, lobbied the European Commission, the European Parliament and EU Member States, and has developed close ties with organisations with similar objectives.

European citizens take advantage of the EU’s area of freedom, security and justice. Every year, some 100 million EU citizens cross the internal EU borders for leisure, business or because they live in cross-border areas. Considered over a period of five years, the number of citizens is certainly greater, as more than two-thirds of the total EU population, ie. some 300 million may be concerned. At the same time, citizens, travelling or not, face emergencies every day. Following traffic accidents, aggressions, fires, thefts, near-drownings, heart attacks, strokes and many more, people call the emergency services for help. Getting help as soon as possible is the expression of the citizens’ fundamental right to life, protection and healthcare, as provided for in the UN Charter of Human Rights. Knowing which number to call is essential to claim this right, and this is why European citizens have the fundamental right to know about the existence of 112.

Furthermore, when travelling within an area of ‘security’, one expects that the protection provided will be somehow equivalent to the one entitled if staying at home. Some European countries have established legal obligations for maximum intervention times of emergency services (eg. the

UK, the Netherlands, Germany) while others have not. In some countries, emergency services must apply quality standards for services provided, while in others this is not the case. If the victim has died or is permanently disabled, introducing complaints and obtaining compensation for negligence may make the headlines but is certainly not enough. Citizens in distress are entitled to the same high quality safety and security standards within the territory of the Member States and they should receive the same high quality aftercare in case of accident or disaster. Otherwise, the EU will remain an empty mercantile shell, indifferent to the needs and everyday problems of its citizens.

Established in 1991, 112 has now been implemented all over the EU (except in Bulgaria where it will be available shortly). According to the European Commission, 112 has been implemented as the single national emergency call number in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden, and Romania. Certain other countries have implemented the 112 for specific national emergency services: Italy (police), Estonia (ambulance and fire), Luxembourg (ambulance and fire), Slovenia (ambulance and fire), and Germany (ambulance and fire). In the UK and Ireland calls to the 112 are automatically transferred to 999, the single national emergency call number. In most of the other EU countries calls to 112 are transferred to the call centre of one of the emergency services (eg. Belgium, Austria, France) or to a specialised national call centre for tourists (eg. Greece). Furthermore, in some countries calls to 112 are answered in several languages (eg. Sweden, the UK, Portugal, Denmark, Greece and some regions of France and Spain). Emergency services can localise callers from fixed telephones in all EU countries while localisation of calls from mobiles has been implemented only partially (eg. in the London area). And although Member States are obliged to inform citizens about the existence and use of 112, according to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2006, on average, only two in every five citizens would have called the emergency number in case of emergency.

So the knowledge of the 112 number as well as the service you get by calling 112 – or the national emergency numbers if you happen to know them – does not correspond to the



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Olivier Paul-Morandini with Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister of Belgium, during the last European Safety and Security Summit in Brussels organised by EENA

same quality standards in different countries. Furthermore, Portugal, the only country courageous enough to evaluate, in 2003, the quality of the complete 112 service chain, discovered that for 15% of calls in Portuguese and Spanish, for 29% of calls in English and for 20% of calls in French, emergency services never arrived at the place of the emergency. In fact, the European Commission does not force Member States to improve the quality of services offered through 112 because it considers emergency services as being an exclusively national responsibility.

To better promote the knowledge and efficient use of 112 all over Europe, the European Parliament, under the impulse of the EENA, adopted on 25th September 2007 a written declaration calling upon the Member States and the Commission to ensure an efficient 112 service all over the EU by dealing with this issue in new and innovative ways. The Parliament also asked for an evaluation by independent bodies of the real state of implementation of 112 throughout the EU. In order to promote better knowledge about the existence and use of 112, it was proposed to establish a European 112 day on the 11th February around which awareness raising and networking activities would be organised.

In November 2007, the European Commission presented its proposals for the amendment of the telecommunications regulatory framework, which include several points on 112. The new proposals are positive in many respects (obligation for localisation in 'push' mode and for information of users about the possibility or not to make calls to emergency services, something useful for VoIP-based services) but they also present several problem areas for which improvements are required (restriction of scope of 112 to only travellers, absence of measures to ensure better implementation and enforcement, no provisions for evaluation). Furthermore,

although the Commission initiated infringement procedures against several Member States for partial implementation of 112, most of them have been closed on the basis of unverified or legalistic claims. The main characteristic concerned the localisation in the 'pull' or 'push' mode. 'Pull' means that localisation data are transmitted to the 112 call centre automatically for every call. 'Push' means that the data have to be requested for individual calls if the emergency services deem it necessary. However, countries that have not implemented caller localisation at all pretended they have implemented the 'push' mode. In the absence of a standard for maximum transmission time of localisation data, this may be legally correct but in practice people may die as before because emergency services will take a long time to arrive.

In the future, Member States need to ensure that all EU citizens know about the existence and proper use of 112. Some countries that run separate emergency call numbers hesitate to publicise 112, fearing that all emergency calls will then be directed to 112 call centres, which often have limited capabilities. However, a better informed user population will ensure less false calls to 112, resulting in the optimal use of available resources. Member States must also ensure that all the EU territory is properly covered by mobile or fixed operators. Calls to 112 should be 'appropriately answered and handled'. This includes the possibility of multilingual support, the use of standardised verbal communication protocols, better training requirements of 112 operators (in Finland, for example, training lasts 57 weeks for a fully operational operator), the establishment of a standardised maximum intervention/response time, and, last but not least, the implementation of overall quality criteria and the evaluation of the quality of the 112 service chain. Special care should be taken for people with hearing and vision disabilities who need special terminals in order to be able to make emergency calls.

Considering all the above, it is evident that improving the 112 service chain is a complex issue requiring the involvement of many actors, especially political authorities. Technology is not the major issue, although it may play an important role. The European Commission has a very important role to play by obliging Member States to fully implement legislation in force.



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