

Europe slow to dial its emergency number: 112

By **Matthew Saltmarsh** International Herald Tribune
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PARIS What is 112? It may be Europe's best-kept secret.

Ask a Briton how to find help if he gets hurt in, say, Greece, and chances are he won't really know. Ask a Frenchwoman what she'd do if fire broke out in her vacation chalet off Sweden and the reply will most likely be a Gallic shrug.

Even officials in Brussels admit that few Europeans think to phone 112. Yet that is the single European emergency number, available in all European Union countries - and remarkably, given its broad anonymity, has been for nearly a decade.

Call the number from any of the 25 EU members, by cellphone or fixed line, and you will get through to a national or regional emergency call center, perhaps run by the fire department, the police, an integrated national center or a special call center for tourists. Some countries - Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain - have 112 as their single national emergency number.

The system sounds ideal: a pan-European service that should match the efficiency of 911 in the United States and Canada. The problem is that 112 is not working nearly as well as it should, plagued by problems from the linguistic to the logistic, according to experts and those with firsthand experience.

Across Europe, it can take far longer to get through to emergency services by calling 112 than by using the national emergency number. The technology to locate cellphone callers geographically is available, but not often used.

Perhaps most problematically, many countries are not telling their citizens about 112 - despite the fact that it was chosen as the single European emergency number in 1991 and was supposed to be in effect within five years.

According to an EU survey, only 20 percent of Europeans knew about 112 by 2001. There has been little or no attempt by most countries to inform travelers about the number. Last summer, Virgin Express became the only European airline to inform passengers, via its in-flight magazine, about the existence of 112 and how it could help on vacation.

One person with tragic firsthand knowledge of the shortcomings of 112 is Fred Heukels. A telecommunications consultant, he used to work for KPN, the phone network in the Netherlands, on switching the country's emergency number to 112 from 0611. Several years ago his nephew, Misha van de Geld, then 15, went for a swim with friends in a lake at Zeewolde. On his way into the water he slipped, hit his head on the ground and was temporarily paralyzed. Later, it emerged he had broken his neck and had a partial spinal cord lesion.

Van de Geld's friends called 112 on a cellphone, but the operator could not locate Zeewolde and assumed the call was coming from Zuidwolde, 100 kilometers, about 60 miles, away. The call center, used to pranks from children, dismissed the call as a joke. Fortunately, a friend was able to call van de Geld's father, a policeman, who sent an ambulance. The teenager will never fully recover.

Heukels has other examples where 112 has cost valuable time, and in one case, possibly someone's life.

"The technology is there to be able to locate callers on cellphones," he said in a telephone interview. "But the operators won't invest in the service. They don't see a profit in it, so they are ignoring implementing it."

Heukels thinks the government should play a role.

But at the Dutch Economics Ministry, a spokeswoman, Judith Thompson Sepmeijer, said, "We have very few tools to force the mobile companies at this moment to do a lot about it." She suggested that the telephone networks be forced to respond at the European level.

This, however, is not an opinion shared in Brussels, where Barbara Helfferich, a spokeswoman for the European Commission, admitted that there had been "teething problems" with the 112 system but added that it was "up to the member states to implement" their commitments.

Meanwhile, operators at 112 centers have faced the problem of how to communicate with distressed foreigners, who often can't speak the language of the country they are visiting.

"We don't have enough linguists to handle the calls, and that means we sometimes lose vital time," says Patrick Héraud, who handles transmission issues at the Federation of Firemen in France, where most emergency calls on 112 are channeled to fire departments.

Various campaigners across Europe have been working to promote 112. One is Olivier Paul-Morandini, who in 1999 created the European Emergency Number Association, a nonprofit pressure group based in Brussels. Complaints about 112 can be lodged at the group's Web site, www.eena.org.

Another is Per Hilding, a former fire chief who used to run quality control at the Swedish government agency responsible for processing emergency calls, and who now runs a Web site for news on 112 (www.sos112.info).

"Some countries have been better than others" at implementing and publicizing 112, he says.

East European countries, Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain earn plaudits from Hilding, while France, Germany and Italy do not.

Héraud says more resources are needed in France, where the fire service funds 112 from its own budget. In addition, he says, since many 112 calls are from motorists whose cars have broken down, a separate pan-European number should be set up for vehicle recovery.

This idea is in fact in the works. The European Commission was to announce Thursday a plan to equip all new vehicles with a service called e-Call by 2009.

The technology will use the 112 network to signal road accidents, according to a draft plan.

Paul-Morandini is so frustrated by the problems besetting 112 that he has asked the European Commission to consider hauling countries slow to make the number work efficiently before the European Court of Justice.

He says that the recent tsunami in Asia should focus minds on shortcomings in emergency communication.

"I'll keep preaching until 112 is properly implemented," he said. "I will work for that in my lifetime."

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