

When 911 Fails

By Steve Goodman

9-1-1, three little numbers that we in America have had drummed into our heads since we were kids (other countries may use the same, or have similar numbers). Three little numbers, know them, use them and when you do in an emergency help is on the way. I made sure my own child knew how to use 9-1-1 and as an Emergency Preparedness professional I make sure other parents teach this to their children with the same import they do for using a knife and fork, or tying shoes.

It should become a skill that is second nature, so when, and if, your child finds himself or herself in trouble, three little numbers bring rescue – except when it doesn't.

That is the tragedy that happened to the nine-year-old daughter of Kari Rene Hunt back in late 2013. The heartrending incident is illustrative of the problem that happens all too often with multi-use lines in many hotel rooms across the country.

The tot, along with her younger sister and brother, could do nothing to help as her mother was brutally murdered by their own father behind the door of the bathroom of their Texas hotel room. She did what she was supposed to do – in the midst of the attack she picked up the phone and dialed 911 – except the call did not go through. She knew nothing about the need to dial “9” first to get an “outside line” from the room.

In a panic, she grabbed her younger siblings and ran down the hall. A hotel guest found the trio, and eventually did call for help, but it was too late, the 31-year-old mother of three,

had already passed away from her injuries. The nine-year old daughter, apparently told her grandfather, referring to her attempt to dial for help as she had been taught, “Papa, I tried, but it didn't work.”

Hank Hunt, the child's grandfather is trying to push for the enactment of “Kari's Law.” Named for his daughter, if passed it would force all hotels and motels across the country, even small “mom and pop” roadside inns, to upgrade their phone systems to allow 911 calls without the need to dial any digit for an outside line.

As tragic as the Hunt's story is, it is hardly unique. While there have been many advances in telecom over the years many hotels and other businesses still use the antiquated multi-party system that requires the user to “dial 9 for an outside line.” The need to dial (9)-9-1-1 isn't only a problem for children who have not been taught to do so, even adults who find themselves in trouble in a “Dial 9” location, can panic and forget to do so in a moment of crisis. In addition, that is not the only problem with such systems. If you're somewhere with a multi-line phone system, not only do you not have direct access to 911, unlike with “normal” 911 calls made from a single line, First Responders do not receive an accurate signal of your exact location. Often they report to the front desk only to be told “no one here made any such call,” even if they arrive at the right location at all! Such was the case Mr. Kaafee Billah, who was found dead under his desk 10 hours after he called 911 from his office in Maryland. Police thought the call was a fake because they went to another building in Billah's complex and security officers there said they had no record of a call being made, or indications of any trouble.

With today's telecom technology, it is a simple fix to correct such issues. However there is no federal requirement to do so. To date, only 18 states have legislation clarifying emergency procedures, which detail how the multi-line systems need to be connected to 911. Some of the laws require that all such systems provide the location of the call, and/or connect to an operator or front desk personnel who can also alert law enforcement.

However, the legislation is spotty even among the states that have put it on the books. In many cases compliance is only required by hotels of a certain size leaving out dozens and dozens of smaller motels and inns, which are often the site of problems.

If you would like to sign Hank Hunts petition on Change.org, please follow this link: <https://www.change.org/petitions/let-hotel-phones-dial-911-easily-help-enact-kari-s-law>

