

## **European Emergency Number 112 and Emergency Assistance**

**Spreading awareness about the emergency services and the EU wide 112 emergency number should be the first step towards preventing accidents and disasters.**

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Last year, a little girl of less than 2 years of age saved her mother's life by phoning 911 the American emergency number. As a baby a year before, her mother taught her how to press the buttons in the correct order if she or anyone else needed help. Almost a year later, the child's mother collapsed into unconsciousness. Though the little girl had not had any additional coaching, when she couldn't rouse her mother, she was able to run to the cordless phone, punch in 911 and repeatedly tell the voice at the other end of the line "Mommy ouwee, mommy ouwee" over and over until they decided to follow up the call and send assistance to the house. When the emergency services arrived they found the child's mother collapsed on the floor near death. They were able to revive the mother and she is now restored to her brave and clever daughter.

The European Emergency Number Association (EENA) plans to develop a 112 classroom kit in all official European languages to teach children how to react in an emergency. If a small child can learn to do this almost anyone can.

### **The Case for 112**

The case for one number in Europe is compelling. Europe is a community of movement. Mobility of people, services and jobs is a corner stone of the European project. To have a different emergency number in each of the European countries is to court disaster. It is to accept that we will fail people in need of help. It is essential to have one number that is easy to remember and that is answered immediately in the language of the caller and responded to locally.

Last year in Ireland there were a small number of deaths among foreign students, workers and visitors; did they try to call for help? Did they know the number for Ireland which would be different from that of their home country? Could we have saved them? We will never know because the fact is they did not ring 999.

Two thirds of Europeans do not know about the 112 number. How can such a large amount of member state citizens not know about a number that can save their lives? Spreading awareness about the emergency services should be the first step towards preventing accidents and disasters. It is time to fully back the emergency number and strategy of 112.

We live in an age of computers and digital telephones and GPS. The technology is available to handle all emergency calls at a comprehensive answering centre. EENA has called for the budgeting of an excellence centre to provide the best possible emergency response with call taking protocols, multilingual answering, instant and accurate location of the caller, and special consideration for people with special needs such as deaf people.

### **The Verona Charter**

The particular lesson that I have taken from Hurricane Katrina is that in an emergency disabled and elderly people are especially at risk. When people fled New Orleans, many of the most vulnerable were left behind. The emergency services seemed unprepared to help. They did not have a clear picture of where to find vulnerable people and how to help them. Many were

unnecessarily lost.

Persons with disabilities run a much higher risk in the event of natural and manmade disasters than persons without disabilities. There is a need for ensuring better understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities and all the various forms of disabilities in situations of risk. However, we must not forget that in times of emergencies, all of us are potentially disabled. This is where the Verona Charter on the Rescue of Persons with Disabilities comes into play. The Verona Charter intends to be a milestone in this whole process and a concrete contribution to the impact of the United Nation Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities.

There has been a renewed interest in issues concerning persons with disabilities in the light of increased focus on topics such as safety, risk prevention and intervention in case of emergency. While in the past, persons with disabilities have played a marginal role in the planning and mitigation of disaster management, in more recent years, this section of the population has been recognised as a privileged target in first response to emergency interventions in case of natural disaster and wars. We can see this in Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities, and in Art. 19 of the European Parliament Resolution on Natural Disasters, as well as the 2 Commission funded projects- Rescuing Disabled Person in Case of Disasters- Civil Protection's Challenge in the Challenge and Flooding: Rapid Reaction and Simulation Schemes for Safety of Disabled. The Verona Charter is a vital document for people with disabilities. It is a valuable tool that we hope will be used when we are drawing up any other protocols, conventions or resolutions.

### **Conclusions - The Future**

With an evaluation on 112, we could then have a clear understanding of the socio-economic consequences of emergency response to everyday accidents within the EU. With this independent evaluation, we will find out the financial consequences for the public health-care, the impact of the lack of education and information on the 112 of false emergency calls, the final cost in terms of human suffering, operational cost for emergency services, public health care and insurance companies of non-implementation of caller-location technologies and which solutions have shown good results for communicating with people with difficulties. Just imagine how many more lives could be saved. In conjunction, The Verona Charter is timely and bridges the gap that we seem to have created between emergencies or disasters and disability. We will no longer have an excuse to "forget about" our more vulnerable citizens. With such developments, emergency assistance to all our European citizens, regardless of ability or disability, age, language or location, will be visibly improved.