

"When you need help, you don't have time to look through a phone book."



Gene J. Puskar/Associated Press

Without 911, Joy Adams had to dial a lot of digits during a gun emergency in Elizabeth Township.

911 service on hold in Pittsburgh suburbs

County is largest metropolitan area in nation without it

By Jim Urban
The Associated Press

Joy Adams of Elizabeth Township jumped for the phone when her son ran through her front door, screaming that a gun-toting classmate had opened fire at a school bus stop.

She dialed a seven-digit number to summon police, then she hung up and dialed a different seven-digit number to reach an ambulance dispatcher.

Her husband was outside, trying to talk

the 14-year-old into dropping the weapon. One student had been hit in the arm and was bleeding in her home. Other students were cringing on her floor.

"It was very confusing," Adams said. "Even though we have a sticker with the numbers on our telephone, it's hard to tell which number is for which."

"It would be so much easier if there was one number for everything — preferably 911," she said.

But like about 25 percent of U.S. residents, Adams does not have 911 service. If emergency numbers aren't pasted to the phone, these people have to look a number up in the phone book when they're under the gun.

And every second counts.

"If I stopped your breathing right now, you'd have five minutes before brain

damage began occurring and 10 minutes before the brain was irreversibly damaged," said Dr. Robert Hamilton, an emergency medicine specialist at Allegheny General Hospital.

That's why, 911 advocates say, it's unfathomable that one of every four Americans cannot access the universal emergency number 25 years after it debuted in Alabama. The same proportion holds true in Pennsylvania, state officials said.

Most areas without 911 are rural. Consultants are hired to rename streets and give out house numbers before bringing an enhanced 911 system on line. You can't dispatch an ambulance to a

SEE 911, PAGE B-8

911 service on hold in much of county

911 FROM PAGE B-1

mailing address like R.D. 2, Box 34. The largest metropolitan area in the country without 911 is here in Allegheny County — in the municipalities that circle Pittsburgh. The city, with a population of 369,000, has 911. The Pittsburgh suburbs, where 1 million people live, do not.

Area hospitals are on the cutting edge of medicine, but the emergency response system is disjointed and archaic. There are about 60 dispatching centers in the suburbs, working with more than 300 police departments, ambulance services and volunteer fire departments.

"It's hard to believe," said Faith DePope, of suburban Wexford. "When you need help, you don't have time to look through a phone book."

In some non-911 communities, there might be three different seven-digit numbers for police, fire and paramedics. Even when it's not an emergency, the process can be trying.

"There were about eight different numbers," said Sarah Hinkley, also of Wexford, who tried to report the theft of compact discs from her car.

"I called one number and they had to switch me to another number, then I got switched again. And they switched me one more time," Hinkley said.

Dialing 911 in a non-911 community transfers the call to an operator in most cases. The operator must determine the appropriate dispatching agency and forward the call. That can take minutes if the caller is disoriented or panicked, experts said.

The advantage of 911 is obvious in that it's easy to remember and well publicized, thanks to large numbers across the back of many emergency vehicles and the televi-

sion show "Rescue 911."

The basic 911 links a caller to a dispatcher. The enhanced version — in place in about 96 percent of 911 systems — allows a phone number and caller location to appear on a console screen and designates the primary response agencies that can be alerted by a dispatcher with a key punch.

"From beginning to end, the time saving comes in knowing that there is just one number to call and everybody knows it," said Gary Allen, a Berkeley, Calif., emergency dispatcher who co-edits Dispatch Monthly Magazine.

"At the other end, dispatchers spend much less time trying to determine where a caller is. They have a starting point at least from the caller's exact location."

And that has saved lives in the past.

"If the line goes dead because a burglar just ripped the phone out of the wall, that address is still on the screen," said John Linko, the emergency communications coordinator in Richland, north of Pittsburgh. He has seen 911 systems in action, and loathes the fact that his community is without one.

Suburban Pittsburgh is handicapped by local governments' reluctance to relinquish what they have — their own dispatching centers. The state demands that a 911 system be centralized, but many of the 129 municipalities surrounding Pittsburgh want to preserve autonomy.

"There's community pride, a desire to do things on their own," Linko said. "So what happens is that many communities do not work in cooperation."

Allegheny County commissioners are pushing for 911, but won't estimate when it will come on line in the Pittsburgh suburbs. Consultants say it's years away.