



Event Type: Cell Phone Emergency 911 Activation

Date: July 15, 2026

Location: Babylon Fire, Utah

The Story and Lessons from This Problematic Cell Phone Emergency 911 Activation Incident

While assigned to the Babylon Fire, Incident Safety Officers were contacted by a Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) from the Utah Highway Patrol, assigned as a Security Specialist Level 2 (SEC2), who had received a call from his Dispatch Center reporting that an Emergency 911 message had been received from a smartphone that indicated there was an unconscious person in the fire's closure area.

An incident ambulance assigned to that vicinity was also contacted by a local LEO, who passed along the same information.

The Team Safety Officers contacted the Field Safety Officer assigned to that portion of the fire. He relayed that there were no reported issues. The Dispatch Center had called the number back. However, there was no answer. After discussing the situation with the LEO, the Team Safety Officers and the LEO assumed it was likely an accidental call or deceleration activation.

Approximately 30 minutes later, during the Incident Management Team's planning meeting, a phone call was placed from the 911 Center to the Liaison Officer (LOFR), who was unable to answer. The Dispatcher left a voicemail, which was subsequently translated into a text message. The text indicated that a phone's 911 distress function had been activated and referenced a possible shooting.

Members of the Incident Management Team began gathering information. Out of an abundance of caution, the Team's Incident Within an Incident (IWI) group was brought in to begin gathering details about what was known.

Communications were also informed that a local air ambulance had been dispatched and was en route to the location associated with the phone's ping.

It took approximately 45 minutes—possibly longer—to determine that the phone belonged to a crew working on the fireline and that the activation was indeed accidental. This was verified by having fireline leadership go to the area and ask crew members whether anyone's phone number had an area code and last four digits that matched the number associated with the 911 distress call.

Lessons

Due to the confusion that this incident caused, within two hours an AAR was conducted. Several ideas were discussed. Some of the key takeaways included:

- Have the Communications Unit Leader (COML) serve as the point of contact for the incident.
- The Liaison Officer was not immediately sure who should receive the information following the initial call.
- Listen to the voicemail. It never included the word "shooting." The autogenerated text somehow interpreted a word as sounding like "shooting." Given the events in Couer d'Alene, Idaho, the previous year in which Battalion Chief John Morrison and Kootenai County Battalion Chief Frank Harwood were killed by gunfire responding to a brushfire, and the kidnapping of two U.S. Forest Service employees in Northern California in July 2026, it was understandable that this possibility came to mind.

- Obtain the phone number and coordinates directly from the 911 Center.
- Continue attempting to call the number.
- Verify the coordinates immediately.
- Notify line supervision.
- Continue gathering information.

Another Similar Incident

Two days later, the Incident Commander came into the Safety Shop and said: "*We have another one.*" The 911 Dispatch Center had called to report that a crash had been detected from a phone in the fire area.

The Safety Officer immediately entered the coordinates into Field Maps and saw the phone's position on the fireline. The Safety Officer continued attempting to call the number, notified the Division/Group Supervisor (DIVS), and worked with the Resources Unit Leader (RESL) to determine whether the phone number had been associated with someone who had checked in.

At the same time, the owner of the phone was finally able to answer. The DIVS was just about on scene, and the RESL had identified the name associated with the callback number and where the individual was working.

This entire process took less than 10 minutes—and all was well. The individual had dropped his phone and it had been run over by a water tender. The phone simply needed a few minutes to reboot.

Lesson

Following this second event, and after vetting the takeaways from the previous AAR, the Team Safety Officers created a form to help standardize and streamline the process for responding to these types of incidents. See the following page for the form the team created.

This RLS was submitted by:
Incident Overhead

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GREAT BASIN TEAM 6

SAFETY

911 CELL PHONE EMERGENCY ACTIVATION

Procedure:

- ☐ Ensure local 911 Emergency Dispatch Center has correct incident contact information

Comm Unit Burner Phone- 661-751-0273

Safety Officer

- ☐ Obtain phone GPS location

- ☐ Obtain phone number

- ☐ Attempt call back to number

- ☐ Enter coordinates into Field Maps/Avenza/ other mapping application

Identify location

Identify Division

- ☐ Notify OPSC if available or OPBD or DIVS
- ☐ Contact Resources to check phone number
- ☐ Contact individual

*If no contact made consider IWI

- ☐ Close the loop with the 911 Communication Center