

Snohomish County

Going Beyond 9-1-1 and Building a Safer Community in Washington State

by Kurt Mills

We all take 9-1-1 for granted. People know it's the number to call when there's an emergency, but they don't know who is working behind the scenes or the details required to connect with necessary response agencies. Our 9-1-1 team acts as the wizard behind the curtain. Callers on the other end of the line, often in extreme distress, expect 9-1-1 call handlers to be efficient and dependable, and I'm proud that our team repeatedly delivers on those expectations.

Public safety professionals can handle anything, but there's an old joke that the only thing we hate more than change is when things stay the same. Rolling out something new is always met with skepticism. But when those of us behind the curtain can see that adopting a new technology will improve safety in our community, everyone eagerly climbs aboard.



Customer

Snohomish County, WA

Solutions

- Smart911
- Rave Alert
- Rave Panic Button



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Connecting with the community in new ways

I've worked in public safety since the 1980s. I started as a 9-1-1 dispatcher, then spent time as an EMT and firefighter, among other roles. I am currently the director of Snohomish County 911 (SNO911), a consolidated 9-1-1 system that serves 43 agencies and 850,000 people in the county just north of Seattle. We're unique because we're not part of a city fire or police department; we're a standalone agency that provides 9-1-1, dispatch, radio and technology services like business operations and support, enterprise solutions, IT security, data analytics, application support and more to all of Snohomish County. When people call us, we collect caller details and information about their emergency so we can swiftly dispatch a team from the appropriate agency. Everything we do serves our mission: protecting public safety and serving the community.

The front end of 9-1-1 services hasn't changed much since the 1980s. Mobile phones may have replaced many landlines, but the public generally continues to reach out to us through voice calls. And on the back end, technology has evolved significantly. One major change has been replacing our old analog switching stations that ran on public telephone infrastructure with a dedicated IP network that routes 9-1-1 voice calls and increases our access to digital capabilities, which allow us to engage and better connect with underserved communities.

In 2014, SNO911 had a chance to further enhance its emergency services and commitment to the public by introducing Motorola Solutions' Rave Mobile Safety technologies. Our first deployment was Smart911, an app that allows community members to proactively provide information about themselves and their households that is then shared only when they call 9-1-1. Members of the public can create secure online safety profiles that contain information that may be pertinent in an emergency, such as health histories, medical equipment, allergies, and disabilities. They can also add pets and family members to these profiles, entry codes for apartment lobbies and gates, and even provide the location of spare keys.

It's not necessarily about response time; it's about improving responders' awareness while they are enroute so that they can take immediate action upon arrival.

We also wanted to give those on the front lines life-saving information, like access to personal health records and prescription details, when responding to medical emergency calls. We created an integration so that when someone with a Smart911 profile dials 9-1-1 to report an emergency incident, that profile information pops up on the 9-1-1 call handler's screen. Our dispatchers can then quickly relay those critical details to emergency responders before they arrive on the scene.





Where a neurodivergent resident, for example those with autism or other conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), might have appeared to be in distress or a danger to others simply because they're unable to verbalize their current state, we can now give emergency responders important caller data so they arrive informed and ready to help de-escalate such situations.

We provide the link to establish a Smart911 profile on the websites of 43 agencies in the counties we serve. The solution offers tremendous value. It's not necessarily about response time; it's about improving responders' awareness while they are en route so that they can take immediate informed action upon arrival. If a responder has as much information as possible before they reach the scene, we hope that will lead to greatly improved safety outcomes.

Supporting educators during active shooter incidents

Shortly after we rolled out Smart911, we learned about Rave Panic Button. We were immediately intrigued at the prospect of being able to do even more to help protect our community. Specifically, we thought the Rave Panic Button could give local school administrators a fast way to rapidly and seamlessly contact emergency services, update staff, and coordinate the type of holistic response that is paramount during active shooter incidents and other emergency situations.

Teachers in the U.S. have it hard. Apart from doing their day-to-day jobs of educating our kids (sometimes with very limited resources), we now expect them to safeguard children against violent offenders and protect their students until help arrives. I started hearing about teachers receiving "Run, Hide, Fight" active shooter training and thought, "They didn't sign up for this." If we're asking them to take on this burden and they're stepping up to the plate, then as a 9-1-1 director, I'm going to do anything I can to help support them and provide assistance until police and fire personnel can arrive on the scene during an emergency. Rave Panic Button was one way to do that.

At the time, SNO911 didn't have relationships with any of the school districts, and I didn't have any experience working with their administrators. Fortunately, Dr. Molly Ringo of the Everett School District emerged as a valuable partner. She had received state funding to improve school safety systems, processes, and training, and she helped us understand what local schools were doing to keep our children safe. Dr. Ringo facilitated inroads in her district so we could pilot Rave Panic Button there before rolling it out to other districts.

While working on that first deployment, we had an active shooter incident at Marysville Pilchuck High School in a neighboring district. The danger was over in less than a minute, but tensions remained high long afterward, as law enforcement officials continued searching the school for other threats. An hour after the incident, first responders entered a special needs classroom, where students were still sheltering in place, terrified. Seeing this, an officer asked the principal to call all the classrooms to see if there were more students still hiding in classrooms. But teachers in lockdown mode aren't supposed to answer the phone, so the police continued their tedious room-by-room, inch-by-inch search because there was no way to communicate with those who remained trapped.

If the school had Rave Panic Button at the time of the incident, school administrators could have texted status updates to teachers, helping them and their students remain calm while the police secured the school and evacuated students. It was a powerful lesson that steeled our resolve to roll out Rave Panic Button in other school districts. To date, we have deployed it at 250 county schools, and it has become the de facto safety tech platform that directly connects these schools to SNO911.

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The Difference-Maker in Various School Emergencies

Although we initially deployed Rave Panic Button to optimize our response in active shooter situations, we rarely receive those types of 9-1-1 calls from our schools. More common calls involve students who have experienced injuries or severe illness. We quickly realized we could use Rave Panic Button for these situations, too. Now, when we dispatch an emergency vehicle, we can simultaneously alert all school staff so they don't fear the worst when they see police, ambulance or a fire truck show up.

Another use case is for missing children. Sometimes, a student leaves school grounds during school hours and someone calls 9-1-1. We started using Rave Panic Button to alert school staff of the missing child and to share information, such as what the student was wearing and their last known location. We communicate these details often before the police and fire department arrive on scene so school and emergency personnel aren't working against each other or duplicating efforts. We've never had an actual abduction, but information sharing and enhanced collaboration are essential for optimal emergency response and incident resolution.

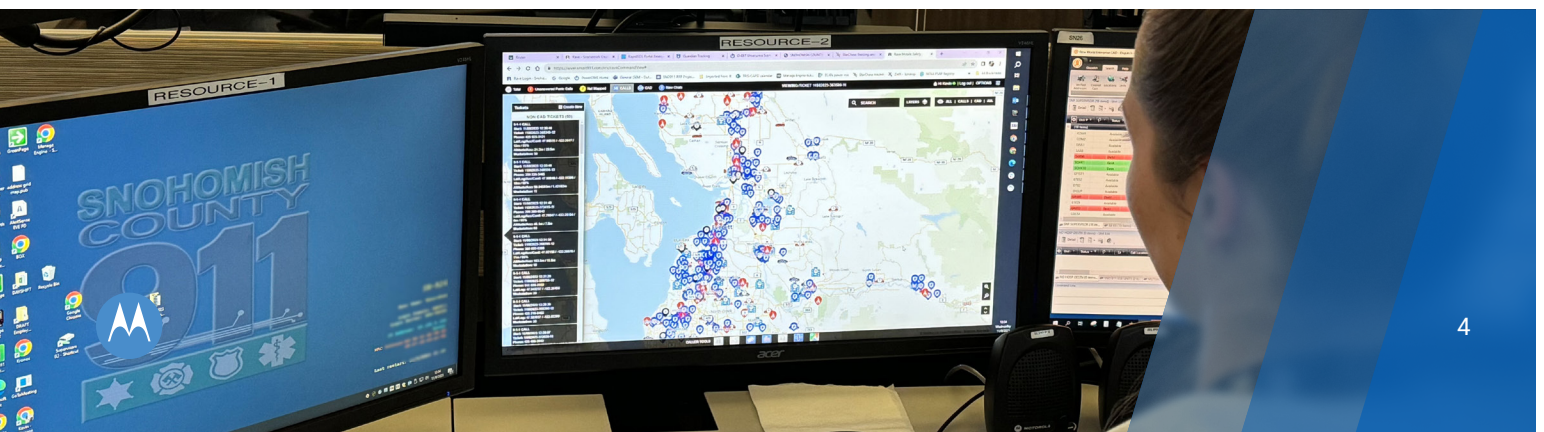
One time, we received a call that somebody had collapsed and stopped breathing. The caller started administering CPR while requesting assistance. When we realized the emergency was unfolding in a school, we pushed out an alert via Rave Panic Button in real time. The school nurse rushed to the person's aid with a defibrillator and revived them. Someone was likely on the way to the nurse's office already, but the instant alert accelerated the response—and possibly saved a life.

Real-time alerts offer agencies visibility into each other's activities. It's incredibly efficient and helps keep the public safer and better informed.

Sharing Rave to Increase Visibility

In 2020, we adopted a third solution from the Motorola Solutions' safety ecosystem, Rave Alert. Even though SNO911 is entirely autonomous, we share this mass notification solution with the Snohomish County Department of Emergency Management to collaborate during emergencies, when necessary. We use Rave Alert's internal communications features to call out the SWAT team and other specialty response units that aren't on the 9-1-1 dispatch list. The Emergency Management team uses the platform to send timely alerts that inform the community about floods, tornadoes, shelter-in-place orders, and more.

Sharing this resource allows our two departments to reinforce each other's actions and ensure our communities are as resilient as possible. For example, if there is a broken sewer main or chemical spill somewhere in Snohomish County, we can share information with the appropriate response team and Emergency Management so they can issue a neighborhood warning or county wide communication. If they hear about a pending disaster or a large-scale emergency, they can alert us at SNO911 so we can reassure citizens in crisis who are calling 9-1-1. Emergency Management doesn't have to contact us when they issue an alert, and we don't have to tell them when we call in the SWAT team. Rave Alert offers our respective agencies visibility into each other's activities. It's incredibly efficient and helps keep the public safer and better informed.





The Rave team helped us set up the shared instance. They didn't have to, but they're a company that does what's right for their customers. Many companies that bid on government contracts in the public safety space want to sell you something and walk away once the deal is finalized, but Rave isn't like that. They're a true partner who always listens and incorporates customer feedback into their products. Rave Panic Button is a great example—it's evolved tremendously since our initial deployment. You don't see that level of attention from many suppliers, and I'm pleased that they continue to support us as we support our community.

We have to invest in change

When I reflect on our first conversations with Rave Mobile Safety, I remember how excited we were to try new solutions, despite it being a big change for us. We knew they would impact our day-to-day operations and help us deliver a better service—but we didn't understand just how transformative the changes would be for our organization and our community. I'm happy we invested in progress instead of maintaining the status quo. Rave technologies allow us to share more information with public safety agencies so that first responders arrive better prepared. Our partnership with county schools ensures we can keep all parties updated during an emergency—and in the current climate, the importance of this level of collaboration between schools and 9-1-1 cannot be overstated. We're confident that our alignment with the county's emergency management department has helped keep residents safe and informed.

9-1-1 dispatchers answer a high volume of calls and send the appropriate response personnel to a wide range of emergencies. We don't always know the outcomes. But we continue to invest in safety technology because we have seen how innovation has helped Snohomish County improve our response and mass communications, and serve the community better.

To learn more, visit: www.motorolasolutions.com



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