

KITTCOM 911

Serving Kittitas County, Washington

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: November 14, 2023

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Kittitas County 911 system facing challenges to public safety

Radios don't work in many parts of the county, creating difficulties for emergency responders

ELLENSBURG, WASH. – Kittitas County 911's emergency radio system and communication infrastructure are facing significant challenges impacting public safety across the county. The outdated system isn't reliable in many parts of the county, making it difficult for first responders and search teams to coordinate and communicate during police, fire and medical emergencies, and search-and-rescue operations.

Kittitas County 911 (also known as KITTCOM) answers and coordinates 911 services for all 17 public safety agencies in the county, including fire, emergency medical service (EMS), police, and search-and-rescue. They respond to more than 48,000 calls per year. KITTCOM and safety agencies rely on radio communication to coordinate and communicate with emergency responders and search teams on the ground. There are many locations in the county where radio signals are not reliable or nonexistent including in the Cle Elum River Valley, Suncadia, Yakima River recreational areas, ski areas, rural schools and homes, and in the many new residential and recreational developments in the county. These "radio holes" or "dead zones" impact response times, patient care, wildland fire suppression, and rescue operations.

"Our radio system is from the 1980s and held together with parts from eBay," KITTCOM Interim Director Rich Elliott said. "And our newest equipment is already 10 years old. We need to upgrade our radios and communication tower infrastructure to adequately serve our community. This is a public safety issue that impacts the entire county. We must secure a sustainable funding source to pay for these critical improvements."

What are the challenges facing the 911 system?

KITTCOM serves nearly 50,000 residents plus thousands more who come to recreate or attend festivals. Seasonal and weekend visitors can triple and, at times, quadruple the population. More people living and visiting the county are straining the outdated and aging 911 system. Emergency responders and search teams must regularly use personnel to seek out radio signals to relay pertinent search information or to coordinate resources and supplies.

“We have to send valuable rescue personnel to drive long distances in many cases just to find a cell or radio signal because of the lack of radio reception with KITTCOM,” said Fire Chief Brandon Schmidt with Kittitas County Fire District 1. “This delays the transfer of critical information between rescue teams as well as delays the coordination of critical resources and supplies needed during emergencies. This is a significant safety issue when we are unable to coordinate time-sensitive resources and information because we are unable to communicate with KITTCOM.”

KITTCOM funds its 911 system through cell phone and user agency fees. In the last three years, user agency fees increased by 50 percent. When user agency fees increase, it reduces the amount of revenue they have for their daily operations to pay for the emergency personnel, equipment, ambulances, and fire engines all residents require. This funding source is not sustainable for the 911 system or user agencies.

What is the solution?

KITTCOM is exploring sustainable funding options to address this countywide safety issue and provide sufficient revenue to pay for radio equipment, communication towers, technology improvements, security and other critical infrastructure, and maintenance costs. This will be a public process and the public will have the opportunity to comment and provide feedback before any decision is finalized by the Kittitas County Board of Commissioners.

Learn more at www.kittcom.org. KITTCOM Interim Director Rich Elliott also welcomes any questions at 509-925-8530 or rich.elliott@kittcom.org.

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KITTCOM answers and coordinates 911 service for all 17 public safety agencies throughout Kittitas County, including fire, emergency medical service, law enforcement and disaster response agencies. The agency serves both Kittitas County residents (population nearly 50,000), non-residents and visitors who come to the county for recreational opportunities. The agency responds to more than 48,000 calls per year.