What is the Number for 9-1-1?

A frequent complaint that I receive (mostly from parents) is that the fire department did not respond to a fire alarm at their apartment building. The calls I receive claim their son or daughter and roommates evacuated, but no one ever showed up from a public safety agency.

Depending on the age and size of an apartment building, the alarm system may not have been required to be monitored by a supervising station at the time of construction. In this instance, there should be a sign located at all manual alarms that reads ‘WHEN ALARM SOUNDS - CALL FIRE DEPARTMENT.’ Or, the message may be provided permanently on the alarm box by the manufacturer.

What makes this situation worse is that students are ever reliant on social media and portable smart devices. It seems that many have missed how to report an incident to emergency services. Or, calling 9-1-1. This seems especially true when they are reporting what does not appear to be an emergency to them. Instead, the caller will Google the name of the town’s fire department or police department.

Sometimes, this number may forward to a public safety answering point. Others may get a voicemail if the phone does not ring in an attended location. That said, it is not uncommon to have a message waiting on Monday morning regarding an alarm sounding from Friday night.

So, how do we correct this?

Some of these situations may auto-correct over time when the alarm system is upgraded in the building. Today’s codes would require a fire alarm system to be
supervised when the
installation of the alarm
is required based on the
use group. The
supervising station must
be in accordance with
NFPA-72.

Better signage could be installed - having the
sign read ‘WHEN ALARM
SOUNDS - CALL 9-1-1.’
Or, the appropriate
emergency service
number if 9-1-1 is not
available. Some phone
systems installed in
buildings require dialing
‘9’ for an outside line,
so in this instance a
lobby phone may have a
sign that states - CALL
9-9-1-1.

Property managers
could distribute
information to tenants
about how to reach
public safety agencies,
as well as a reminder of
the maintenance
number to report alarm
issues. It would be
helpful for property
managers to update
tenants of the cause of
an alarm, and to thank
those that evacuated or
took appropriate
actions.

As we deal with newer
buildings, or high-rise
buildings there are also
requirements for
Emergency Voice
communication
systems. In this
instance we now
options to utilize
provide customized
messages and specific
instructions to the
building’s occupants.

The fire department or
management may also
use the voice feature to
update occupants about
the alarm conditions,
the need for additional
floors to evacuate, or
give the all-clear
message and even
details of why the alarm
sounded.

As technology changes
many of the human
variable is being
replaced. Sometimes
this is good. However,
we will still have the
need to train our
communities about all
emergencies and
methods to call for
help. We need to
encourage occupants to
call 9-1-1 to report an
alarm sounding and
especially any related
conditions that they observe. This goes in line with the ‘See Something - Say Something’ campaign. The first responders can then decide if it is an emergency, or not.

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