7 Reasons Why Mobile Apps Won't Replace Your Blue Light Phones

Comprehensive security plans employ both blue light phones and mobile apps, along with other emergency communication solutions. *By Michael Zuidema*

There doesn't seem to be much that cell phones can't do these days. Between text messages, social media, Internet, gaming, calendar, camera and video capabilities, it sometimes seems like the last thing people want to use their cell phones for is making actual calls. Now, though, there is a growing faction of individuals lobbying for safety and security to not only be included in the mobile communication mix, but act as a primary method for alerting first responders during an emergency situation.

But is trading out blue light phones for cell phones really a fair deal for the thousands of students, faculty, staff and visitors who roam campuses every day? The answer is simple: no.

Blue light phones act as integrated security stations that provide a wide array of emergency communication solutions, while simultaneously augmenting mobile security apps. Removing them would be a hasty and potentially dangerous decision for campuses looking for a complete security solution.

Blue light phones have a number of advantages:

Pinpoint location: Blue light phones can be a boon for first responders, who will have advance knowledge of their placement on campus and thus can determine its whereabouts instantly upon activation. Mobile apps, however, frequently use geo-triangulation, which is not always precise and may not be able to provide an exact location. Blue light phones also provide direct contact with emergency personnel on site, while a mobile app may connect with 911, meaning help possibly could be miles away from the scene.

Durability: Blue light phones are rugged and durable enough to withstand everything from a heat wave to a hurricane and everything in between. They also provide reliable communication when a high rate of traffic might overwhelm cellular networks. Anyone who's tried to use their cell phone during a major sporting event or storm knows that consistent service isn't guaranteed. Far from it, in fact, and that's before we factor in periodic software updates and potential data connectivity issues.

Highly integrated: While emergency pedestals and call boxes have been around for decades, they are far more cutting edge than the "blue light phone" moniker might suggest. Most systems on the market are sophisticated enough to integrate with public address speakers, mass notification software, video cameras, card readers, automated external defibrillator (AED) housings and more as additional security and safety measures.

Universally accessible: Blue light phones are available for anyone to use. Mobile apps may be convenient for those who have taken the time to download and configure their location in a campus setting, but that doesn't do much to help parents or guests who are visiting. And blue light phones can also be useful for non-emergency services like information requests, campus escorts late at night and car assistance.

Highly reliable: Blue light phones also take an element of human error out of the equation. While cell phones are handy during emergencies, there's no guarantee that the battery won't be dead or it won't be forgotten in someone's room or car. Emergencies are also highly stressful situations and the moments spent fumbling with a cell phone could have an impact. Blue light phones, on the other hand, make it simple: Push the button, alert first responders, receive assistance.

Blue light phones still provide high reliability and a high level of technology.

Finances: Blue light phones certainly require an upfront financial investment, but once they are installed the maintenance costs typically are very low and they are durable enough to last for years. Mobile apps, however, can have a reoccurring fee that is due each semester and is based on campus enrollment.

Peace of mind: A popular argument against the installation of blue light phones is that the research doesn't support their inclusion on campuses. That is often coupled with comments like "No one uses them" or "The only calls we get are pranks." It's hard to reconcile that rationale, however, with comments from students and parents, who frequently cite the presence of blue light phones as a visible deterrent that provides them with the peace of mind of knowing they are in a safe environment.

This may seem like an apples and oranges comparison, but the bottom line is campuses shouldn't be forced to choose between blue light phones or mobile apps. It's not an either/or argument. The best method for a comprehensive security plan is to employ both blue light phones and mobile apps, along with other emergency communication solutions like public address speakers and mass notification software, for a multi-layered approach. **CS**

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