



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Milton-Freewater (WA) woman dies as inability to pinpoint cell-phone call hinders response

By Sheila Hagar of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

MILTON-FREEWATER — Like countless others, Kathy Alger believed having a cell phone instead of a land line made good sense.

The 64-year-old Milton-Freewater resident was disabled by health problems, but determined to fully participate in life. Not only was a wireless phone contract cheaper than a land line, but she could be in the yard with the grandchildren or shopping at Wal-Mart and summon help at the touch of a fingertip if needed, said her daughter, Kim Alger.

Three pushes — 9,1,1 — seemed the perfect safety net for the disabled woman who valued her independence and preferred to live on her own. “Her understanding was that you could call 911 no matter what,” Kim said. “She wanted to have the phone with her everywhere in case she fell.”

The Algers, like multitudes of people, had assumed public safety technology has kept pace with cell-phone marketing.

That’s not the case, experts agree, and the Walla Walla Valley family would come to learn in a story that is too far from unique.

Under circumstances that have shocked her clan to the core, Kathy was found dead in her house on Dec. 11. Although no one will ever know exactly how long, it soon became clear she had been dead for days.

By then, in a mobile home kept heated to 74 degrees, her body had bloated almost beyond recognition, her skin splotched deep purple and red. Blood had seeped from her nose and mouth, pooling on her chest and shoulder and soaking into the carpet below.

Seated in her favorite chair in front of the TV, Kathy’s glasses remained perched on her nose and her cell phone was open on her lap when her 31-year-old grandson walked in.

Sean Alger had been summoned by an employee of a medical transport agency who had twice been unsuccessful in getting Kathy to open her front door at a scheduled pick-up time. The driver, knowing the disabled woman would have hollered if she could, had already called the Umatilla County's Sheriff's Office

"I knew going over there, she was probably dead," Sean said. "But when I walked in and she was still sitting in the place she always sits, my brain played a trick."

For just a few seconds, his mind allowed him to believe things were just fine, that his grandmother was watching TV like usual, he said. "That should have never happened."

What he didn't yet know at the moment of discovery was that Kathy had placed a call to the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office Communication Center at 11:22 p.m. on Dec. 6. The Alger family would be nearly 36 hours into the grieving process before learning Kathy had realized she was in trouble and had reached out for help.

While Kathy Alger's death was unexpected, it was not surprising, her family said. Heart disease and diabetes had plagued her for years. "She was the type of diabetic who would eat a box of Twinkies, then take the insulin to make up for it," family members told a sheriff's deputy during an investigation of the woman's death.

The mother of six, Kathy's early life was much like the rest of it — rough, often unconventional and usually bumpy, Kim noted.

Born into the rigidly structured household of an Army officer, Kathy rebelled against house rules at a young age. When coupled with an early physical maturity, her quest for freedom ended at 16, pregnant with her first child and married to her boyfriend.

Nearly 50 years later, her mother had taken a similar approach to her own health most of that time, disregarding the care she needed, Kim said. As well, Kathy had poor relationships with the people most likely to coax her to wellness — her four still-living children.

"It all goes to why she didn't have the self-worth to fight her diabetes," Kim said. "She was a very loving human being, but she had a hard time dealing with close relationships."

Which makes Kathy's death sharper still, honed with the edge of irony. Although she didn't often relate well with her grown children, the opposite was true of her grandchildren. Rarely did a school event go by without the family matriarch in attendance, and she was a primary caregiver for several grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Kathy helped her teen-age grandkids with auto insurance fees and paid the initial costs for each to have a cell phone. It was a way her mother, on a limited income, could offer them a little help, Kim explained. "That was important to her."

Too, Kathy had finally begun to take more responsibility for her health. A recent problem with swallowing was being evaluated by Kathy's physician.

Because of the medical situation, her mom had not been providing child care for her grand- and great-grandchildren in early December, Kim said.

A mixed blessing, she believes. While Kim is thankful no youngster had to watch Kathy die, she might still be alive had there been a child to summon help.

Someone who could perhaps tell the lady on the phone just where Kathy lived.

It was late into the night on Dec. 12 when Kim Alger finally had a minute to stop and check her mother's cell phone's history. The Unicel phone rang and rang while Kim went through her mother's home the day after Kathy's body had been found, Kim recalled. "So it ended up in my pocket."

In the process of trying to establish a time line for her mom's death, Kim began going through the phone's messages.

Her world stopped when she discovered a voice mail from a dispatcher at Umatilla County's emergency call center.

"Hello, this is Tammy from the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office out of Pendleton, Oregon. I just received a 911 call from this phone. If you're able, please call us back on 911 so we can get a location on you if there is an emergency. Thank you," the female dispatcher said.

It was the first, terrible inkling her mother had left the world in a less than peaceful manner, Kim said. No longer could she assume Kathy had simply drifted away while watching a TV program or petting her dog, Shelby.

Kim immediately called her older sister, Cindy Armenta, then contacted other family members. "Then I called the dispatch center to see what they could tell me."

And what she found is unacceptable, she said.

Like people are trained to do, Kathy Alger called 911 for help on Dec. 6. It was the day she likely died, although no autopsy was done to confirm a time of death. The tape of that call gives an audio history of her mother's last moments, Kim believes.

"It sounds like my grandmother probably died on the phone," Sean confirmed.

In listening to the recorded call, there can be little doubt the caller is in serious trouble.

Whether from choking, a stroke or heart attack, Kathy could only offer guttural responses to the dispatcher's queries.

"911, do you need police, fire or medical?" the dispatcher asks.

In deep, struggling grunts, Kathy answers with three syllables, forming what sounds like "medical."

It's the last semi-intelligible utterance. Everything else is answered with a croaking scream, including a request for an address, after gasping inhalation. What could be construed as 'help' is uttered 11 times.

Kathy is heard for the last time at one minute and 45 seconds into the call. At three minutes and 14 seconds, a dial tone precedes the electronic chords of the keypad as the dispatcher redials the number.

Although the emergency call center labeled the tape copy handed over to the Alger family as a “911 hang up,” there is no apparent evidence that her mother disconnected.

“I was told ‘We can’t follow up on every hang-up 911 call we get’ by the center supervisor,” Kim said. “She never hung up.”

Matters became more complicated. As Kathy fought to articulate her plight, the dispatch center was working to establish where the call originated and dispatching emergency workers. Readouts indicated the caller was at Highway 339 — typically referred to as Old Milton Highway — and Appleton Road, said Umatilla County Undersheriff Terry Rowan, who oversees the 911 center.

Kathy Alger lived in a double-wide trailer at the corner of Appleton Road and the east side of Highway 11, more than eighths-tenths of a mile away.

A deputy thought he might know the caller and address indicated by the cell tower coordinates, but that proved to be a false hope after he checked the area, Rowan said. “Then it becomes a scenario where you’re looking for a needle in a haystack.

“If we can’t get information from a caller, then how do you know? You don’t know if it is a domestic, hostage or medical situation,” he said. “You just don’t know.”

Most people, including many in law enforcement, can’t get past the Hollywood version of 911 calls, Rowan said. “This CSI theory where the whole United States has the same thing you see on TV. Where you can not only get cell phone location, but it’s tracking you the whole time you’re moving.

“We just don’t have that stuff.”

Before Dec. 11, Rowan was guilty of the same belief, he conceded. “My perception would be if my wife crashed in some remote spot, they would find her (via cell phone), spot on.”

Umatilla County is in the process of implementing Phase 2 of the Enhanced 911. As required by the Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act of 1999, E-911 was created to provide a seamless communications system for emergency services, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

The upgraded system allows for automatic reporting of telephone numbers and locations of 911 calls made from land-line calls. Transition periods were designed to bring the nation’s communications infrastructure into compliance.

Also, the commission requires cell-phone carriers to provide 911 and E-911 capability where public safety officials request it. Once fully in place, wireless E-911 provides accurate coordinates for emergency calls from wireless phones from 164 to 984 feet of the actual location.

Kathy Alger was more than 4,200 feet from where the cell-tower information placed her.

Umatilla County is partially through the E-911 upgrade, Rowan noted. Even so, every cell phone is only as good as the information provided to emergency dispatch centers by carriers, he added.

The Milton-Freewater area is especially hard to map for E-911 purposes. "This address might be in the city limits, the house across the street might show up as county." It's the addresses right on the fringe that require dispatchers to make an instant judgment call as to which agency to send out, Rowan said.

In the case of Kathy Alger's call, other barriers plagued the response. Emergency call centers can't keep up with what's on the market, he explained. "There are just a million different companies, different plans, Trac phones ... a lot of systems won't even track that kind of stuff."

For example, when Kathy's call came in, it showed up as a Rural Cellular Corporation phone, "a subsidiary of Unicef and we didn't even know that."

To find that out took half an hour, which didn't happen until much later, Rowan said.

Had his staff known, they might have been able to utilize the link on Unicef's Web site that guides law enforcement in getting subscriber location information almost immediately. That's just one of many things he plans to address for Umatilla County's 911 center, Rowan said.

"Let's make sure we have — at least — all the contact information for all the cell phones we can think of. What we learned is many of the 911 centers across Oregon are faced with the same battle in identifying different corporations for cell-phone carriers. In identifying protocol to get subscriber information."

People changing carriers but retaining old numbers adds another layer, as does cell signals pinging off towers far from where those signals originate, he said.

It's a complicated issue, said Miriam Svobodny of Unicef. Beyond that, the wireless company could not comment by press time, she said.

The Umatilla County official would like to see a central clearinghouse where every 911 center can access that data until the day technology allows individual agencies to integrate that into their own systems. "It's hard to say what would make it one solid system."

This case has been a terrible lesson in where procedural and training gaps are for his and other dispatch centers, Rowan said. After exhausting the obvious means to identify and find the unknown 911 caller, the matter was considered done, a "hang-up 911."

"What I wished would have happened is that a supervisor would have been notified of the call. A supervisor would have had time to investigate, like we did when (Kathy Alger) was discovered dead in her home."

Notifying him would have allowed Rowan to trace what steps had been taken, as well. Now, it's all Monday morning quarterbacking, he added. "This has certainly had an impact on staff. The dispatcher who took the call was distraught over this, devastated."

His office has developed new policies in light of the situation. Supervisors will be briefed on every call, follow-ups will be conducted, and additional training may be added.

Cell-phone companies need to do their part, too, Rowan said. "When are they going to help make sure what's being marketed is working like they say it is?"

Kathy Alger's family doubts whether anything could have been done to save her life.

Kim and Armenta are nurses for Vange John Memorial Hospice in Hermiston and were keenly aware of how precarious their mother's health was, Kim said. A successful 911 response may have prolonged his grandmother's suffering, Sean agreed. But no one should experience what he views as apathy on the part of the Umatilla County emergency call center, heard even during the actual call, he feels. "There was no compassion, no encouragement. No reassurance they were going to do anything."

It's painful to imagine the woman who helped raise him as helpless and alone in the last minutes of her life, Sean explained.

"I had just taken my daughter there the week before. We hung out, I took out the garbage, things I always did," he recalled. "She gave me my own baby spoon that day."

Kathy also gave her first grandchild "The Spooky Old Tree," his beloved childhood book. "Here it was, the last time I saw her and she gave them to me."

He plans to see his grandmother when he reaches heaven, Sean said. While still on Earth, however, he'll do what he can to change the issues surrounding cell phones and 911 calls.

"I should never have had to walk in there, no one should have to see that. I don't want to ever hear another story like this."