

Case studies in

Innovative thinking from New Zealand's public sector

Case study #5:

NZ Police partners with the Deaf community

New Zealand Police broke new ground when it unveiled its 111 texting service for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired in 2010.

Not only was it a world-first service using bespoke technology, but it was the result of a unique collaboration between Police and a group whose needs are often overlooked – the 9,000-strong Deaf community.¹

Overcoming outmoded technology

The 111 text service was developed to give Deaf and Hearing Impaired people equal access to emergency services as other citizens.

In an emergency, Deaf and Hearing Impaired people have traditionally relied on faxes and slow, outmoded teletypewriter phones, or asked a hearing person to call 111 on their behalf. This meant more delay, and was also immensely disempowering. “The powerlessness connected to the inability to manage your own affairs in times of emergencies is most devaluing of your right to citizenship,” said Rachel Noble, chief executive of the organisation representing the Deaf community, Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand.²

Police had learned a lot about the importance of mobile phones to the Deaf and Hearing Impaired community following the 2007 murder of young Christchurch woman Emma Agnew, who was Deaf. The homicide inquiry had revealed how much Deaf people relied on texting for communication and personal safety, with some having up to four mobile phones.

All these factors prompted Police to look around for new technology to put Deaf and Hearing Impaired people on an equal footing with others in an emergency. Solutions developed in other countries were less than optimal, as texts had to be relayed to emergency services via a third party. After consulting with the Deaf community, Police decided to develop an entirely new system that had never been tried elsewhere – one that would enable Deaf and Hearing Impaired people to communicate directly with the Police Communications Centre via text.

Partners in development

Recognising that it did not have the in-house capacity to develop such a product, Police contracted an external supplier, Australian-based firm Whispir and their partner IBM. The registration-based system was developed on time and within budget, using standard project and governance methodology. But one very distinctive feature became critical to the project's overall success: the close involvement of the Deaf community.

Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand was a pivotal partner throughout. Specialist input was provided by Police Constable Deb Leahy, Senior Station Officer Quin Webster from the New Zealand Fire Service, and St John volunteer Helen Skinner – all fluent in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). They filmed NZSL explanations of the service tailored to the Deaf community. With other emergency services staff, Deb and Quin fronted meetings around the country where they used NZSL to explain how the 111 text system would work and what constituted an emergency. In all, the team met with nearly 400 Deaf people.

Insights from users enable customisation

These public meetings gave Police plenty of positive feedback, and also highlighted the need for modifications before the service could be successfully launched.

“We learned that we were far from the mark in our thinking of how people would use the service and what they needed to know,” explained project leader Superintendent Andy McGregor. Several aspects of the system were customised, such as adjusting text templates to accommodate the unique grammar of Deaf English

The workshops also provided valuable insights into how best to get the message out to the Deaf community about the new service. Police prepared a step-by-step online demonstration of the registration process for Deaf Aotearoa staff to show users, and made video resources about the service in NZSL, available online and on DVD.

Superintendent McGregor said the customisation of the service and the communications strategy that accompanied it were the direct result of Police's decision to partner closely with the Deaf community: “We gathered some very specific information that a hearing person would not have otherwise considered.”

New approaches, aspirational outcome

In the 10 months since the 111 Deaf text service went live on 15 October 2010, 640 people registered to use it and nearly 100 emergency texts were received. The response from the Deaf and Hearing Impaired community was overwhelmingly positive. “This is a major event for the Deaf community and incredibly empowering,” said Rachel Noble.

Police said the potential of the service was still to be tapped. Deaf and Hearing Impaired people were not the only group who could benefit – Police hoped to expand it to others with access issues, such as people with severe speech impairments.



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Lift rescue via 111 TXT

An Auckland man was pleased he'd registered for the 111 Deaf TXT service when he ran into trouble in a hotel carpark lift after taking a shortcut to meet friends at lunchtime.

He said all of a sudden the lift shook violently and the lights went out.

“It gave me a hell of a fright as I thought it would drop down fast. But it stopped about 1m down.

“I was the only one in there. It was very difficult to know what to do. I tried the emergency phone but it didn't help because I'm Deaf.

“Then I thought of that ‘Die Hard’ movie and tried to use my hands to force the internal doors open but that didn't work.

“So I was thinking how can I get out? Then I remembered the new Deaf 111 texting service.

“I texted Police emergency for help. I was so happy to receive a message back from Police. They told me the Fire Service were working on a way to get me out.

“After 45 minutes I finally got out of the lift. I was so grateful that Deaf 111 TXT had been launched.”

Source: NZ Police

¹ According to Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand, there are about 9,000 ‘culturally Deaf’ people in New Zealand – people who consider themselves part of a distinct Deaf culture and whose first language is sign language (see <http://www.deaf.co.nz/for-you/useful-info/facts-about-Deaf>). A 2010 report commissioned by the organisation says there are also around 200,000 people with a hearing impairment who do not use a visual language and have acquired significant hearing losses later in life. See <http://www.deaf.co.nz/yk-files/7f415a7813efd37a482b1f1ba8095137/Deaf+Way+Report+Final.pdf>, p13

² From NZ Police submission to the IPANZ Gen-i Public Sector Excellence Awards 2011. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from this source.