

Emergency Call System in Portugal

Hopefully most of us will never encounter a situation whereby we will need the assistance of the emergency services. However in case we need to do so it is important to know how it operates and what you will be asked in making a call.

Some back ground

112 is the only emergency call number in Portugal. Callers seek help in all types of emergency situations such as firefighting, medical or maritime distress, crime protection, and many others. Fast and efficient responses to those calls literally save lives. It is crucial to make sure callers can use the system anywhere and anytime. A service disruption at any time could be disastrous.

For many years, Portuguese authorities had relied on an emergency call management system working with 18 regionally distributed Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs), each of which covered one of the country's districts. Incoming calls reached one of the PSAPs throughout mainland Portugal. However, especially in the case of major incidents, these local PSAPs posed risks of failure or capacity overload.

Seeking to strengthen the infrastructure to meet current and future requirements, as well as new national and EU regulations, the Ministry of Internal Administration (MAI) decided in 2012 to update the existing data centre and build a second data centre to cover the entire Portuguese territory. The two centres, one in Lisbon and the other in Porto, are designed to be fully redundant and to ensure disruption-free operation of the emergency platform, even if one centre experiences an overload or a failure.

Calling 112 in an Emergency

It is important to remember the system should only be used for real Emergencies. Non-emergency use can detract operators from dealing with real emergencies. Do not call 112 for traffic, weather, general information and queries. Unnecessary calls can overload the system and endanger the lives of those who really need emergency help. False calls can also affect the response to real emergencies.

A properly trained operator will answer your call. Most operators speak English, but it is important to try and speak clearly and slowly which can be difficult in stressful situations. Depending on the type of emergency the operator may handle your request or transfer to a more appropriate emergency service, for example to a doctor in case of illness or trauma.

The table shows some tips. Please cut this out and keep



What happens if you cannot get an answer?

This can happen when there is a massive unexpected demand on the service. In this case it is important not to hang up and make repeated calls, as this exacerbates the overload.

112 for those with impaired hearing

But what if the caller can't hear or talk? Portuguese authorities have been working for years to grant barrier-free access to public services—and using Avaya technology they have now done so for the public emergency call system.

An app Mai 112 connects the caller to a sign language interpreter in the operational centre who translates the sign language into speech. The technology also lays the foundations for future video emergency calls from all smartphones, which would allow the transmission of live images from an emergency site when alerting the security agency.

The app is now available for download through the website "112. PT" and soon can be downloaded directly on smartphones through play store (Android) and app stores (IOS).

This is a free service, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, throughout the national territory, for Portuguese or foreign citizens.

Locating callers in an emergency

Lack of caller location can be detrimental for the safety of citizens in many ways, the decision on which emergency resource is dispatched, the quickest route to get to the incident, and so on. This has been a problem in Portugal for some living in remote areas.

Good news is that progress is being made with the use of AML technology (Advanced Mobile Location) technology.

An AML-enabled smartphone recognises when an emergency call is made and, if not already activated, activates the phone's GNSS to collect the caller's location information. The handset then sends an automatic SMS to the emergency services with the caller's location. The service can also use Wi-Fi, depending on which is better at a given moment. Please note that AML is not an app.

The system is used so far in around 16 countries worldwide and is currently being tested in Portugal with implementation scheduled for the last quarter of this year.

IN EMERGENCIES

Stay calm - When calling 112 it is important to stay calm. You need to provide the emergency service with relevant information.

If possible, make the call yourself - No one can explain the situation better than you.

Wait until the operator answers your call - It may take a little time, but every repeated call is considered a new one and is put at the end of the queue, therefore the time of getting through might be prolonged.

Providing details - When the operator answers your call, say your name, try to explain what happened and who is involved. Also, try to indicate your location the best way possible. It makes it easier for emergency services to reach you.

Follow the operator's advice - Answer the questions and follow the operator's advice. Do not hang up until the operator says so. Try to keep your phone line free until the emergency services reach you. The dispatcher may need to contact you for further information.

If something changes, inform 112 again - For better or for worse, call 112 again and report it.