

Prepare your phones for emergencies

Destructive tornadoes, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake, Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee all hit Virginia in 2011. In the minutes and hours after these disasters, it was difficult to make calls on cell phones because the mobile networks were so busy. Follow these tips to make sure you can communicate during and after an emergency:

- If you have a traditional landline, keep a non-cordless phone in your home, because it will work even if you lose power.
- Keep a list of emergency phone numbers in your cell phone and near your home phone.
- Prepare a family contact sheet with at least one out-of-town person who can serve as your family's emergency contact. Often it's easier to make long distance rather than local calls during an emergency. Get a worksheet at www.ReadyVirginia.gov. Click on Make a Plan and look on the right side of the page for wallet cards.
- Have charged batteries and car phone chargers for back-up power.
- Subscribe to text alert services from local or state governments and schools to receive emergency alerts.
- Use text messaging, email or social media instead of making calls on your cell phone. Texts and emails are less likely to experience network congestion. You also can use social media to let family and friends know you are okay.
- Keep all phone calls brief to avoid tying up voice networks.
- Conserve your cell phone battery by reducing screen brightness and closing apps you are not using.
- Limit streaming videos, downloading music or playing video games on cell phones after a disaster to help emergency calls get through to 9-1-1.
- If you have a life-threatening emergency only, call 9-1-1. At this time, 9-1-1 cannot receive texts.

For more tips and to download a tip sheet on communicating during disasters, go to <http://www.vaemergency.gov/readyvirginia/stayinformed/how-to-communicate>.