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News Brief

New Emergency Services Program Launches in Europe (9/1/09)

A new program set to launch in five European countries will give disabled people direct access to emergency services. In France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom, Reach112 (Responding to all citizens needing help) will deploy a new text/voice/video communications solution to allow thousands of people to communicate in video, voice and text simultaneously, with special focus on disabled people.

The project will offer access to relay services to help connect users with different abilities to others and will also provide access to emergency services. REACH112 is a three-year project that began in January and is partially funded by the European Commission, gathering 22 partners from all over Europe, including user organizations and major global telecommunications companies.

The European emergency number 1-1-2, which is used to contact emergency services free across the EU, is currently not accessible to the majority of disabled people. However, REACH112 will introduce improved communications solutions for disabled people, allowing them direct access to emergency services, a potentially life-saving feature.

"REACH112 will test innovative solutions to ensure that 1-1-2 can be reached by every citizen all over the European Union and set the guidelines for the take-up of new communications technologies by European Union (EU) emergency services," said Olivier Paul-Morandini, president and founder of the European Emergency Number Association (EENA).

Users will also be able to call each other in video, voice and text via the Internet, across national boundaries. It will also allow sign language users to communicate through remote interpreting services and via other relay services, using text to talk to voice users.

"The REACH 112 project initiative will provide modes of communications to find a way to communicate in each situation, may it be with a live real-time text conversation, with sign language, with lip reading, with voice or with any simultaneous combination of these modes," said Carlotta Besozzi, director of the European Disability Forum (EDF) and adviser to the project. "This will also be a major step ahead for persons with disabilities in the equality to access emergency services in a society designed for all."

During the one-year pilot in the five countries, IP devices will be provided in the homes, workplaces and on the move, connecting users. The service will be integrated with existing platforms and emergency service frameworks. Additionally, a protocol for the exchange of information between emergency services will be made available.

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