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A Lot Can Change in 300 Seconds

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Imagine you're living on the 17th floor of a high-rise apartment building in downtown Austin. Your grandmother comes over for a visit. While there, she starts having chest pains, so you call 9-1-1. The Austin Fire Department (AFD) is the first to respond, as they are in the case of many medical emergencies. What they might not know, however, is that only one set of elevators in your building goes to the 17th floor; the other set only goes to the 10th floor.

Ensuring the crew gets on the right elevator saves precious seconds in life-saving treatment. So how does AFD know on which set of elevators to get on? Thankfully, your building has an emergency plan on file with the department and all the firefighters assigned to your call are using its corresponding digital emergency plan maps.

Like many things, technology has made emergency plans much more accessible to the crews who need and use them. Until recently, they were only on paper and kept in a notebook on the fire truck. But their rudimentary availability was in direct opposition to their importance: they are a vital tool for firefighters, providing locations for water shut-off valves, hazardous materials, areas of refuge, elevators, and more. High-rise buildings (those taller than 75 feet) present unique challenges.

For example, a high-rise building in downtown Austin recently suffered $5.5 million in property damage due to a busted water pipe that caused flooding throughout the building, all in just 30 minutes. The damage might have been much less severe if there had been an emergency plan showing where the water shut-off valves were located.

Left: Gold lines show the border of an apartment complex emergency plan. Green lines indicate fire truck access lines; red numbers indicate the building numbers; red and white circles show fire hydrant locations. Firefighters can scroll in on digitized maps to access more information like elevators, water shut-off valves, stairwell numbers, etc.

In Austin, only 32 percent of high-rise buildings have an emergency plan. AFD Fire Specialist Ashley Hamilton, who has helped spearhead the emergency planning efforts within the department, is helping change that.

"We're working on digitizing paper emergency plans," says Ashley. "These new, interactive digital maps give all members of the fire crew access to critical information about the building; it's now in their hands, on their phones, inside of buildings…. not stored on paper in a three-ring binder or a computer**."**

And that saves time for *all* first responders, including police and EMS.

"In emergency response, every second counts," says Ashley. "We define our world in 300 seconds. Because every second could be life or death."

That's how long a first responder may have to save a cardiac patient or find the water shut-off valve when a pipe bursts. AFD started digitizing hundreds of paper emergency plans in 2020. Firefighter Shelley Sinopoli kicked off the project by digitizing 30 plans in less than one day., leading to the training of other department staff to assist. The overall result was 1,500 plans being digitized in just three months.

"We've made tremendous progress in less than a year," says Ashley. "It's really cool to be working on the edge of things and solving complex problems. But even more so, creating value for the troops on the ground that serve the public."

Digitized emergency plans are hosted on an actionable 'Software as a Service' platform (interactive digital map) that shares decades of first responders' knowledge of critical information in three clicks or less. This puts 'on-hand data' necessary to solve emergencies on the phones and tablets of all of Austin's first responders. By the end of 2021, AFD hopes all of Austin's 4,000 first responders will be online and have access to the system, helping them make critical decisions in 300 seconds or less.

The data is being used to address all types of emergencies: fires, locating people lost on the area's greenbelts, and active shooter situations. In fact, the digitized plans were used during an active attack in April of this year inside an apartment complex where three people were shot and killed. An Austin Firefighter commented about that event, "Emergency planning created structure within chaos; it kept dozens of people out of harm's way."

Seconds matter and hopefully, this new data and the tools that go along with it will provide first responders with opportunities to protect more property and save more lives — including grandma .

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