

Expediting Emergency Contact for Car Accidents: Database Will Link Emergency Contact Information with Vehicle ID Number

Save to myBoK

by David Sweet, MLS

Participating automotive manufacturers plan to introduce a voluntary, nationwide database designed to put emergency contact information for motor vehicle owners in the hands of emergency responders quickly, dramatically reducing the time it takes to identify accident victims and notify their emergency contacts.

The initiative is part of the Health Information Technology Standards Panel's work on the American Health Information Community's emergency responders and electronic health records use case, which is defining the functional components and standards that will provide first responders with pertinent health information on accident victims.

A Slow Process for Identifying Contacts

The need is great, given the number of serious car accidents each year, the importance of involving family in the victim's care, and the difficulty responders typically have in locating contact information.

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics reports that in 2006 there were more than 2.5 million people injured in traffic accidents (250,000 of whom had life-threatening injuries) and more than 42,500 deaths caused by car accidents.¹⁻² Motor vehicle accidents represent the leading cause of unintentional injury and admittance to an emergency room in an unconscious state, as well as the third leading cause of death in the United States, surpassed only by heart disease and cancer.³

Early involvement of family or an emergency contact to advocate on behalf of an accident victim and provide additional knowledge, such as pre-existing conditions, medications, and allergies, has the potential to greatly enhance a victim's chances of survival after an accident.

However, the national average for the time it takes police to positively identify accident victims and track down family members ranges from more than six hours for in-state notifications to more than two days for out-of-state notifications.⁴ In most cases, the only information available to police is the address on the victim's driver's license.

When the police are unable to contact anyone at the home address listed on the accident victim's driver's license, the police must begin a search, contacting neighbors or looking up old records. This process can take precious hours and prevent friends and family from reaching a loved one quickly.

Emergency responders do not have special access to emergency contact or next-of-kin data following a traffic accident. A Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) query can be initiated by police based upon the vehicle identification number (VIN) or vehicle registration plate. However, neither query will return vehicle owner emergency contact or next-of-kin data.

Typically, emergency responders resort to searching personal belongings (e.g., wallet, glove compartment, cell phone, etc.) for an emergency contact or next of kin information. Still, emergency responders can encounter obstacles, such as unlisted phone numbers that might require a warrant for release in certain jurisdictions or unresponsive victims who cannot be moved for fear of further injury.

Expediting Identification and Contact

In Florida and Ohio, lobbying efforts by www.ToInformFamiliesFirst.com and www.ParentGrief.com have successfully passed legislation to create the Driver's License Emergency Contact Database. The legislation requires the DMV to allow individuals

holding a valid Florida or Ohio driver's license, commercial driver's license, temporary instruction permit, or identification card to file the name, address, telephone number, and relationship of at least one contact person.

That person would be contacted if the individual is involved in a motor vehicle accident or emergency situation and dies, is seriously injured, or is rendered unconscious and unable to communicate.

However, these are only two states, and there are limitations on what these efforts can accomplish. The driver's license database query is not nationwide; that means that the emergency contact data for a Florida licensed driver involved in a motor vehicle accident in Ohio may not be available to the Ohio State Highway Patrol. And if an accident victim is unconscious or otherwise unidentifiable, police must physically locate a driver's license in order to initiate a query, which is not always possible due to the type and severity of the accident.

Nationwide VIN Database in Development

Prompted by these limitations, participating automotive manufacturers will soon introduce a nationwide database system that will link individuals' emergency contact information to their automobile's vehicle identification number. Kia Motors America is the first auto maker to formally announce their intent to offer this service on future models. The National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System will also be a part of this new system.

When launched the system will allow consumers purchasing or leasing a motor vehicle from an authorized dealership to voluntarily list a minimum of a name and telephone number for at least one contact person. If the motor vehicle is involved in a traffic accident or emergency situation and an occupant dies or is seriously injured, the police will have a contact person's name and telephone number for immediate notification.

The automotive manufacturer VIN database system enhances the functionality of Florida's and Ohio's system and leverages the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System by linking together more than 20,000 law enforcement agencies nationwide and more than 500,000 in-vehicle police mobile data devices in the US and Canada, as well as DMV agencies.

The Importance of PHRs at the Scene of an Accident

The minutes after traumatic injuries are sustained, or the so-called "golden hour," are critical in saving a crash victim's life and minimizing the effects of injuries. The availability and access to vital health data from a personal health record (PHR), such as pre-existing conditions, medications, and allergies, have the potential to greatly enhance a victim's on-scene emergency healthcare.

HITSP's Emergency Responder Use Case Work Group is developing the interoperability standards that will electronically link PHRs to the nationwide emergency contact database system, enabling emergency responders to access accident victims' vital health data.

Notes

1. US Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. "Injured Persons by Transportation Mode: 1990–2006." Available online at www.bts.gov/publications/pocket_guide_to_transportation/2008/html/table_02_05.html.
2. US Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. "Distribution of Transportation Fatalities: 2006." Available online at www.bts.gov/publications/pocket_guide_to_transportation/2008/html/table_02_02.html.
3. Subramanian, Rajesh. "Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes as a Leading Cause of Death in the United States, 2004." Traffic Safety Facts Research Note, March 2007. Available online at www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810742.PDF.
4. Hayes, Heather B. "HITSP Seeks Volunteers to Develop National Car Accident Reporting Network." *Government Health IT* April 21, 2008. Available online at www.govhealthit.com/online/news/350324-1.html.

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