

999

60TH ANNIVERSARY

THREE DIGIT EMERGENCY DIALING IN WINNIPEG

Three-digit emergency dialing was proposed in Winnipeg after then Mayor Stephen Juba visited the UK in the late 50's and heard of the idea. A sub-committee was then struck which was composed of two members each from Manitoba Telephone System, City of Winnipeg Signals Department, and the Winnipeg Police Department. In January of 1959, a proposal and budget summary was submitted to City Hall indicating that the adoption of 3-digit dialing would “simplify the procedure for the public to obtain emergency services with a minimum of delay and confusion”, and that the numbers 999 were selected because it was “easily dialed and remembered”.

The proposal combined emergency service phone numbers for sixteen different municipalities. Some municipal leaders were upset with the cost, which was a proposed annual fee of 10.77 cents per person in their municipality, believing this was too extravagant. Alderman A.E. Bennett (Police Commissioner, Chairman) proposed a way to cut costs by instead hiring *women* as operators, at a cost of \$200/month instead of \$345/month for male personnel. This cut one quarter of the cost to the municipalities, and was accepted by city council as they were reassured by Mr. Bennett that “this arrangement will not affect the efficient operation of the proposed system”. For perspective, \$200 in 1959 equates to \$1780 in today's market.

On June 21st, 1959, Winnipeg would become the first city in North America to adopt 3-digit emergency dialing.

Several articles have been written with conflicting dates on when the number 999 changed to 911 in

Winnipeg. City archives documentation confirms that it was recognized in 1969 that the number needed to change because 911 would eventually be the digits used universally for emergency services throughout the American continent; however, the numbers did not in fact change until 1975. This



THE EMERGENCY SERVICE

Provided in the
CITY of WINNIPEG

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY **DIAL**
"999"



ANOTHER FIRST
FOR WINNIPEG

Front Cover of a 1968 Brochure

999



999 Centre in 1965

delay was largely due to technical problems experienced by Manitoba Telephone System.

In 1990 a significant change in Winnipeg's 911 capabilities was experienced with the implementation of Enhanced 911, which provided Call Takers with landline details (name, address, phone number) of 911 callers. In 2009 another significant change was experienced when Call Takers began to receive the estimated geographic coordinates of wireless 911 callers. In the near future, yet another significant change is scheduled to occur which will impact the entire 911 industry in North America - Next Generation 911. Current 911 analog systems will be replaced with digital (internet protocol) systems in order to support a growing wireless society. This will not only provide more accurate location information for callers, but also open up the doors to the possibilities of things such as video and texting to 911.

Today, Call Takers answer an average of 1350 calls per day (911 and non-emergency lines combined). In contrast, in the early years 999 Operators answered approximately 300 calls per day. Calls for service are much more complex than in the past due to technological advancements and procedural changes. Staffing has increased from 9 members to approximately 100 members working inside the Winnipeg Police Service Communications Centre.

2019 marks a celebration of Winnipeg's 60-years in the 911 industry.

