

Help for non-English speaking people in an emergency

Older people with poor English language skills are more vulnerable in an emergency situation due to language barriers when attempting to communicate with emergency services.

Red Button Technologies has addressed this problem by providing a new service to enable a person to rapidly contact multiple friends or family with a single phone call who can then provide assistance or contact emergency services acting as an interpreter on their behalf. The system works with any telephone.

Surprisingly, an estimated 1 million migrants in Australia cannot speak English, a huge number in a country of only around 20 million people, and some 3 million residents (around 15 per cent of the population) speak a language other than English at home.

For people who cannot speak English, obtaining assistance in an emergency presents difficulties; emergency service operators mostly only speak English.

“With a growing migrant population the language issue is becoming more important, because even though Triple Zero services have access to interpreters it’s not a simple process to identify the caller’s language and to quickly locate a suitable interpreter,” said Justin Wearne, Chief Executive Officer of Red Button Technologies.

A new service

Red Button Technologies has launched a new service to enable people who have poor or no English language skills to obtain emergency assistance by facilitating fast connection to



With Telstra’s delayed hotline service you dial Red Button by taking the phone off-hook and waiting 4 seconds. Red Button then automatically rings up to 9 people at the same time.



Red Button can be used with both fixed line and mobile telephones. An account holder can program Red Button to recognise both numbers for the same cost.

a group of friends and family who can provide consultation in a suspected emergency. The designated group can then contact Triple Zero on the caller’s behalf creating a three-way conversation.

Red Button utilises friends and family as a “guardian group”. A person in distress dials the Red Button service which then contacts every guardian si-

multaneously. The first guardian to answer is connected to the caller. Up to 9 guardians can be contacted.

This approach vastly increases the probability of reaching someone on the first call and increases the speed of response. The guardians who did not answer are sent a text message informing them who made the call and who answered. Further text messages are sent if Triple Zero is dialed, and a final broadcast text message can be issued by the family member or friend who handled the situation.

“Non English speaking people are more likely to call friends or family in an emergency. Red Button increases the probability that they will reach somebody on the first dial. In addition, the system can be set-up so that the user only needs to press the 5 key on their phone to initiate the call,” said Justin Wearne.

Conference call with Triple Zero

In the case of a caller who has impaired speech or cannot speak English, friends and family are able to firstly render immediate assistance and secondly initiate a three way conversation with emergency services.

The connection to Triple Zero is achieved without breaking the connec-

tion to the caller. This is an important feature in an emergency.

“During the Red Button call, the guardian simply presses zero on their telephone. The system then dials Triple Zero. When the Triple Zero operator answers they are added to the existing conversation.”

The conference call with Triple Zero also allows the guardian to assist by acting as an interpreter, clarifying medical history and location information, thereby improving communication and the effectiveness of the emergency response.

“With the introduction of Red Button we are hoping for a more effective use of the Triple Zero service with fewer false calls and more effective outcomes,” said Justin Wearne.

Independent living

Many older people are choosing to remain in their own home as long as possible rather than moving into a nursing home. For relatives this can cause anxiety worrying about how they will manage in an emergency. For older people who speak English poorly or not at all, this is even more concerning.

The Red Button service provides reassurance that they will be able to obtain assistance quickly.

Red Button
Technologies Pty Ltd



Red Button Technologies Pty Ltd was formed in 2006 through a partnership between telecommunications expert Professor Reg Coutts and technology specialist marketer Justin Wearne.

Professor Coutts was a member of the expert panel formed by the Federal Government in 2008 to provide advice on the National Broadband Network which led to the announced policy to invest \$43 billion on the national network; he is an Emeritus Professor of telecommunications at the University of Adelaide.

Red Button Technologies received an AusIndustry COMET Grant in February 2009 to develop the Connectivity Server prototype and to assist with commercialisation of the venture.

In December 2009, Red Button announced that it had received a \$500k investment from Melbourne based firm Optimisation Software Engineering and had entered into an agreement to develop and commercialise Red Button’s Connectivity Server platform leading to the development of the first consumer product.