Staying safe on campus

M-Urgency app adds live video to 911 calls

By: Nicholas Hung

As you’re walking around campus at a reasonably late time, you notice a fire blazing away inside a building. Unfortunately, most people are asleep and there aren’t any emergency telephones nearby. However, you happen to have an Android phone and downloaded the M-Urgency application. Never fear, for M-Urgency is here!

Developed by Computer Science Professor Ashok Agrawala and his group, the M-Urgency application, which was first released for free download on January 25, 2012, provides a new level of safety and ingenuity for the University of Maryland community.

“For the last many years, my focus has been to come up with the ways in which technology can be used for improving the quality of life on campus,” Agrawala said. “M-Urgency is an effort in that kind of direction.”

M-Urgency is an application for cell phones which, in an emergency that typically requires a 911 call, can connect the caller to a police dispatcher, not just through audio but through real-time video via the caller’s phone as well. The police will be able to see what is occurring at the caller’s location and know the caller’s number and exact location, which will appear on a map on the police dispatcher’s computer screen. As a result, emergencies can be more effectively handled than a traditional 911 call.

M-Urgency was conceived by Agrawala and his group after they examined the amount of crime on campus and students’ perception of their safety on campus. Because of this project, one student’s Ph.D. has been completed and three more are expected to be completed as well. M-Urgency is the first phone application of its kind that has the potential to increase safety to such a high degree. “We are implementing all the cutting state-of-the-art status [technology]… and inventing new techniques, new ways [to develop applications],” he said.

The conception of M-Urgency has also spawned the creation of other useful applications. One example involves the police escort service, in which the user can contact the police for monitoring through real-time video via phone. The caller’s location is continuously tracked and, if anything suspicious is detected, the police can easily dispatch officers to intervene. Another application will reveal important details of buildings on campus, such as the presence of hazardous materials, layout and occupancy, so that the emergency scene can be taken care of appropriately.

There are more improvements to the M-Urgency application yet to come. The next version is planned to include the ability of the police dispatcher receiving the call to see where police near the caller are, assign them to the caller’s location and transmit the real-time information from the caller to the nearby police. An iPhone version is expected to be released sometime in the near future.

“This [application] serves as a major detriment,” Agrawala added. “If a criminal know[s] that any student could be carrying this device...they’ll think twice before coming to the campus.”