

Urgency Cell Phones

“No, I don’t want a free cell phone; I can’t afford it.”

——Overheard in the Haystack lunch room

Say what? Well, say this: So-called free cell phones typically require a one-year contract for \$200 to \$350 even if no calls are made or received. Cell-phone service providers are understandably eager to sell contracts for service, and their cost for the phone instrument is small compared with such contract amounts. There is an alternative, however, for folks who need a cell phone only infrequently and who don’t need to receive incoming calls.

An *urgency cell phone* is a wireless phone that:

(1) Can call 911 and other emergency numbers such as *77 (i.e., *SP) in Massachusetts or *64 (i.e., *NH) in New Hampshire to reach the State Police especially for highway emergencies. Any cell phone can do this, and these are free calls.

(2) Can make collect, credit-card, and perhaps calling-card calls. This is called *manual roaming* and is an FCC requirement (but there seem to be some loopholes in the FCC rules). These calls are quite expensive, and most folks limit them to urgencies, hence the name. Typical costs are \$1 to \$2 for the connection plus \$1 to \$2 for each minute of connected time. If you make more than a few minutes of calls each month, then this may not be economical for you. There may also be the hassle of punching your credit-card number.

(3) Can *not* receive incoming calls.

(4) Has no contract, no monthly or recurring fees or charges. You pay only for the phone instrument and for calls as in (2) above.

An example of an urgent (but not emergency) call that someone might make using (2) above would be a motorist who has a problem with the vehicle and needs to call AAA or his or her spouse or employer for help. Another example would be a walker or runner who experiences a minor injury or a sudden illness and needs a ride home (not in an ambulance and not to a hospital). Such cases should be handled as urgencies, rather than 911 emergencies, so leaving our police, fire, and ambulance corps to respond to real emergencies.

Urgency cell phones are not very widely known and used primarily because information about them is scarce. Cell-phone service providers are not likely to advertise

this capability. Although a manual-roaming call might cost \$10, it might be needed only once or twice in a year.

There are several ways to obtain such an urgency cell phone. Sometimes a so-called *yard-sale phone*, which you might actually buy at a yard sale or through eBay, will work in this way right off the table. Such a phone probably originally had a service contract, which has expired. The catch is that this phone's previous phone number is probably still stored in the phone, and if a cell-phone service provider assigns this same number to another customer, then an attempt to use this phone as above will be blocked. To the service provider, this looks like an attempt to use the phone on this other customer's account, which would be fraudulent. Such a yard-sale phone might work for a while but then fail to work in manual roaming when its number was assigned to another customer.

The solution to this problem is to reprogram the phone to have a generic phone number such as the one recommended by the FCC for no-callback emergency phones, namely 123-456-7890. Setting the Carrier ID to 0 is also desirable. Reprogramming cell phones is, however, messy business. Each phone manufacturer, and sometimes each model, is different. The store that originally sold the phone is not likely to be helpful because they want you to buy a cell-phone contract. Lots of help is available on the Web, some reliable.

There are several companies that sell such phones ready to use and with a guarantee. Examples: <http://www.emergencycellphones.com/>, <http://www.911phone.net/>, <http://www.FareTheeWellPhones.com/>, and <http://www.helpmephone.com/>. Typical costs are \$40 to \$60 per phone, usually reconditioned. These sites have lots of additional information about using such phones.

We have personal experience with a Motorola *flip-flap* analog cell phone, originally on MCI, and originally Audrey's. The service contract expired long ago, the phone number was assigned to someone else, so we had to reprogram it. We have the original owner's manual, and, since these models were quite popular, we found lots of information on the Web. After several false starts, we managed to change the phone number and the Carrier ID as noted above. We can now use either Cingular, on the type-A (non-wireline) setting, or Verizon, on the type-B (wireline) setting to make calls as in (2) above. But we have tried this only at nearby locations; your results may differ especially in other parts of the country.

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