

Appendix B. Cell Phone Location Systems

The use of cell phones is dramatically changing the face of search and rescue. In many cases, it can change what would normally require a search into a more “simple” rescue only. If a cell phone is involved, the subject’s behavior category may not matter as much—instead, find the cell phone and, in most cases, you find the missing subject. Therefore, it is critical to understand how different cell phone location services work, their limitations and inaccuracies, and how to obtain location information in a timely fashion. In addition, it is important to understand how to communicate with the subject while conserving the cell phone battery.

Key Points

- **Without an established relationship with cell phone providers it may be difficult, slow, or even impossible to obtain location information.** In an emergency, it might be more appropriate to work through another agency with an established relationship.
- The location provided by the cell provider may or may **not** be related to the subject’s present location or even close to it.
- Minimize conversations and air-time with the subject. Tell the subject to turn off the phone.
- Know how to send a text message.
- Be knowledgeable about the limitations of different cell phone location services. Someone knowledgeable about cell technology and search should be the point of contact with cell provider.

The most important point is the need for an established relationship with cell phone providers. Phone companies are not emergency response organizations and have a culture different from search and rescue. Each company may have different sets of requirements and forms for submission prior to the release of information. The middle of an incident is not the time to determine the exact requirements for each provider. Cell phone providers will feel more comfortable dealing with easily recognized entities such as law enforcement, 911 call