



## 1. Medical emergency services in the 1000 Islands: A cautionary tale

Imagine the following scenario: You are at your island cottage and suffer a heart attack or some other debilitating medical condition. You are either alone or there is no one able to drive your boat to the mainland to meet an ambulance. Fortunately, you have a telephone within reach and are able to make a call for help. What is the best way to make sure that EMS can get to your island in time to help you?

This situation was faced by one of our members a few years ago. Fortunately, he survived and is currently hale and hearty, but he was very lucky that the EMS personnel found their way to his island. On that evening, he managed to make it to his phone and, lying on the floor, called his wife who was on the mainland. During a subsequent call, the 911 operator indicated that she was unfamiliar with "the islands," but was told that there was no bridge or ferry access to this island, so rescue would have to be by air or boat. The Gananoque Marina was designated as the pick-up point for paramedics to be transported by a rescue boat, but there was lingering confusion about the island name because there is a similarly named island nearby. Luckily there were several interventions: First, the patient's wife arrived dockside in Gan when the rescue boat was being readied for the mission. Then, overhearing the misnamed island, she clarified the island name and location. As well, the rescue boat operator, a Fire and Rescue volunteer, knew the family and the exact location of the island. He was able to expeditiously transport the paramedics.

As it turns out, this situation is covered by local emergency rescue protocols on both sides of the border, but when calling 911 from an island, it is imperative that you specify you are calling about a **marine emergency**. This will trigger local protocols to arrange a Fire Rescue boat to take paramedics to your island. However, do not assume local island knowledge on the part of 911 operators. You need to be able to tell the 911 operator EXACTLY where your cottage is, so that information can be efficiently transmitted to EMS personnel.

Ideally, because of the uniqueness of the 1000 Islands, and because emergency situations are stressful while requiring immediate action, you should have on hand a copy of the following information: (1) island name and civic number of your cottage, and (2) GPS coordinates pinpointing the dock at which emergency personal should land.

On the next page you will find instructions for recording this information. For more information on emergency situations in the 1000 Islands, see the [FAQs page](#) about local emergency procedures.

## 2. Instructions for Completing TIA’s Marine Emergency Information Fridge Magnet

To help islanders deal with these types of emergencies, TIA has produced and distributed fridge magnets depicted in this figure so they can have the key information on hand, available in a format that can be read out to a 911 operator:

	<h1 style="margin: 0;">Marine Emergency Information for 911 Calls</h1>	
<b>Begin the call with:</b>	<i>“Operator, I’m reporting a marine emergency on an island in the (Canadian or American) waters of the 1000 Islands in the St. Lawrence River.”</i>	
<b>Civic/911 address of your cottage:</b>		
<b>GPS coordinates of dock (DD or DMS):</b>	<b>Latitude:</b>	<b>Longitude:</b>
<b>For more information on filling out this form:</b>	<a href="https://www.thousandislandsassociation.com/river-safety-911">https://www.thousandislandsassociation.com/river-safety-911</a>	

**Row 1:** This row is pre-filled to help people initiate the call and tell the operator **exactly** what needs to be said to alert them that it is a marine emergency and therefore a rescue boat needs to be dispatched to an island that has no other means of access to it (i.e., no bridge or ferry).

The call should begin with this sentence, adjusted (within the brackets) to whether the emergency is on a Canadian or American island. It is crucial that the operator is told that you are calling about a **marine emergency**. This will trigger local protocols for the operator to arrange one of several possible rescue boats to take paramedics to your island.

**Row 2:** In this row, write in pen (a fine-point permanent marker is recommended) the civic address of your island property. If you are unsure what your property number is, check your property tax bill.

On tax bills for Canadian properties, it is the “CIVIC ADDRESS” and on the American tax bills it is the “LOCATION.” The first part of the address is a number, and the second part is the formal name of the island on tax records. This number corresponds to the number on the civic address sign (sometimes called the “911 sign”) that you may (and should) have at your main dock.

On the Canadian side, there is a Township bylaw requiring these signs:  
<https://www.leeds1000islands.ca/en/living/911-Signs-and-Mailboxes.aspx>

On the American side, there is no unified code and most people just use reflective number stickers posted on something near the water, like their dock or mailbox, following these general instructions: <https://www.lifenetems.org/911address/>

If you are the only property on an island, on the Canadian side you will have been assigned a default “1,” so a civic address may simply be something like “1 Paradise Island.” The larger the island, the more digits there will be in the address, such as “357 Big Paradise Island.” If you do not have one of these signs prominently displayed at your main dock, we **strongly recommend that you install one.**

However, because some island properties do not have their civic addresses linked to the emergency response data that the operator has on hand, it is very helpful to also give them your GPS coordinates, in row 3.

**Row 3:** There is ample space in this row for the two GPS coordinates —latitude and longitude—pinpointing the dock at which emergency personal should land. Although 911 dispatchers are typically able to determine the general location of callers using their smart phone’s GPS locator, this is not always precise, especially in areas like the 1000 Island where cell towers are spread out and reception can be spotty. Besides, many people still use landlines, so regardless you are advised to determine and record this information in advance on our fridge magnet so the person placing the call can tell the 911 operator exactly where you are in case there is any question.

Here is what a completed fridge magnet would look like for a fictitious island:

 <p><b>THOUSAND ISLANDS ASSOCIATION</b> Founded in 1934</p>	<h2 style="margin: 0;">Marine Emergency Information for 911 Calls</h2>	
<b>Begin the call with:</b>	<i>“Operator, I’m reporting a marine emergency on an island in the (Canadian or American) waters of the 1000 Islands in the St. Lawrence River.”</i>	
<b>Civic/911 address of your cottage:</b>	<i>357 Big Paradise Island</i>	
<b>GPS coordinates of dock (DD or DMS):</b>	<b>Latitude:</b> <i>44.123456</i>	<b>Longitude:</b> <i>-76.123456</i>
<b>For more information on filling out this form:</b>	<a href="https://www.thousandislandsassociation.com/river-safety-911">https://www.thousandislandsassociation.com/river-safety-911</a>	

*Which GPS system to use—DD or DMS?*

There are two systems for recording GPS locations currently in use: Decimal Degrees (DD) and Degrees Minutes Seconds (DMS). Many people may find the DD system easier to use for the current application because it is simpler to write out in advance and easier to read out the numbers during an emergency call. The comparable DMS format for the above DD coordinates would be something like 44°07'22.42"N 76°07'24.391"W. Not everyone will know what the three symbols mean for degrees, minutes, and seconds. Trained navigators will find the DMS

coordinates user-friendly, but someone not familiar with GPS coordinates— especially if they are in a stressful situation—may not. Our advice: keep it simple.

*How to determine the GPS coordinates of your main dock:*

The easiest way to determine the DD coordinates is to use Google Maps (or some similar app) and “drop a pin” on the location of your dock. To do this, you should zoom in on the location of your dock and click its location. This should give you the DD coordinates to 5-6 decimal places. We recommend using 5-6 decimal places because the more decimal place, the more accurate the reading. However, beyond 6 decimals there is not much to be gained against the extra time it would take to read them out during an emergency.

Another method is to take the reading using the Compass App on a smart phone while standing on your dock. Many phones, especially iPhones, come with one preloaded (if you have an Android without a preloaded app you may be able to download one from the App Store). If the readings you get are in DMS, you can easily convert the coordinates using an online converters like <https://www.gps-coordinates.net/gps-coordinates-converter>

### **Information for boaters:**

For obvious reasons, our fridge magnet design is not meant for boats because they move around. However, it still may be worth using one to help people make emergency calls. The instructions in the first row on what say at the beginning of the call stressing it is a marine emergency are easily adapted to say that you are on a boat. The second row could have the name of your boat and the GPS coordinates could be taken on the spot at the time of the emergency with the smart phone Compass App. An alternative to the GPS system is provided by the recently developed app “what3words,” which also provides on-the-spot location information and which many 911 operators can now use to pinpoint your location. Here are a couple of links that explain the what3words app:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDhA2RoxOcs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qR9QVslZW4&t=9s>

However, be forewarned that this app has several limitations, covered in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqK0ciE0rto&list=Wl&index=5>

### **One final piece of advice in case you have poor cell phone reception:**

Beginning with iPhone 14, newer models have built-in satellite reception that activates if you are attempting to place an emergency call when cell service is not available. Some Android manufacturers are apparently working on providing this service in future models. For details on iPhones see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V35jHAKpUIk>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41EdCXjotmo>

*Good luck and stay safe on the river.*