



University of Minnesota Residential Life Department

Facility Communication and Student Safety is Improved Through Innovation

The University of Minnesota is a public research university with more than 51,000 students enrolled in its Twin Cities campus. With nine student residence halls and apartment buildings, the Housing & Residential Life department needs a reliable mobile communication system to connect with team members across campus. The team, which includes facilities supervisors, front desk staff, custodial workers, student workers, mechanics and more, ensure living communities are comfortable, well-maintained environments for students and visitors.



Housing & Residential Life

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Scott Creer

Coordinator for Housing & Residential Life
University of Minnesota

Solving Communication Challenges

Residence halls at The University of Minnesota are critical to many students’ college success. Keeping these structures clean and safe is a top priority for the housing and residential life department. Because staff are not tethered to desks and are spread out across campus in the different residence halls addressing student requests, making repairs, accepting deliveries, etc., it’s important for them to communicate using mobile devices. Yet, the concrete and steel structures on campus make it difficult to connect on cellular networks. Across campus, the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center was having a similar communication challenge.

In 2015, the coordinator for Housing & Residential Life, Scott Creer, was at a local hospital waiting for the birth of his first child. While there, he saw nurses using the Vocera[®] Communication Badge to communicate while caring for mothers and babies. Impressed by the hands-free solution operating on Wi-Fi, Creer knew the wearable and voice-activated devices were exactly what the university needed to improve staff communication and satisfaction. The Housing & Residential Life department teamed up with the Veterinary Medical Center to publish a public request for proposal and selected the Vocera Communication Platform, which enable staff to communicate via the hands-free Vocera Badge and/or the secure texting application on their smartphones. Both departments went live with the Vocera deployment in March 2016.

“Both departments really wanted to move away from cellular and move toward reliable Wi-Fi devices,” said Creer. “We loved the simplicity of the Vocera system for the end user. So, when we were ready to select a vendor, it was no surprise that Vocera met all our needs, including running on a Wi-Fi network.”

Enabling Easy and Efficient Communication

Most of the work done by the facilities staff is hands-on. So, they need their hands free to do their job efficiently and effectively.

“When staff members are scrubbing a shower or repairing a toilet, they don’t have to stop working, take off their gloves, and answer a call. That makes a tremendous difference in staff workflow and satisfaction,” Creer said.

The wearable, hands-free device is also valuable when staff members are building and moving beds. In preparation for opening and welcoming a new first-year class, over 6,500 beds must be set up by the housing and residential team.

“When your hands are full of bed pieces weighing 40 pounds each, and you get a phone call, it’s nice to be able just to say ‘yes’ to answer. I don’t have to drop or quickly set down heavy materials. I can keep doing the task at hand while carrying on a conversation,” Larry Van-Grootheest, Comstock Mechanic.

Before these thousands of beds can be installed, they must be delivered to the residence halls. The loading docks receive these and many other large deliveries at unscheduled times. The Vocera system makes it easier for mobile residential workers to connect with truck drivers and accept these deliveries on time. Prior to implementing the Vocera Badge, the delivery person would call the information front desk, who would then call every contact on his or her list until someone was available to receive and sign for the delivery. If no one in the building could be reached, the supervisor would be contacted. Oftentimes, the supervisor would be in a meeting across campus and would need to drop everything and rush to receive the delivery. Now, the process is simple. The delivery person uses the landline telephone that is conveniently located at the delivery dock to dial one phone number that connects them directly to the Vocera Badge of a staff member inside the facility.

“There are no more calls to the information desk, which is staffed by a different student every few hours, and no more guess work to figure out who is available in the building,” said Creer. “It’s great that calls from landline phones and cell phones can connect to the Vocera Badge. This functionality has made a substantial impact. Deliveries once were a struggle for us, but not any longer.”

The reporting capabilities and robust back-end analytics provided by Vocera allow supervisors to track call history. If there is a breakdown in communication, system administrators are able to track phone calls; when and who made them, and if they were accepted or denied.

Streamlining Security Protocols

The ability to forward calls instantly to a specific staff member is also valuable during an emergency situation. If a fan coil unit freezes, bursts, and causes a resident’s rooms to flood, the on duty residence assistant can dial the number assigned to the right facility contact in the Vocera system. The call is immediately routed to the in building staff’s Vocera Badge.

“Students and residence directors no longer waste time going down a long list of numbers and calling several people before receiving assistance,” Creer said. “In an emergency, it can be a hindrance to worry about what number to call, or what list to look at, while you are working the situation. Having one number to call makes it simple and easy.”

Prior to implementing the Vocera system, the Housing & Residential Life department had more than 115 phone numbers for facilities assigned to different users, buildings and devices. All the address books needed to be constantly updated to represent who was assigned to which facility, at what time, and with what phone number.

In a serious situation, where a group of people should be notified, the emergency broadcast capability of the Vocera system is a valuable feature that can significantly increase the safety of students and staff. To initiate an emergency broadcast, a Vocera administrator can quickly communicate to everyone on site logged into the system.

“With cell phones, I could never send an emergency broadcast to the entire staff. We’ve never had that kind of capability before. If our buildings go into lockdown because of an emergency scenario, we can now alert our buildings quickly, reliably, and simultaneously,” explained Creer. “Vocera is the only tool that provides us with dependable person to person and group communication across campus. The students and clients are receiving better service, and we are operating more effectively because we are able to reliably communicate with staff,” said Creer.



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For More Information

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