



University of Minnesota

Residential Life Department

Improving facility communication and student safety

“With cell phones, I could never emergency broadcast to the entirety of our staff. We’ve never had that kind of capability before. If our buildings go into lockdown because of an emergency scenario, we would be able to alert our buildings quickly, reliably and simultaneously.”

– **Scott Creer**

Coordinator for Housing & Residential Life
University of Minnesota

With nine student residence halls and apartment buildings, the University of Minnesota Housing & Residential Life department needed a reliable mobile communication system to keep team members across campus connected. The team of facilities supervisors, front desk staff, custodial workers, student workers, mechanics and more ensure that living communities are safe, well-maintained environments for students and visitors.

Solving communication challenges

Because staff are not tethered to desks and are spread out across campus addressing student requests, making repairs, accepting deliveries and more, it’s important for them to stay connected using mobile devices. Yet, the concrete and steel structures on campus make it difficult to connect on cellular networks.

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 wearable Vocera communication devices 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.

“We loved the simplicity of the Vocera system for the end user,” said Creer. “When we were ready to select a vendor, it was no surprise that the Vocera solution 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 and take off their gloves to answer a call,” Creer said. “The Vocera device has made a tremendous difference in staff workflow and satisfaction.”

The Vocera communication 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,” explained Larry Van-Grootheest, Comstock Mechanic at University of Minnesota. “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.”

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 Vocera technology, 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. Often times, 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 telephone that is conveniently located at the delivery dock to dial one phone number that connects them directly to the Vocera device 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 devices. 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 the Vocera system allow supervisors to track call history. If there is a breakdown in communication, system administrators are able to track when and who made calls, and if the calls 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 desk 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 device.

“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.

When a group of people needs be notified in a serious or dangerous situation, the emergency broadcast capability of the Vocera system is a valuable feature that can help significantly increase the safety of students and staff. Emergency broadcasts are initiated on the Vocera device and when an emergency broadcast is triggered, everyone logged into the Vocera system can hear the caller immediately.

“With cell phones, I could never send an emergency broadcast to the entire staff,” said Creer. “If we go into lockdown because of an emergency scenario, we can now alert our buildings quickly, reliably and simultaneously. Our Vocera solution 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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