

## **GMDSS TASK FORCE INFORMATION BULLETIN**

### **USE OF CELL PHONES FOR DISTRESS ALERTING**

#### **RESCUE 21 – The Coast Guard’s Coastal VHF-DSC Network.**

The Coast Guard has long advocated for VHF-DSC as the primary coastal distress network and its massive system wide upgrade has been termed Rescue 21. Not only is it the designated GMDSS short range system, but it has been engineered to give consistent offshore coverage throughout the U.S. coastal zone of at least 20 miles for a one watt portable at sea level. While Rescue 21 has been completed, coverage in Alaska is limited to the populated zones due to limited access, especially during winter.

#### **Cell Phones are Increasingly Being Utilized for Distress.**

Despite the Coast Guard’s preference of VHF-DSC for this purpose, alerts by cell phones have been increasing and now equal or exceed DSC alerts by VHF on channel 70. There is nothing illegal about this trend since any system may be used for distress alerting, but there are some significant shortcomings that cell phone users need to keep in mind:

1. Cellular devices are not designed for the maritime environment, have a poor battery life, and are not as effective as designated distress systems and devices. Also, offshore coverage varies greatly since the cellular systems are designed to maximize coverage for use on land.

2. Heavy use of cell phones for social contact means that you have to keep close watch on battery status in cell phones. Also, cell phone batteries drain significantly faster when they receive weak or no signal from shore. The Coast Guard often spends hours or even days searching for people who relied solely on cell phones.

3. Unlike VHF where Distress alerts will be heard by all other vessels and coast stations within range, cell phone connections are private. Assistance from other nearby vessels is often the earliest help available.

4. The U.S. Coast Guard DOES NOT RECOMMEND reliance on your cell phone as your primary means of distress notification. Remember that small craft intending to stay near shore often drift out to sea. The most reliable source of help is an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) or a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB). EPIRBs and PLBs are satellite enabled and will provide your exact position and a homing signal to responders. They also have years of guaranteed battery life and global coverage!

### **Position is a Key Factor In Search and Rescue Cases.**

Smart phones with built-in GPS positioning provide a good starting point for rescue forces. If the alert goes direct to the Coast Guard they will have it, but calls to 911 sometimes lose the position information when forwarded to the Coast Guard so you may get a call back from the Coast Guard asking for the position. VHF-DSC used properly, has a connected or built in GPS processor to provide this essential data as part of the alert.

### **The GMDSS Task Force.**

This document was adopted on 14 May 2020 by the GMDSS Task Force, a Coast Guard sponsored group established to coordinate implementation problems, recommend their resolution, and disseminate GMDSS information.