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Daily OPINION

IN DEFENSE OF BLUE PHONES, STUDENT SAFETY

by The Editorial Board
opinion@dailycampus.com

CONTENT WARNING: *The following article contains discussions of mugging, car accidents, stalking, sexual assault, rape and murder. Student survivors of sexual assault can receive crisis counseling and a free sexual assault forensics exam through Student Health and Wellness. SHaW's 24/7 Advice Nurse can be reached at 860-486-4700.*

On Sept. 30, the University of Connecticut announced its plan to remove blue phone kiosks from campus. The phones were originally installed in the 1990s on campuses nationwide in accordance with the Cleary Act, allowing students to press a button and immediately be connected with university emergency services. According to UConn Today, the technology has become nearly obsolete due to the near universality of cell phones; blue phones have become too expensive to maintain for the amount that they are used.

The Editorial Board is in strong support of student safety — nothing is more important than a student's ability to feel safe while crossing campus at all hours. If the university decides to go through with the removal of the blue phone kiosks, we ask for a clear alternative to the blue light system that provides a preventative measure aside from the assumption that students will have working cell phones on them at all times.

According to UConn spokesperson Stephanie Reitz, only 166 phone calls have been received through the blue light phone system over the past five years. Of those 166 calls, two were incident-related. Reitz cited the annual cost of $70,000 to operate the phones as another reason for their removal; it seems that they are not used enough to warrant this cost. As costs are expected to increase, UConn would need to spend about $6 million to update the phones.

As an alternative to the blue phone system, the university has suggested the "LiveSafe" mobile app, which allows students to report to UConn's emergency communication center. Officials also point to emergency services, which are always available by calling or texting 911. Still, we must acknowledge that cell phones are insufficient for protection in numerous cases. It's easy to assume that everyone has a cell phone on hand, but doing so discounts the many situations in which this isn't the case: Cell phones can die, get left behind or become buried at the bottom of backpacks.

Blue phones automatically geolocate the person in danger and notify emergency services. Simply pressing a button is much easier than trying to figure out exactly where you are and relating that to emergency services, especially under the stress of being in a dangerous situation. Symptoms of stress and shock (shaking, confusion) can make it difficult to unlock a phone and navigate to contacting emergency services. In extreme scenarios, the time it takes for someone to look down to their phone and dial 911 could mean the difference between life and death. Overall, when experiencing dangerous situations, blue phones provide the accessible, singular task of pressing a button and knowing everything will be taken care of.

Blue phone kiosks were installed at universities nationwide as a part of a federal initiative after Lehigh student Jeanne Cleary was raped and murdered. Cleary's death led to the passing of the Cleary Act in 1990, a federal law requiring colleges to improve security and report campus crimes. The blue light system was popularized as a crime prevention and response system. According to CampusOptics, "by the mid-2000s, more than 90% of U.S. colleges receiving federal aid had some form of blue light system in place." The blue phones were not solely installed to protect students in dangerous situations; they carry equal weight as a preventative measure. Taken from a preventative perspective, the blue light system is succeeding. The idea of uninstalling a preventative measure because it is preventing too many crimes is illogical.

Blue phones are important from a symbolic standpoint as well. When walking through campus at night, it's impossible to ignore the bright blue lights and sirens. These environmental signals provide a visual cue that the availability of help is omnipresent. Conversely, any potential offenders are reminded that the law is only a button-press away. There is a reason why university tour guides deliberately point out the blue lights to visiting families to assure them of the steps the university takes to protect students. Above all, even if they aren't used, they're a reminder to students and visitors to campus that we are safe.

Despite the limited number of calls coming through the blue phones, the university's decision has motivated UConn students and parents to speak out in favor of campus safety. Billy Contreras, parent of a UConn student, has sued the university for their removal of the phones. Contreras launched a petition to protect the phones which has garnered over 4,000 signatures from students, parents and faculty.

The university has decided to keep some of the blue phones, specifically in areas with weak cellular service. However, the most recent incident-related calls made (a car accident and a suspicion of stalking) came from areas with cell service, demonstrating that the phones are still useful in these areas. Even the suspected stalking, which wound up inconclusive, was worthwhile; it demonstrates a resource being used and successfully helping people feel safe.

In 2016, the university considered removing blue phones and solely relying on cell phone technology but ultimately decided to put student safety first and keep the blue phones in collaboration with protective mobile apps. The Editorial Board remains hopeful that ten years later, the university will return to a similar consensus. Based on the response from the UConn community, the presence of blue phones or a similar system — one that represents preventative and protective measures — is crucial. While a mobile app is an important resource for students, it shouldn't be the sole solution to campus crime.

We can only hope that on-campus crime rates will continue to decrease. However, we must remain aware that the potential for stalking, mugging and rape will never completely disappear, as will the potential for cell phones to be inaccessible in these situations. UConn has a responsibility to protect students and prevent as much harm from occurring on campus as possible. Any measure to protect students and prevent crime is worth the time, money and upkeep.



A blue emergency phone sits under the trees on Tuesday, Sept 22. UConn recently announced their plans to remove most of the emergency phones from campus. PHOTO BY MICHAEL JEFFERS, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS



A blue emergency phone sits next to a streetlight on the UConn Storrs Campus. UConn recently announced their plans to remove most of the emergency phones from campus. PHOTO BY MICHAEL JEFFERS, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS