University of Vermont | Safety and Compliance

University of Vermont Blue Light Sunsetting

History & General Information

For more than two decades, UVM maintained a hardwired system of blue lights on campus. These "call box" systems, originally based on telegraph technology, were commonplace in municipalities and campuses for decades, often predating telephone technology in large cities.

Our experience, mirrored by the City of Burlington, shows that **they are rarely used in an emergency or to intervene in suspicious circumstances.** They are old technology that is difficult to maintain, get parts for, and ensure the reliability of in our harsh New England climate. Over a few years, the aging blue light system was slowly sunsetted, beginning in the summer of 2023, and concluding in late 2025.

Most importantly, this system has been replaced with more reliable, always accessible, mobile technology in the form of the LiveSafe app – which features immediate access to voice and text calls to emergency services as well as SafeWalk feature.

Additional History

When the system remained in service, a cross section of our blue lights were tested weekly and repaired as we were able to obtain parts. Despite a weekly effort to identify and repair broken lights, there were typically 5% to 10% of blue lights out of service on any given day.

The campus blue light system was originally installed about in the 1990s, prior to widespread use of cell phones and current messaging and communication technologies. As we look at comprehensive, contemporary campus safety and security strategies, there are a number of tools and technologies that are central to the effort. The blue light system, which was difficult to maintain due to age, availability of parts, and susceptibility to environmental impacts and damage, became a system no longer central to our overall safety strategy. Today, the LiveSafe app, coupled with a large and growing security camera system and access control technology (CATcard), create the core toolset for campus safety.

Our data shows that blue lights were rarely used in emergencies. In Vermont, over 76% of emergency calls are generated from cell phone voice connections while an increasing number of emergency calls are fielded by the 911 system via text and the remainder come from land lines – often in office settings and areas of the state where cellular service is more limited.

In 2019, during discussions on the future of safety technologies on campus, our students requested a more modern approach to safety. That request yielded deployment of the LiveSafe app. LiveSafe enables a “blue light in your pocket” with the ability not only to communicate with emergency services and others but to utilize the SafeWalk feature, which allows users to select a contact (who doesn’t need to have the app) to do a peer-to-peer virtual escort to safely reach a destination. The app can be used anywhere (not just at UVM). LiveSafe puts campus safety resources (emergency help, mental health resources, bias/hate reporting, and victim advocate information) in one location – in your hand and always available. It offers the option to message UVM Police, send a concern anonymously, or include pictures and video with a report. It has the benefit of being with the student anywhere, including many places where blue lights are not located such as within residence halls, laboratories, and off campus locations. For more information about the LiveSafe app, please visit CATSafe.

Division of Safety & Compliance
12 Centennial Woods Way
Burlington, VT 05405
802-656-2212 safetycopliance@uvm.edu

Calling for assistance via cell phone enables a more comprehensive approach than trying to locate and make your way to a relatively small number of stationary locations to call for help. Additionally, if a caller uses a phone or app to contact UVM Police in an emergency via 911 their GPS position will be automatically shared. Moreover, using your phone to call for assistance enables you to stay mobile if the situation requires it. Staying stationary on a fixed base phone in some emergencies such as active threats is not ideal and runs contrary to contemporary training such as "run, hide, fight."

Frequently Asked Questions

Aren't Blue Lights a deterrent to criminal activity?

Actually, the deterrent effect of your cell phone - both with the ability to call for help and to record suspects in criminal activity - is a larger deterrent. Crime patterns have evolved significantly over the last two decades because of handheld technology and the advent of inexpensive home surveillance cameras such as video doorbells.

How often were the Blue Lights used?

Blue light call buttons are most often false alarms and hoax calls. A seven year look back at calls from blue lights showed that a total of 5 “real calls” were received. Four were traffic accidents, also generally reported via cell phone, and one was a suspicious vehicle.

Was the sunsetting of Blue Lights just a cost-saving measure?

No. In fact, just the opposite. Our safety, security, and health investments have continued to increase. We have taken the cost savings from blue lights and invested in additional resources in tools, technology, and training that are more contemporary and effective. Specifically, we have invested in app-based systems like LiveSafe, deployed CAT ECare emergency stations with automatic external defibrillators, bleeding control kits, and Narcan/Naloxone, and increased the number of digital access controls (CATcard) and security cameras in public spaces campus-wide.

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