

## **NENA & NHTSA: A Partnership for One Nation—One Number**

*By Jeff Michael*

Our timing could not have been better. No sooner had NENA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) committed to work together on the goal of “One Nation—One Number” than President Clinton signed Federal legislation designating 9-1-1 as **the** national emergency telephone number.

On October 26, 1999, President Clinton signed Senate Bill 800 (S.800), the Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act, a bill that gives Federal endorsement for concepts that NENA has promoted for nearly 20 years. The new legislation directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to designate 9-1-1 as the universal emergency number for both wireline and wireless telephone systems and provides encouragement and support to states for deploying an end-to-end emergency communications system.

A few weeks earlier, NENA and NHTSA signed an agreement to work together on an effort to extend 9-1-1 service to areas of the country that remain unserved. NENA officials brought this problem to the attention of NHTSA and the agency was pleased to join the effort.

NHTSA entered into this agreement because the goal of universal 9-1-1 service is central to the agency’s mission to reduce death and injury from motor vehicle crashes. The agency pursues this mission by regulating the manufacture of new vehicles, studying crashes to identify new ways to reduce crash risk, and promoting safe driving behaviors. The agency also supports the national emergency medical services system by developing the National Standard Curricula for emergency medical technicians and by providing leadership for local EMS system development. In other words, NHTSA looks at the crash problem from all sides: what goes on before, during, and following a collision.

NENA reminded NHTSA that emergency access is the key to survival for motor vehicle crash victims and that 9-1-1 is the key to emergency access. Crash statistics bear this out. We know that minutes count when a person is severely injured, and that delays in accessing emergency responders waste precious time. In several thousand fatal crashes each year, more than ten minutes pass between the time of the crash and when someone reaches emergency help. In several hundred cases, more than 30 minutes pass before the emergency call is made. People are dying because help can’t be reached.

When NENA explained that most of the areas still unserved by 9-1-1 are rural, the connection became even clearer. While most vehicle travel is in urban areas, the greatest number of annual crash deaths happen in rural locations. And the average time between a fatal crash and emergency notification is about twice as long in rural areas. Emergency help is hardest to reach just where it is needed the most.

NHTSA joined NENA in an effort to introduce 9-1-1 service to the approximately 600 counties across the nation that still lack this critical service. The first step of this collaboration will be a jointly sponsored gathering of state and local emergency officials to discuss potential strategies for overcoming the barriers of implementing 9-1-1 service in these areas.

This is not the first time NHTSA and NENA have collaborated. In May 1999, the organizations cosponsored a national meeting to discuss a promising new emergency access technology, automatic collision notification (ACN), and its integration with wireless E9-1-1. This conference was presented as a NENA Critical Issue Forum in the Washington, DC, area and was well attended by the leadership from the Federal government, industry, and the emergency communications and response communities. The meeting opened a dialog between those who are developing and deploying automatic emergency communications devices in automobiles and those who have the responsibility for responding to the calls that come from these devices.

NHTSA has also been working closely with NENA for several years on the wireless E9-1-1 issue. In 1996, NHTSA sponsored development of a strategic planning document for EMS. The consensus-developed plan was titled “The EMS Agenda for the Future” and included a number of goals to improve the future value of the EMS system as our communities’ “emergency medical safety net.” One of the 10 priority goals was implementing nationwide wireless E9-1-1. NENA joined NHTSA in a May 1997 Call to Action meeting to alert the nation’s health and medical professionals of the lifesaving benefits of wireless E9-1-1 and elicit their support for local infrastructure development. The organizations have since joined forces on a number of occasions to promote national policies in favor of wireless emergency access.

With our ongoing work on wireless E9-1-1 and automatic collision notification, and our new joint commitment to One Nation—One Number, NHTSA and NENA are extending the emergency medical safety net in all directions. Rapid, easy access to emergency care is a basic ingredient in our quality of life. Americans need this lifeline at home, at work, or on the road, and whether in the city, the suburbs, or the countryside. Building a nationwide emergency access system that can meet these needs requires that we work on several fronts. We need to push the horizons of technology, implementing wireless E9-1-1 and automatic collision notification as quickly as technology and resources allow. And at the same time, we need to ensure that every area of the nation is covered by at least a basic wireline emergency access system.

NHTSA is pleased to join NENA in the One Nation—One Number initiative. Working together, and taking advantage of support from other partners such as the Federal Communications Commission, we can vastly improve emergency access across the nation, building a 9-1-1 system that saves lives by bringing help where it is needed, when it is needed.

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