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## **Local 9-1-1 Call Centers Face a Growing Crisis; Wireless Phones, Budget Strains and Homeland Security Pose Major Challenges**

*Legislators, Regulators, Business Executives and Public Safety Officials  
Are Working to Make "E9-1-1" a Top Priority*

Washington, D.C. – The nation's 9-1-1 system is falling further and further behind in its ability to respond to life-threatening situations, a leading public safety group says.

The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) says wireless phone technology, inadequate funding, and demands from homeland security pose major challenges for many local 9-1-1 systems and require immediate action by all parties involved.

### **Unable to Locate Wireless Callers in Trouble**

For example, 99% of communities in America have emergency centers that can automatically identify the physical location of callers from hard-wired phones. This capability, called "enhanced" or E9-1-1, speeds response time in the critical first few minutes of an emergency.

But fewer than 2% of U.S. communities can locate callers who are using *wireless* phones, NENA says. This is despite the fact that about one-third of all calls to 9-1-1 centers nationwide are from wireless phones, and many consumers buy wireless phones specifically to enhance their personal safety. The call centers' inability to locate wireless callers has been a part of the story in a growing number of tragedies nationwide.

"There is absolutely no technological reason why we cannot locate wireless callers in every community in America," says John Melcher, president of NENA and deputy director of the Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network in Houston. "The obstacles are policy, funding and will. For the lives and safety of millions of wireless phone users in this country, we have got to make E9-1-1 implementation our top communications priority."

Melcher added that given the explosive growth in new communications devices such as handheld PDAs and voice-over-Internet, "We need to ensure the public can access 9-1-1 from any device, any where, any time."

## **Dedicated 9-1-1 Funds Not Being Spent as Intended**

Another serious problem is that, in far too many states and localities, funds and resources that are supposed to be invested in E9-1-1 services are not being spent as intended.

The costs of maintaining and operating reliable 9-1-1 systems are substantial, from rapidly changing hardware and software to retention of an increasingly skilled workforce. For years, the costs of providing 9-1-1 services have been recovered mostly through state-level surcharges on phone bills. Today, there are more than 40 states that collect 9-1-1 surcharges from wireless phone customers as well.

However, in many states, these monies are being diverted to other purposes. Instead of being used for the upgrades needed to provide life-saving services, millions of dollars in 9-1-1 customer surcharges are being spent for other purposes. "We understand that policy makers face many difficult choices, especially in the current budget environment," NENA's Melcher said. "But with lives and homeland security at stake, we believe everyone can agree on the principle that 9-1-1 funds should be preserved and invested in 9-1-1 systems."

## **Stakeholders Working to Craft Solutions**

In Washington, E9-1-1 issues are being given a higher priority, prompted by concerns about homeland security, as well as several recent tragedies in which constituents using wireless phones could not be located in time. Working with NENA, Senators Conrad Burns (R-MT) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Representatives Anna Eshoo (D-CA) and John Shimkus (R-IL) recently formed the Congressional E9-1-1 Caucus to focus attention on the issue. Sen. Burns, who chairs the Senate Communications Subcommittee, held a March 5 hearing on the issue.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is also taking an active interest, planning a public forum on April 29 and urging rapid compliance with E9-1-1 regulations. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta has also supported an initiative aimed at resolving key issues.

Federal leadership is welcome and necessary. But lasting solutions to the E9-1-1 crisis will not come from government action alone, says Melcher. "There are many players, private and public, at the national, state and local levels, who have crucial roles to play. That's why NENA has convened its Strategic Wireless Action Team (SWAT), representing all interests, to tackle the barriers and develop action plans for ubiquitous E9-1-1 service," said Melcher.

The NENA/SWAT initiative brings together leaders of public safety, state and local government, technology companies, and the wireless and wireline carriers. Members are meeting regularly and developing technical guidance and policy recommendations.

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*At [www.nena.org](http://www.nena.org), you will find a wealth of additional information on the nation's 9-1-1 problems, including NENA's leadership role in crafting a solution, actual case studies, maps showing the level of 9-1-1 service in each state and county of the United States, and links to official documents.*

*A not-for-profit corporation, the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) is the only educational organization dedicated solely to the study, advancement and implementation of 9-1-1 as America's universal emergency number.*