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Americans Place High Priority on Enhanced 9-1-1 Service

Public Safety Leader Urges Congress to Make Location Technology for Wireless Callers a “Top Public Policy Priority”

Washington, D.C. – Americans are practically unanimous in placing a very high priority on upgrading the 9-1-1 system to identify the physical location of wireless callers, a public safety leader told Congress today.

John Melcher, president of the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and deputy director of the Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network in Houston, told a House subcommittee that Congress must help ensure that modernizing the emergency 9-1-1 system becomes one of the nation’s top public policy priorities.

In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, Melcher released findings of a survey commissioned by his organization which showed that nearly 60 percent of Americans believe today’s focus on homeland security increases the importance of the 9-1-1 system. After hearing a description of “enhanced” or “E9-1-1,” which enables call centers to automatically identify the physical location of wireless callers, *99 percent* said it was important that this technology be provided as rapidly as possible, with 75 percent calling it “very important.”

Survey respondents also rated E9-1-1 at least as important as a number of other public policy priorities, including education (59% say 9-1-1 is more important), universal health insurance (65%), highway maintenance (75%), and homeland security (75%).

The survey of 2,712 Americans was conducted from April 4-8, 2003, by the Monitor Group, an independent consultant, and has a margin of error of +/- 2 percent.

Call Center Readiness Requires Coordination by Many Players

In his testimony, Melcher also addressed the ability of local public safety answering points (PSAPs) to make the necessary upgrades for wireless E9-1-1. In particular, he said faster progress depends on improving the coordination of incentives and responsibilities across the entire system, which involves more than 7,000 primary and secondary PSAPs, multiple wireless and wireline phone carriers, equipment and software vendors, state and local decision makers, and millions of ordinary consumers.

“PSAP readiness is about keeping *all* of the parties at the table, so that we can address challenges on a systemic basis,” Melcher said. In that regard, Melcher pointed to the ongoing efforts of the NENA Stakeholders Dialogue Initiative, which has brought all of the key private and public sector leaders together to tackle the systemic obstacles and develop comprehensive, balanced solutions.

State Fiscal Crises Affecting E9-1-1 Funds

Compounding the difficulty of implementing E9-1-1 for wireless callers, Melcher said that in many states and localities, monies collected from wireless customers for the purpose of upgrading the 9-1-1 system are being diverted to other purposes or withheld. Even though wireless subscribers think the “9-1-1 Surcharge” on their monthly bill is going to improve their safety, too often the money is paying for something else.

Last year, state agencies diverted \$53 million in California, \$9 million in Oregon, \$10 million in Rhode Island, \$5 million in North Carolina and \$6 million in Washington state to other projects from taxes collected for E911 implementation, according to audit reports.

“Obviously, policy makers face tough choices in the current budget environment,” Melcher said. “But with lives and homeland security at stake, it’s just common sense that 9-1-1 funds should be preserved and invested in 9-1-1 systems. This is a policy principle that federal, state and local governments should all agree upon.

“Indeed, it’s time for policy makers at all levels to make E9-1-1 for wireless callers one of our *top* public policy priorities,” Melcher added. “Nothing less than our lives, our property and our homeland security is at stake.”

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At www.nena.org, there is 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.