



9-1-1 Funding – Now and Future

In the past 15 years, advancements in modern communications technology have created the need for a more advanced system to access emergency care. While the existing 9-1-1 system has been successful for more than 30 years, it has been stretched to its limit as technology advances. New wireless and IP-based communications devices are being developed at a rapid rate, offering capabilities such as combined audio, video, text messaging, and Internet access. Unfortunately, the current 9-1-1 system was never intended to receive and handle calls and data from these new and emerging technologies. As a result, the nation's 9-1-1 systems are in need of a significant overhaul in order to keep pace with a growing need to perform expanded and new functions.

In addition to the proliferation of new devices and data sources, local and wide area wireless networks are allowing the mobile public to communicate wirelessly from more locations. Many cities, from large to small, are in the process of provisioning citywide Wi-Fi networks that will potentially allow the public to wirelessly communicate on IP-enabled devices from anywhere in their metropolitan areas. Additionally, WiMAX build out is beginning to occur, including at least one nationwide initiative of a major communications provider.

While it is obvious that today's 9-1-1 and emergency communications capabilities must be fully funded and supported, we should also respond to the changing communications landscape. It is apparent that there is a critical need for an IP-enabled Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1) system, one that is able to adapt rapidly to new technology and support new communications devices. Such a move, from today's 9-1-1 system to NG9-1-1, requires a national focus on key technical, operational, and policy issues.

Perhaps the most important policy issue today and into the next generation is funding. The current funding model for 9-1-1 service has its foundation in the historic regulated wireline telecommunications environment of the past 30 years. Subscriber fees for 9-1-1 service are assessed on wireline and wireless phone bills and are collected by telecommunications providers. The funds are then remitted to a state or local government agency who distributes the funds within the state/county to pay for the 9-1-1 system and to supplement Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) operating budgets.

With the advent of modern wireless and IP-based communications, funding models need to adapt to the technical and operational realities of today and be flexible enough to accommodate future technology advances.

Modifying the current surcharge model to account for a changing landscape that includes not only an increased use of wireless and IP-based services, but also a corresponding drop in traditional wireline phone service, can be a first step. However, that is far from the goal that the public safety industry needs to achieve. In order to meet the public's expectation of ubiquitous 9-1-1 service for all technologies, there is simply no choice other than to migrate from the current limited 9-1-1 system to a fully IP-enabled NG9-1-1 and emergency communications system capable of responding to a 9-1-1 communication "anytime, anywhere, from any device" and with interoperable voice, data and video communications among all emergency response entities.

In order to support both current emergency communications systems and operations, and to support transition to the future, it is imperative that current 9-1-1 funding be continued and improved while changes to more appropriate and adequate funding methods are identified and implemented at the state and possibly national level. To do otherwise is to endanger both current public safety and the transition to more capable and technically advanced 9-1-1 systems and service for the future safety of the public.

For more information on NENA's report on future funding alternatives and the NG Partner Program 2006 Report on Next Generation policy development, see www.nena.org and click on NG Partner Program.