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Wireless 911 Services

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

The number of 911 calls placed by people using wireless phones has more than doubled since 1995, to over 50 million a year. Public safety personnel estimate that about 30% of the millions of 911 calls they receive daily are placed from wireless phones, and that percentage is growing.

For many Americans, the ability to call 911 for help in an emergency is one of the main reasons they own a wireless phone. Other wireless 911 calls come from “Good Samaritans” reporting traffic accidents, crimes or other emergencies. Prompt delivery of these and other wireless 911 calls to public safety organizations benefits the public by promoting safety of life and property.

Unique Challenges Posed by Wireless Phones

While wireless phones can be an important public safety tool, they also create unique challenges for public safety and emergency response personnel and for wireless service providers.

A wireless phone is actually a radio with a transmitter and a receiver that uses radio frequencies or channels -- instead of telephone wire -- to connect callers. Because wireless phones are by their very nature mobile, they are not associated with one fixed location or address. A caller using a wireless phone could be calling from anywhere. While the location of the cell tower used to carry a 911 call may provide a very general indication of the location of the caller, that information is not usually specific enough for rescue personnel to deliver assistance to the caller quickly.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has taken a number of steps to increase public safety by encouraging and coordinating development of a nationwide, seamless communications system for emergency services that includes the provision of location information for wireless 911 calls. Because wireless 911 location information will not be available everywhere immediately, it is important for consumers calling 911 from wireless phones to remember the following:

- Tell the emergency operator the location of the emergency right away.
- Give the emergency operator your wireless phone number so that if the call gets disconnected, the operator can call you back.
- If your wireless phone is not “initialized” (*i.e.*, you do not have a contract for service with a wireless service provider), and your emergency call gets disconnected, you must call the emergency operator back because he or she does not have your telephone number and cannot contact you.
- To help public safety personnel allocate emergency resources, learn and use the designated number in your state for highway accidents or other non life-threatening incidents. Often, states reserve specific numbers for these types of incidents. For example, “#77” is the number used for highway accidents in Virginia. The number to call for non life-threatening incidents in your state can be found in the front of your phone book.

- Refrain from programming your phone to automatically dial 911 when one button, such as the “9” key, is pressed. Unintentional wireless 911 calls, which often occur when auto-dial keys are inadvertently pressed, cause problems for emergency services call centers.
- If your wireless phone came preprogrammed with the auto-dial 911 feature already turned on, turn off this feature. Check your user manual to find out how.
- Lock your keypad when you’re not using your wireless phone. This action also prevents accidental calls to 911.

FCC’s Wireless 911 Initiatives

In addition to other efforts to promote coordinated emergency services, the FCC has adopted wireless 911 rules. These rules are aimed at improving the reliability of wireless 911 services and identifying the location of wireless 911 callers to enable emergency response personnel to provide assistance to them much more quickly. The FCC’s wireless 911 rules apply to all wireless licensees, broadband Personal Communications Service (PCS) licensees, and certain Specialized Mobile Radio (SMR) licensees.

Basic 911 Rules

The FCC’s **Basic 911 rules**:

- Require wireless carriers to transmit all 911 calls to a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), regardless of whether the caller subscribes to the carrier’s service or not.

Phase I Enhanced 911 (E911) Rules

The FCC’s **Phase I E911 rules**:

- Require wireless carriers, within six months of a valid request by a PSAP, to provide the PSAP with the telephone number of the originator of a wireless 911 call and the location of the cell site or base station transmitting the call.

Phase II E911 Rules

The FCC’s **Phase II E911 rules**:

- Require wireless carriers, within six months of a valid request by a PSAP, to begin providing more precise location information to PSAPs, specifically, the latitude and longitude of the caller.
- This information must meet FCC accuracy standards – generally, it must be accurate to within 50-300 meters (depending on the type of technology used).

The FCC’s Wireless 911 rules are being implemented in stages; they are not all immediately effective. The specific conditions and schedules of Phase I, Phase II, and the revised schedules for nationwide carriers are located on the FCC Web site, www.fcc.gov/911/enhanced.

Wireless carriers may comply with certain FCC E911 rules by ensuring that 95% of their customer’s handsets are E911-capable (also referred to as location-capable). The FCC’s E911 rules do not specify precisely how carriers may achieve this compliance. At their discretion, some carriers may provide various incentives or policies to encourage customers without location-capable phones to obtain new, location-capable phones. For instance, some carriers may offer location-capable handsets to you at a discount.

Some carriers may choose to adopt policies that prevent you from reactivating older handsets that don’t have E911 capability, or may adopt various other measures. The FCC’s E911 rules do not require that a carrier adopt any particular one of these measures as an incentive or policy when

seeking to encourage its customers to obtain location-capable phones.

Even if a carrier chooses to decline to reactivate your handset if it is not location-capable, the FCC requires that it still be capable of making 911 calls (only). Note, however, that if you use a deactivated handset to make a 911 call, the carrier may not be able to accurately and automatically determine your location. And, if you decide to replace your handset, you should always check with your service provider to determine the new handset's E911 capabilities, as well as whether the replacement handset offers the same coverage as compared to your current handset.

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