

Dialing 911: How You Call Might Affect You!

Remember how you were taught to dial 911 in case of an emergency? That in time of need or crisis, you were confident that someone would answer your call and be able to help you? While 911 is still the number to dial in cases of emergency, advances in technology have complicated service delivery, frustrating both emergency service dispatchers and callers alike. Two technologies, wireless phones and Internet Phone Services (or IPS), are examples of innovations that need special considerations by consumers who wish to utilize 911.

Internet Phone Service

IPS, or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), is a more recent technology that allows individuals to make phone calls over their Internet connection rather than their regular analog telephone line. While individuals receiving calls from VoIP users need no special equipment, customers of this service must either use an adaptor that connects from their phone to their broadband connection, or a VoIP-ready phone. VoIP has gained popularity because of the low cost and versatility of the service. Not only can subscribers call anywhere that has a phone number (local, mobile, long distance or internationally), the prices for the service are often competitive with traditional phone companies; most service plans offer flatrate monthly service costs that include options such as unlimited domestic phone calls with blocks of international call minutes. Further benefits often include the ability to select your own area code; businesses often take advantage of this option when their location is different than major clients.

While VoIP may be a great option for some, one consideration to make is how 911 is serviced. VoIP does not support traditional 911 services. Since VoIP can be portable, service providers of VoIP cannot automatically determine your location. Often, 911 calls made from VoIP phones are routed to the location of the service provider, not the subscribers physical location. While 911 services are usually offered by the VoIP provider, most require you to activate this service before one uses 911. This activation requires the subscriber to note the physical location from where the service is being used; when the subscriber moves, the location must be updated. If you have correctly activated the 911 service with your provider (paying special attention to your physical location) 911 calls made through VoIP should be directed to your local emergency contact.

Other Considerations for VoIP

Providers of VoIP services warn that in power failures, their 911 service will not function. Further, Internet congestion over broadband lines may result in lower 911 routing speeds as compared to calling through a traditional phone line. On one final note, the FCC does not have regulatory power over VoIP network systems, unlike traditional land lines and cell phones.

Wireless Phones

Some of us may consider our cell phone a necessity, an item we could not live without. And, in cases of emergency where a land-line phone is not available, cell phones can be a life-saving tool. With this consideration, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has implemented the Enhanced 911 (or E911) program to ensure 911 dispatchers receive information necessary to service calls made from wireless phones. The program has two parts. Phase I required wireless carriers to provide, upon request, the phone number and antenna location of the call received into the local Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP). This would provide the dispatcher with a rough area of where a caller was located. Phase II requires wireless providers to supply much more precise information from where calls are made; according to the FCC, this distance is within 50 to 300 meters. Many carriers have achieved compliance with the FCC's Phase II plan by creating phones that are Phase II compliant; many newer cell phones are Phase II compliant and The Woodlands Neighborhood Services Department recommends confirming this with your phone provider/maker. Local PSAP agencies, however, also have to be Phase II compliant,

requiring special technologies and upgrades to be employed. Both Montgomery and Harris Counties are Phase II compliant, meaning if you are traveling within these counties and call 911 from a Phase II compliant phone, they should be able to track your location within feet. The Community Associations remind you that if either your cell phone or the PSAP you are traveling within is not Phase II compliant, you will have to give the dispatcher the exact location you are calling from in order for them to locate you.

Helpful Tips

- Ask your phone carrier(s) if they provide 911 services.
- Keep alternate phone numbers (such as the business lines) to law enforcement and fire protection agencies handy. Phone stickers are available from Neighborhood Services.
- Ensure you have at least one method of phone service that has 911 services.

Resources

Emergency: 911

The Woodlands Fire Department business line: 281-367-3444

FCC: www.fcc.gov/911

The Woodlands Township Neighborhood Services Department: 281-210-3800

VoIP Phone: Know How It Affects Your Call to 911: <http://www.911voip.org/>