

# 9-1-1 calling centers reel under increasing load

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Swamped emergency 9-1-1 communications systems need help with staggering call volumes, advancing technology and the money to handle both, said a key emergency communications industry group on Oct. 5 in Washington.

A group of emergency communications technology vendors, 9-1-1 operators and emergency responders said that not only are people expecting more from the services, but they're calling 9-1-1 more than ever before and stretching systems' abilities to keep up, said George Rice, director of the Industry Council for Emergency Response Technologies (iCERT).



*FCC's James Barnett*

The group convened a workshop at Georgetown University on Oct. 5 that brought vendors, 9-1-1 network operators, regulators and emergency responders together to discuss solutions to the problem of 9-1-1 system overload. Incomplete, dropped, deferred, and unanswered 9-1-1 calls are increasing as wireless phones, network complications and budget constraints arise, they said. A study released by iCERT on Oct. 5 noted that in May, 2011, more than 15 percent of New Orleans' 9-1-1 calls went unanswered because its calling centers were understaffed. In 2009, it said the state of California's 9-1-1 system became so overloaded that more than 26 percent of all wireless emergency calls were "abandon" as people simply hung up in frustration.

"It's a troubling problem," said Rice. The study blamed the dilemma on the explosion of wireless devices. It said there were 240 million 9-1-1 calls placed in 2010, which is a 26 percent increase from 1999 when 190 million 9-1-1 calls were made. The study also, listed many instances in the last year where emergency calling systems were overwhelmed by calls. For instance, on Aug. 18 in Tacoma, WA, sonic booms from two fighter jets generated thousands of calls to 9-1-1 systems within thirty minutes. The surge overloaded lines into all six of the county's 9-1-1 call centers. Similar surges occurred three other nearby counties, said the study.

The iCert thinks such overloading is the future of 9-1-1 call centers if more planning and funding for the facilities isn't done soon. The group is working with federal regulators and the U.S. Congress to develop methods for both.

The Federal Communications Commission began an effort to look into "Next Generation" 911 calling shortly after the earthquake that shook the East Coast last year. The commission launched an official notice of proposed rulemaking - its first step in drawing up new rules - in September. The FCC wants to modernize emergency calling capabilities, creating a next-generation system that allows wireless device users to send text messages, pictures and videos in addition to voice calls via 9-1-1.

However, the system has to be paid for and that has become a sticking point for budget-strapped local, state and federal governments. In September, The FCC asked the public and communications industry for ideas on how to send text over the existing system, as well as how those capabilities could be developed for future photo and video transmission.

The FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau presented a paper at the same time estimating the network connectivity costs of a nationwide next-generation 911 system to be between \$1.4 billion and \$2.7 billion. The paper, said James Barnett, chief of the FCC's public safety and homeland security bureau, was aimed at showing the costs involved, but also in hopes of sparking interest on Capitol Hill over the new capabilities being discussed for 9-1-1.

"Funding is still key," he told *Government Security News* in an interview at the iCERT conference.

The funding could be waylaid by another emergency responders' initiative on Capitol Hill, however. The stalled efforts to pass legislation that would allocate, or auction "D-block" wireless spectrum for emergency responder networks has soaked up money that was intended for the 911 system. A Senate bill, S-19, had funded \$500 million for the next generation 911 system, but the money was taken off the table in favor of using it for the D-block effort, said a wireless industry official.