

The VoIP-911 Dilemma

As the FCC deadline for 911 acknowledgments from voice-over-IP phone customers looms, I have a little different take on what the real problem is. Isn't it ironic that the FCC solution for not being able to place 911 calls from a phone is to disconnect your phone service entirely. Talk about throwing the baby out with the bath water, what are these people smoking?

From my vantage point as a user of Ma Bell, cellular, and VoIP phone services, the real problem is the conspiracy by the Baby Bells to mask the actual phone numbers that the public can call in an emergency. And the blame really rests on the shoulders of the Public Service Commissions across the country that have silently allowed the Baby Bells to pull off this 911 scam. Try to find a traditional telephone number to report an emergency in your city or county using your Baby Bell-provided telephone directory, and you'll see what I mean.

But why would the Baby Bells want to limit emergency calls to only 911 and not provide a traditional telephone number in each city and county? The answer is pretty simple. The Baby Bells have control (and reap enormous income) from the 911 operation. And it also locks competitors such as VoIP providers out of their local telephone service monopoly. To give an example, our local phone service in Atlanta hovers around \$50 a month plus additional fees for every long distance call. Our VoIP service in the same house costs less than \$20 a month (with a local phone number). And it provides unlimited free calling to 21 countries including all of the U.S. and Canada.

Having been a lawyer for over three decades and having worked in the technology business for well over two, I can tell you that it took every skill set I could muster to uncover traditional telephone numbers for emergency service equivalent to dialing 911 in just two cities where I have VoIP telephone service: Atlanta, Georgia and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. That's what's wrong with the 911 debate. The FCC has focused on the wrong problem. If the public could just find out the correct numbers to call for emergencies in their home towns, my five-year-old could program almost any phone to make the call.

-- Ward Mundy
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