

## **Public Safety Community Praises New '911' Report**

Public safety leaders are praising a new report that recommends changes in "911" system technology, governance, and funding in order to ensure that next-generation, Internet protocol (IP)-based networks are built to keep current with the pace of technology.

As members of the public safety community lobby Congress for additional funding for enhanced "911" (E911) grants, it helps to have the report to show them, said Richard Taylor, president of the National Association of State 9-1-1 Administrators and executive director of the North Carolina 911 Board.

"I think anytime that you can come in with documented evidence of the health of the 911 system, I think that's going to always assist in any type of lobbying that you may be doing," Mr. Taylor said at a March 5 news conference held to release the report. "When you come in with facts and figures, that's going to help." Mr. Taylor said that while he's not happy with the state of 911 services cited in the report, he said, "The truth is the truth."

In a joint statement, the presidents of the National Emergency Number Association and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International said they concurred with many of the report's findings, including the need for a sustained source of funding to upgrade 911 networks.

"The public safety communications community has been playing catch up with emerging technologies for years and is well aware of the need for 911 systems to be updated to address current requirements," APCO President Willis Carter said. "The one thing that hasn't changed is local public safety agencies' need for funding so they can make these improvements."

The report brings "additional light to challenging issues we have been dealing with for a long time," added NENA President Jason Barbour. "We support the findings of this report and hope it will provide much needed reinforcement in our continued efforts at the state and federal level to secure funding for critical advancements to our 911 system."

The 96-page report was commissioned by the 911 Industry Alliance, a group founded in 2005 that includes nearly 20 vendors of 911 technologies and services, and prepared by ColoComm Group LLC, which is led by Dale Hatfield, former chief of the FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology. Mr. Hatfield and his associates interviewed representatives of public safety agencies in 21 states, public safety and industry groups, carriers and other companies, and the Department of Transportation.

"As we explain, the current communications landscape is a far cry from the one for which the current 911 system was engineered," the report said. "Accordingly, we believe changes in technology, governance, and funding procedures are necessary in order to meet citizen expectations as well as public safety and homeland security needs."

The report says that 911 offerings "must be better aligned with the expectations and demands of consumers," noting, for example, that current 911 systems are not capable of handling the latest

technologies that consumers enjoy on their devices, such as text messaging and photo sharing. It said that students at Virginia Tech assumed wrongly last year that they could text message their local public safety answering point (PSAP) during a mass shooting. A next-generation 911 system would enable such technologies to be used and could also facilitate greater cooperation among PSAPs, including load sharing, Mr. Hatfield said during the news conference. "The 911 system is just not keeping up with the modern technology," he said.

Addressing both funding and governance concerns, the report said that officials must ensure that funds collected for 911 services are not "raided" for other purposes. "Clearly this raiding has got to stop," Mr. Hatfield said. "I mean, that is just ridiculous, given the need here. Moreover, we must have a stable source, a predictable source of funding."

The report recommended that states be in charge of collecting 911 surcharges and then distributing them to localities. Such a system could ensure that enough funds are being collected and they are being spent for the right purposes. It suggested an auditing process, as well. The report also said that 911 surcharges "should be assessed in a principled manner which promotes competition." It said there often doesn't seem to be a rationale for why varying surcharges are levied depending on the jurisdiction and type of carrier offering the 911 service and said that surcharges should be "informed by a policy of equity and then parity."

The report also calls on states to take a larger role in facilitating faster adoption of advanced 911 technologies. There also needs to be a strategy for coming up with a way to pay the huge costs of deploying next-generation systems, and policy-makers should consider bonds, credit facilities, tolls, and other mechanisms, it said. At the news conference, Mr. Hatfield said that in addition to state governments, the federal government should contribute its share toward the capital expenditures necessary to build next-generation networks. He said there is also a role for the federal government in the development of technical standards.

Mr. Taylor said the report makes a number of good points. He sees a need for increased collaboration between federal and state governments and state and local governments in 911 planning and said his state is moving on a number of fronts to improve the management of 911 systems. For example, a single 911 surcharge is now imposed statewide, rather than localities each deciding what surcharges to impose. The fees are collected at the state level and distributed to localities. "With this new model, we'll be able to actually see what the cost of 911 is in North Carolina," Mr. Taylor said. He also said a comprehensive 911 plan has been commissioned to help the state see where 911 is now and how to transition to new technologies.

Jeff Robertson, executive director of the 911 Industry Alliance, said the group plans to meet with state legislators around the country to discuss the issues raised in the document.

A public safety leader from Ohio highlighted the difficulties his state is facing. The state legislature has yet to renew a 911 surcharge on wireless services, which expires at the end of this year. Some lawmakers, worried about supporting taxes, have indicated they might wait until after this November's election to address it, said William Hinkle, director of the Hamilton County Department of Communications in Cincinnati. "No [PSAPs are] going to do anything in Ohio

because of the uncertainty of funding," Mr. Hinkle said. "As far as I'm concerned, we're playing Russian roulette ... with the public's safety."