

Internet may not work for 911 calls

BY ROBERT GOODRICH
Of the Post-Dispatch

Using the Internet for making phone calls is growing in popularity but may not work for an emergency 911 call, according to a warning issued by local emergency service coordinators.

Internet phone use is commonly called VoIP for voice over Internet protocol or VON for voice on the net. It allows people with high-speed Internet service to make inexpensive calls, sometimes worldwide.

Area 911 coordinators acknowledge it can be quick, convenient and economical, but caution that the cost could be high for a 911 call, when seconds count.

Emergency 911 coordinators Ray Romine of Madison County and Norm Forshee of St. Clair County issued a public warning last week.

"First of all, you may not be able to call 911 from your VoIP phone," they wrote. "Several VoIP providers route callers to a recording."

A warning is issued, suggesting people test it

Even if your 911 call gets through, it may not be routed to the closest or most appropriate emergency agency, they warned.

In addition, information on the emergency caller's location may not show up and the call may not be handled on a dedicated 911 trunk line, they added.

In many cases, it would be the same as dialing a 10-digit non-emergency number, they said.

"You would have to be physically able to tell the call taker where to send help and possibly even identify your own emergency providers," Forshee said.

Romine agreed. "It's a scary situation for us," he said. "We want to make the public aware."

Forshee and Romine emphasized that they do not oppose use of the Internet for any other type of phone call. But they noted that the Internet industry has no 911 emer-

gency calling requirements in place.

Kerry Hibbs, a spokesman for AT&T, said 911 calls do work with VoIP calls, but the enhancements, which allow a caller's name, address and telephone number to pop up on a dispatcher's screen, do not work.

"That's the issue the entire industry is working on," Hibbs said. Charter Communications Inc., which provides IP-based telephone service, said 911 and enhanced 911 works on Charter's phones, which do not send calls over the Internet.

"It works just like SBC or Verizon," said Carrie Cox, director of legal and regulatory affairs for Charter, based in Town and Country.

Some companies have voluntarily set up systems that meet requirements for handling emergency calls and others are working to do so, Forshee and Romine said.

both parents, then fled. The girl ran to a neighbor's house to call 911.

"That's why the St. Clair and Madison county emergency telephone system boards are starting a campaign asking people to check their Internet phones for 911 service—before they need it, Romine and Forshee wrote.

AT&T's Hibbs said a situation in which a caller gets a recording rather than a dispatcher would be very unusual and would depend on where the 911 call is answered.

Cell phone service has been improved enough that using a cell phone to make a 911 emergency call should work anywhere in the Metro East area.

Forshee said he knew of no recent glitches from people calling 911 using a cell phone. "They should let us know if that ever happens," he said.

Jerry Stroud of the Post-Dispatch staff contributed to this story.

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