

## **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and 911 Emergency Calls**

### **Caution: Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Telephones Have 911 Limitations**

The public relies on Enhanced 911 service and has an expectation that this service will be available from any phone. This may not be the case if you use your Internet connection for telephone service.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), sometimes called Voice on the Net (VON), is changing the shape of the telecommunications industry. VoIP telephone service, available through many different providers, including Verizon, Vonage, and Charter, uses the Internet to route telephone calls, as opposed to more traditional wireline or cellular telephone services. VoIP provides features that make it more attractive than wireline or wireless service, one of which is the ability to choose almost any area code. This allows people to have, for example, a New York telephone number while they are actually located in Chicago. Another feature is the ability to have more numbers assigned to an account, and these can all have different area codes. Some VoIP customers may also use their VoIP phones to make calls while traveling. As long as a customer can connect to the Internet, they can use their VoIP phone.

While this all sounds great, VoIP presents serious public safety concerns. What happens when you call 911 in an emergency using a VoIP phone? On VoIP 911 calls, location or call back information is not usually provided, if 911 even works at all. Several VoIP providers route callers to a recording. If you are able to dial 911, the call may not be routed to the appropriate and closest 911 center for the area where help is needed. Information on your location, called Automated Location Information (ALI) may not be available, and the call may not be handled on a dedicated 911 trunk line. In many cases dialing 911 from a VoIP phone will be the same as dialing a 10-digit non-emergency number. You would have to be physically able to tell the call taker where to send help and possibly even identify your own emergency service responders.

VoIP currently is not government regulated. The VoIP and Internet industries have no 911 emergency calling requirements in place. While the industry is participating in setting voluntary practices toward provision of Enhanced 911 service, it is just that – voluntary. Consistency and reliability on behalf of all Internet VoIP providers will be vital to the delivery of 911 emergency services.

Some VoIP/VON companies may be able to provide the same Enhanced 911 service that we have come to expect from landline and wireless telephones. However, until this becomes standard across the industry, those using VoIP to call 911 should understand that this "advanced" telephone service could actually be a step back to the days when you dialed the 10-digit police, fire, or medical service telephone number to call for help.

The St Clair County Emergency Telephone System Board urges anyone considering the purchase of VoIP or VON service to thoroughly investigate the company and its ability to provide E911 service prior to making any purchase.