A Brief History of 911

The history of 911 in the United States (US) began in 1967. On May 23 of that year, Indiana Congressman, J. Edward (Ed) Roush recommended a single, nationwide telephone number for reporting fires. That same year, President Johnson's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Criminal Justice recommended a national three-digit emergency telephone number. In November of that year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) met with AT&T, and shortly thereafter, AT&T announced—at a press conference held in the Washington, D.C. office of Indiana Representative Roush—that it had reserved the numbers 911 for emergency use nationwide.

The Alabama Telephone Company implemented the nation's first 911 system in Haleyville, Alabama. On February 16, 1968, Alabama Speaker of the House, Rankin Fite, made the first 911 call from the Haleyville City Hall. Congressman Tom Bevill answered the call on a telephone located in the police department.[1]

Early 911 technology had limited capability and could only deliver 911 calls to an answering point within the caller's telephone exchange. Since there was (and is) little correlation between a landline telephone exchange boundary and the emergency responder's jurisdiction, a 911 call could end up at a PSAP that did not serve the caller's location. This basic 911 (B911) service did not provide a call-back number or location information with the call.

Significant advancement in 911 technology occurred with the introduction of E911 in the early 1980s. Using existing circuit-switched technology, E911 added the capability of selectively routing 911 calls to the PSAP serving the caller's location and delivering the caller's telephone number and location.

By the 1990s, the use of cellular technology had increased dramatically. This consumer-driven change posed serious challenges for public safety, because landline-based E911 systems did not have the capability of easily routing or providing location information for cellular callers.

To respond to this growing public safety issue, in 1996 the FCC required carriers to provide a call-back number and geo-based location for wireless 911 calls. Although less-than-perfect and inherently less reliable than landline technology, wireless E911 still represented a huge improvement in the PSAP's ability to get help to a wireless caller's location. Over time, location accuracy has diminished, due, in part, to the fact that people increasingly use their mobile phones indoors. This prompted the Commission to update its location accuracy rules in 2015.

Smart phones and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) have added a host of new issues and challenges for 911. The nation's legacy E911 system has reached the end of its ability to adapt to these new modes of communication, and the next generation of 911 (NG911) is being deployed across the nation. NG911 is based on Internet Protocol (IP) and has the capacity to transmit the data and content so integral to today's consumers' use of communications technology.

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[1] Alabama Chapter of NENA Website, "World's First 911 Call" <http://www.al911.org/first_call.htm> (April 18, 2008)