

VoIP providers using administrative lines for 911, allege PSAPs

The country's public safety answering points (PSAPs) and 911 systems operators are alleging that some VoIP providers or third-party call centres are routing nomadic and non-native VoIP 911 calls over the PSAPs' administrative lines. In an application filed with the CRTC on August 17, the group asks the commission to enforce rules already in place that forbid the practice.

This is a big problem, according to Peter Glen, a staff sergeant with the London Police Department. While he wouldn't go into the numbers or identify specific providers – those have been submitted to the CRTC in confidence – he says the number of VoIP 911 calls being routed over PSAP administrative lines “are rather substantial.”

He notes that even some VoIP providers admit that 911 calls will be routed over PSAP administrative lines. “Your calls will be directed at administrative lines at the PSAP where they may not be answered by PSAP-certified dispatchers,” Glen says stated one provider's website.

To get VoIP providers to comply with the existing rules, the group wants the CRTC to remind both VoIP providers and their VoIP 911 call centre operators that they are required under commission regulation to use VoIP 911 routing arrangements developed by the Emergency Services Working Group (ESWG) of the CRTC Interconnection Steering Committee (CISC) and approved by the commission in a number of proceedings in 2005 and 2006.

In addition, the group is proposing in its Part VII that the CRTC “add a condition upon the supply by [local exchange carriers] of telecommunication services to VoIP service

providers, to include in their service contracts or other arrangements with these services providers, the requirement that the latter (directly or through third-party operator service suppliers) only utilize VoIP 911 call routing arrangements which were developed in the ESWG and which utilize tariffs approved by the commission for this purpose or, alternatively, alternative call routing arrangements that have been approved by the commission for this purpose.”

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The application goes on to note rules do exist at present. “The ILECs' nomadic and non-native VoIP 911 call routing tariffs have been in place for several months now. VoIP service providers have had ample time to adapt their systems and procedures to the availability of these serving arrangements,” reads the PSAPs' August 17 application.

Glen explains that part of the problem stems from the VoIP providers' arrangements established prior to the creation of the current rules. “All we're saying is use them,” he tells Network Letter. “It's not like they have to reinvent the wheel to get this. They've got to pay the cost and connect to the service.”

The rules as they are currently set up allow VoIP 911 calls to resemble a traditional 911 call when it is received by the PSAP, says Glen. When a VoIP 911 call comes in, “it gets processed like a 911 call [and] we're able to use the provincial platform to transfer to downstream agencies,” he adds. “It allows for all our protocols and all of our procedures that we've worked very hard on and trained very hard on to still be in place.”

Glen admits that some of the functionality is lost when processing a VoIP 911 call, but at least the call is getting treated with the same priority. In the case of calls being routed over PSAP administrative lines, it is possible that the caller could get a busy signal or no answer at all, he says.

Network Letter will take a look at some of the ongoing work to develop next-generation systems to deal with VoIP 911 calls in an upcoming issue. ■