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Restore Your 9-1-1 Budget

Like your investment accounts, 9-1-1 budgets across the country aren't immune to the financial crisis gripping the country. This is a departure from past times of economic challenge in the United States when public safety, and in particular 9-1-1 funding, was more immune to economic swings. During other recessions, people cut back on expenses by reducing the cable TV bill, eating at home and holding off on major purchases. But they didn't disconnect home phone lines, considered as essential as bread and milk.

This isn't currently the case, but there is more to the story. The tsunami of challenges facing 9-1-1 funding include the following listed in order of importance to your budget:

1. Consumers' telecommunications device preferences are changing, and the public is demanding costly upgrades to 9-1-1 systems to keep pace.

2. Standards and coordination for connecting to the nation's 9-1-1 net-

4 Potential Funding Solutions

By Jeff Robertson and Renee Wagner

work are becoming incompatible with consumers' voracious appetite for new telecom technologies.

3. Surcharge collections for 9-1-1 are increasingly collected at the state level. This in turn is increasing scrutiny and the need to be justified by a new political standard.

4. The public has a lack of knowledge about 9-1-1 system funding.

5. State budgets are trying to operate at record deficit levels.

Changing Consumer Market

If you have a teenager at home, try telling her that she must leave the power cord in the wall and sit near the wall outlet when using the phone. She will give you a strange look. And if you ask her to recite the phone numbers of the top three friends and family members she contacts multiple times

each day, you'll get another crazy look.

Lets face it, it's a different world than your parent's rotary dial phone; and our 9-1-1 funding system, legislation and technology is stuck in this bygone era. Our world has evolved into a place of VoIP phones, wireless devices, video phones, GPS, panic buttons and vehicles that have the ability to contact 9-1-1. We are at the mercy of consumer preferences, and so our industry needs to adapt, educate and plan ahead to best serve the public.

New Technologies

Landline vs. wireless phone funding. Across the United States, 9-1-1 budgets collect around 90 cents per landline phone per month after fees on average. Alternatively, with wireless phones, 40 cents is the average contribution to a public-safety



State governments should establish funding plans for the next generation of dispatch centers.

answering point (PSAP). Some states, such as Missouri, don't collect 9-1-1 fees for wireless phones. In Ohio, the funding is temporary and expires this year. Are politicians expecting that emergencies will expire as well?

People are disconnecting landline phones at record rates, not to mention fax machines that used to be connected to landlines. Also gone are dial-up modem lines. Reducing the average contribution to your PSAP from 90 cents to 40 cents is a 56-percent drop if it's a one-to-one disconnect. It's important to also take into account that wireless calls to 9-1-1 now represent

a funding perspective, the biggest prepaid phone providers are aggressively fighting against using current 9-1-1 funding mechanisms in favor of pushing for retailers to take on the collection of funds.

On the other hand, millions of these prepaid devices are used to dial 9-1-1 with no surcharges being received at all. This represents a 100-percent drop in funding if users replace either a landline phone or traditional wireless one with a prepaid device. This is the biggest funding issue public safety faces, representing well more than a \$100 million shortfall, and prepaid

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more than 50 percent of all calls to 9-1-1. This means there is increased demand and decreased resources.

Prepaid wireless phones. The category of prepaid wireless phones is the fastest-growing segment of consumer phones in the nation. Not only are consumers disconnecting their landline phones, they are disconnecting them for phones that are paid for upfront. In many cases, when callers dial 9-1-1 from these devices, they are difficult to locate, and there are no records tied to them to indicate who owns them and where they live. From

phone consumers continue to call 9-1-1 everyday and expect service.

VoIP phones. VoIP phones used to be the bad boys of telecom. However, as they become more mainstream, the industry behind them has worked to voluntarily collect 9-1-1 surcharges and make advancements for locating callers. Most of the reputable carriers are remitting 9-1-1 surcharges and educating consumers on the nuances of VoIP phones. These carriers collect at the lower wireless rate, which is a 56-percent reduction from traditional landline phones.

Where Did The Standards Go?

Bellcore was created on Jan. 1, 1984, as part of the 1982 Modification of Final Judgment that broke up the Bell System. Bellcore was a consortium established by the regional bell operating companies after their separation from AT&T. Bellcore ensured that anything connecting to the nation's telecom infrastructure was based on reliable standards that ensured everything worked together and met consumers' expectations. This group had a lot of influence in determining how landline-based phones could be reliably located (E9-1-1), which has served us well for the past 25 years.

Most companies that offered telecommunications products and services had to adhere to these strict standards if they wanted their devices and services to connect phone calls in North America and around the world. Currently, if you have an innovative idea and a little funding you can build a device that can connect to 9-1-1 without having to worry about details such as reliability in an emergency, power, which agency should respond, location or how to deal with prank/false calls.

Sometimes standards can hinder innovation; it's a balancing act between unbridled innovation and standards. Right now we need more standards before more innovation breaks the 9-1-1 system as we know it.

Lack of Public Knowledge

If you run a PSAP, try this exercise the next time you are giving a tour of the 9-1-1 center to your local service club or chamber of commerce. Ask them how they think the 9-1-1 center is funded. Brace yourself; the answers will be scary. Most people think funding comes from police or fire department budgets, property tax assessments or magically from state or federal governments. Many don't know that they pay for it themselves, in the form of a line item on the bottom of their monthly phone bills.

5 Challenges Facing 9-1-1 Funding

State Budget Politics

Across the country, the script goes something like this:

Treasurer: Governor, did you know our wireless/wireline account has more than \$150 million just sitting there? And it's growing.

Governor: Really? What is it for?

Treasurer: It says it's for 9-1-1. It hasn't been touched in four years though. I have never heard of it. They obviously don't need it.

Governor: Who is in charge of it?

Treasurer: Some quasiboard that self appoints its members; the chairman is appointed by you and is a state employee who works for you.

Governor: Great, this will help fill the budget hole. Set up an appointment. I am sure this person won't object to helping our state in its time of need, and if he objects, we can always appoint someone else.

Obviously, this is a fictional example, but given the current state of affairs, can you blame politicians? If this 9-1-1 fund has never been explained, if a plan has been developed without input from the public, or if there's been no explanation about how these funds support citizens — more importantly voters — in an emergency, why wouldn't politicians raid these funds? This holds especially true when there will be little backlash from voters who don't know how funding works. When faced with choosing between an increase in state taxes, reductions in school teacher salaries or a raid of a 9-1-1 fund nobody knows about, the politician will take the path of least resistance: use of the publicly unknown 9-1-1 fund.

This is happening in a number of states. New York, California, Arizona and other states have already had funds that were originally, legally earmarked for 9-1-1 transferred to the state's general fund to deal with a state budget shortfall.

Borrowing from legally earmarked funds for 9-1-1 reveals a far greater issue in state budget planning. Living beyond our means is a nationwide

issue, and one that has caused a lot of the economic turmoil we are currently experiencing. We can all learn a lesson on this one, including politicians.

Potential Solutions

Along with the problems, there are differing opinions on what to do in the future. Following are four policies that could help budget shortfalls:

1. A phone is a phone, is a phone. If you can use a device to contact 9-1-1, a surcharge should be collected, and the fee should be fair and not vary based on the type of device. A single statewide fee should apply to all devices in that region. Laws need to be modified to address this reality. If states (preferred) can't enact legislation to handle collecting and allocating funding, the federal government should mandate it.

If your state collects a "tire tax," this fee isn't different for all-season radials versus summer tires. There is one fee for two different technologies with the same purpose. The same thing should hold true for telecom devices: simple, fair and uniform.

2. Funds collected for 9-1-1 must be used for 9-1-1. There should be a legal mandate that funds collected from the public under the premise of supporting 9-1-1 services should be used exclusively for this purpose. It's unethical to tell the public that they are paying for something and then use the funds to pay for something else. Each state should conduct a formal audit of how these funds are collected and used. This will encourage transparency and accountability and will ensure funding allocated for 9-1-1 is used specifically for emergency service delivery.

The federal government tried this, but the federal legislation stated that any state government that raids funds earmarked for 9-1-1 wouldn't be eligible for federal 9-1-1 grants. The federal grants total only \$45 million for the entire country and require matching funds by state governments. For example, a state government can benefit from a \$100 million windfall by raiding 9-1-1 funds. The only conse-

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3. Surcharge collections for 9-1-1 are increasingly collected at the state level. This in turn is increasing scrutiny and the need to be justified by a new political standard.

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quence for this raid is ineligibility to receive a small piece of the \$45 million grant that must serve all 50 states. This consequence is not a significant deterrent.

3. Set next-generation 9-1-1 (NG 9-1-1) device standards. These standards must come from an organization with strong accountability and credibility. Nonprofit organizations are well meaning, but they often don't have the power to ensure standards are adhered to. They also have a tough challenge balancing the needs of their various member stakeholders. I recommend that the FCC, as the country's primary regulator for telecommunications devices, issue standards with input from all the stakeholders for the purpose of ensuring the 9-1-1 network in the United States. The FCC already regulates wireless phones and wireline services. Why not extend this to handle 9-1-1 requirements?

4. Enhanced planning at a state level. If you are a local government official trying to run your center, between keeping the lights on and holding staff accountable, you have enough on your plate. The last thing you need is help from a state agency. But if you want to continue funding your PSAP, state help is coming. Telecom devices are no longer constrained to just your county or city; they move

4 Ways to Fix 9-1-1

and must serve a more geographically diverse population than traditional landline phones.

PSAPs need to interoperate and network together, and now there is a valid financial and technological reason to do so. However, this will not happen if we continue our patchwork of more than 6,100 PSAPs, each with different funding and technology and various proprietary systems. State governments need to establish plans outlining funding for the next generation of interconnected centers that can support a wide array of digital IP-based devices, many of which have not even been developed.

States with strong leadership have proven to be better at planning for the

future, funding, dealing with technology and serving the public. Unfortunately, some states are falling victim to weak leadership with poor records of service and no strategy outlining how they will handle future demands. ■

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