

REGION OF OTTAWA-CARLETON
RÉGION D'OTTAWA-CARLETON

REPORT
RAPPORT

Our File/N/Réf. 03 02-99-0009
Your File/V/Réf.

DATE 3 May 1999

TO/DEST. 9-1-1 Management Board

FROM/EXP. Co-ordinator, 9-1-1 Advisory Committee

SUBJECT/OBJET **CALLING 9-1-1 FROM CELL PHONES**

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

That the 9-1-1 Management Board send a letter to the Canadian Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) with respect to the issue of problems associated with calling 9-1-1 from cell phones and recommend that as an interim measure, cell phone companies be requested to provide an insert in their monthly bills explaining the limits associated with cell phones and 9-1-1.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 12 March 1999, the 9-1-1 Advisory Committee approved the above recommendation. Reference can be made to the Minutes of that meeting for the discussion of this item.

Chief Ford has submitted the attached New Release from the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police in conjunction with this issue.

Approved by
Rosemary Nelson

att.



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NEWS RELEASE

RELEASE: March 25, 1999

OACP Calls on Governments, CRTC to Resolve Problems that "Threaten" 9-1-1 Emergency Service

March 25, 1999 — Saying the effectiveness of responding to 9-1-1 calls is being threatened, the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OACP) is challenging governments at all levels to resolve the obstacles facing the emergency telephone system.

"The 9-1-1 system is beginning to falter, due mainly to an ever-expanding cellular network, and also to the unbundling of local telephone service and the emergence of new telecommunications technologies," says Julian Fantino, President of the OACP and Chief of York Regional Police.

"In an increasing number of cases, critical name and address information is unavailable," Chief Fantino says. "In an emergency, this is frustrating to the people answering the 9-1-1 call, and contributes to unnecessary delays in the response of police, fire and ambulance personnel. What results is a serious compromise of safety to the public."

Typically with wired phones, the 9-1-1 caller's name, location and number appear automatically on the call taker's screen. However, that doesn't happen when you dial 9-1-1 from a cell phone. The same problem is occurring as newer companies are entering the phone business in Canada. Information to identify the customer isn't always forwarded to the main telecommunications computer system, which in turn provides those details to the 9-1-1 system.

All of this means that the 9-1-1 call takers must spend the time to confirm the caller's information — time that could be spent dispatching the emergency response. If callers are disconnected before they can provide their number and location, the 9-1-1 operator also has no way of tracing the call.

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Currently, local municipalities maintain the 9-1-1 system. (Some jurisdictions still lack 9-1-1, often because the municipality can't afford to operate the system, and 9-1-1 hasn't been declared a public service offering to which every citizen must have equal access.) However, municipalities don't have the power to legislate the changes that ensure the accurate and timely delivery of the 9-1-1 caller's name, address and phone number.

At the federal level, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regulates the telephone industry, which includes 9-1-1.

"From our perspective, the local municipalities haven't coordinated their concerns about 9-1-1 or effectively lobbied the CRTC," says Chief Fantino. "At the same time, we're troubled by the lack of forceful action on the part of the CRTC to set deadlines for reaching solutions that will benefit all 9-1-1 users, and help public safety agencies live up to their responsibilities."

The timely handling of calls is a particular issue in large population centres, where cellular phones now generate 20-25% of all 9-1-1 calls. In all, 9-1-1 receives about 2 million calls a year from wireless phones. This issue has the potential to worsen, as 3,000 new subscribers a day sign up for wireless phone service.

With wireless phones, callers are also dialing from any location as opposed to a fixed address. They may not know exactly where they are, and with current technology the 9-1-1 call taker has no way to pinpoint their location.

"Wireless phones are marketed partly as a safety tool if you're caught in an emergency," says Bruce Herridge, Chair of the OACP's Information Technology Committee and an Inspector with York Regional Police. "That's not completely true unless we can handle a 9-1-1 call properly. The Canadian wireless industry makes millions of dollars a year. They have an obligation to invest in technical solutions to the 9-1-1 issues."

He says most calls are handled without incident, but wireless devices and other technologies and services are being introduced without considering the impact on the 9-1-1 system. "As that happens, the risk of caller dissatisfaction with the service increases," Inspector Herridge says. "It's only a matter of time before tragedies occur, and then emergency services personnel will be unfairly blamed."

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Over the past three years, the Ontario 9-1-1 Advisory Board has made efforts to work through the challenges of the explosive growth of cellular phones and de-regulation in the phone industry. The OACP supports the work of the Advisory Board, which includes representatives of emergency responders, municipalities, the Ministry of Health, and others.

But Chief Fantino says their efforts have met with "limited success", partly because public safety agencies lack lobbying clout compared with the telecommunications industry.

"Although some work is being done to resolve issues related to cellular phones and fully functional access to enhanced 9-1-1 systems, governments at all three levels need to be concerned with the snail's pace of progress," says Chief Fantino. "If the governments don't answer this call now, then public safety agencies may not be answering the 9-1-1 calls in the most efficient way in the future."

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