

Emergency Communications Services and Programs

I. INTRODUCTION

The Panel reviewed three critical emergency communications services and programs: Wireless Priority Service (WPS); Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS); and Telecommunications Service Priority (TSP). Based on the Panel's investigation, we believe that only a small percentage of eligible entities subscribe to these important services. In addition, we believe that the Commission's eligibility rules may not be broad enough to ensure that key industry sectors have access to these programs. Thus, and as detailed in the recommendations section below, we conclude that the Commission should focus on (1) increasing government, public safety, and critical industry groups' awareness and understanding of these programs; (2) encouraging greater subscription levels; and (3) broadening the industry sectors that may use these programs.

WPS, GETS, and TSP are vitally important to our Nation's national security and emergency preparedness. As recognized in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, natural and manmade disasters can impact communications connectivity. And during these times of emergency, WPS, GETS, and TSP can help ensure that national security and emergency preparedness personnel can communicate effectively. Indeed, this Panel is not the first group to recognize how important these programs are and to recommend that greater numbers of eligible users subscribe to these programs. For example, the Network Reliability and Interoperability Council VI (NRIC VI) found that the public safety community lacked awareness of GETS and recommended that the National Communications System (NCS), and the National Coordination Center (NCC) enhance GETS awareness training. *See* Network Reliability and Interoperability Council VI, Homeland Security Public Safety (Focus Group 1C), Final Report (April 2003). In light of this past effort and our Nation's recent experiences in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, we believe that the Commission should continue to promote these programs.

A. **Overview of GETS**

During emergencies situations, the wireline telephone network may become incapable of completing every attempted telephone call due to network congestion or damage to wireline facilities. GETS is a White House-directed emergency phone service administered by the NCS that provides eligible users with a higher probability of call completion when normal calling methods are unsuccessful. GETS utilizes the public switched telephone network ("PSTN") and is designed to provide 90 percent call completion rates when call volumes are eight times greater than normal capacity. And in actual emergencies, GETS has consistently met or exceeded this completion rate.

GETS achieves these important results by providing eligible users enhanced call routing; alternate carrier routing; priority treatment with trunk queuing, sub-grouping, and reservation; and exemption from restrictive network management controls during congestion among other features.

Currently, there are five broad categories that serve as guidelines for determining who may qualify as a GETS user. And in general, federal, state, local, or tribal government, critical

infrastructure sectors in industry, and non-profit organizations that perform critical national security and emergency preparedness functions are eligible.

New subscribers can apply for GETS via the GETS website (gets.ncs.gov). If NCS determines that the applicant is an eligible user, then that person or organization will receive a GETS calling card. To use the service, the user then needs to dial the GETS access number (1-710-NCS-GETS) using ordinary wireline telephone equipment and follow a series of prompts. For more information about applying for the GETS program, please contact GETS Administration toll free at 1-866-NCS-CALL (627-2255) or visit the GETS website (gets.ncs.gov).

B. Overview of WPS

WPS is the wireless equivalent to GETS and is also administered by the NCS. As with wireline networks, wireless networks can become congested and suffer outages during emergencies that can hinder communications connectivity. WPS is an enhancement to basic wireless service that ensures a higher probability of call completion by queuing qualifying wireless calls and “grabbing” the next available radio channel.

Similar to GETS, there are five levels of eligible WPS users. And the levels were chosen to meet the needs of the emergency response community and to provide access for the command and control functions critical to management of and response to national security and emergency situations, particularly during the first hours following an event. However, users should note that WPS does not address congestion on the wireline network. Therefore, to increase the likelihood of call completion, WPS users should separately apply for and activate a GETS card.

To find out more information about the WPS program or to determine whether you or your organization currently qualify for WPS, please contact the NCS at 1-866-NCS-CALL or by e-mail at wps@ncs.gov.

C. Overview of TSP

TSP provides qualifying users priority restoration and provisioning of telecommunications services that are vital to coordinating and responding to crises. The TSP program provides service vendors with an FCC mandate for prioritizing service requests by identifying those services critical to national security and emergency preparedness. A telecommunications service with a TSP assignment is assured of receiving full attention by the service vendor before a non-TSP service.

As with the other emergency communications programs and services described above, only certain entities are eligible for TSP. Therefore, to find out more about the TSP program or to determine your eligibility, please contact the NCS at 1-866-NCS-CALL or visit their TSP website (tsp.ncs.gov).

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Commission should work with the NCS to actively and aggressively promote WPS, GETS, and TSP to all eligible government, public safety, and critical industry groups. As part of this outreach effort, the Commission should target groups that have relatively low levels of participation. For example, the Panel recommends that the Commission reach out to the emergency medical community and major trauma centers to make them aware of the availability of these services.
- The Commission should work with the NCS to clarify whether broadcast, satellite, and cable company repair crews are eligible for GETS and WPS under the Commission's existing rules. If so, the Commission should promote the availability of these programs to those entities and urge their subscribership. If the Commission determines that these entities are not eligible, the Panel recommends that the Commission revise its rules so that these entities can subscribe to WPS and GETS.
- The Commission should work with the NCS to explore whether it is technically and financially feasible for WPS calls to automatically receive GETS treatment when they reach landline facilities (thus avoiding the need for a WPS caller to also enter GETS information). The Commission may desire to set up an industry task force to explore this issue.
- The Commission should work with the NCS and the communications sector to establish and promote best practices to ensure that all WPS, GETS, and TSP subscribers are properly trained in how to use these services.