911 Wireless Services

For many Americans, the ability to call 911 for help in an emergency is one of the main reasons they own a wireless phone. While wireless phones can be an important public safety tool, they also create unique challenges for emergency response personnel and wireless service providers. Since wireless phones are mobile, they are not associated with one fixed location or address. While the location of the cell site closest to the 911 caller may provide a general indication of the caller’s location, that information is not always specific enough for rescue personnel to deliver assistance to the caller quickly.

Tips for Making Wireless 911 calling

When making a 911 call from a wireless phone, you should:

- Tell the emergency operator the location of the emergency right away.
- Provide the emergency operator with your wireless phone number, so if the call gets disconnected, the emergency operator can call you back.
- Remember that many emergency operators currently lack the technical capability to receive texts, photos and videos.
- If you do not have a contract for service with a service provider and your emergency wireless call gets disconnected, you must call the emergency operator back because the operator will not have your telephone number and cannot contact you.
- Learn and use the designated number in your state for highway accidents or other non life-threatening incidents. States often reserve specific numbers for these types of incidents. For example, "#77" is the number used for highway accidents in Virginia.
- Consider creating a contact in your wireless phone’s memory with the name "ICE" (In Case of Emergency), which lists the phone numbers of people you want to have notified in an emergency.
- Lock your keypad when you’re not using your wireless phone to help prevent accidental calls to 911.

Basic and Enhanced Wireless 911 Rules

FCC wireless 911 rules aim to provide Public Safety Answering Points with meaningful, accurate location information so that local emergency responders can be dispatched to quickly provide assistance to wireless 911 callers.

The FCC's basic 911 rules require wireless service providers to transmit all 911 calls to a PSAP, regardless of whether the caller subscribes to the provider’s service or not.

Phase I Enhanced 911 (E911) rules require wireless service providers to provide the PSAP with the telephone number of the originator of a wireless 911 call and the location of the cell site or base station transmitting the call.

Phase II E911 rules require wireless service providers to provide the latitude and longitude of callers to PSAPs. This information must be accurate to within 50 to 300 meters depending upon the type of location technology used.

The FCC permits exclusions for location accuracy requirements where wireless carriers determine that providing location accuracy is limited, or technologically impossible, because of either heavy forestation or...
the inability to triangulate a caller’s location. Wireless service providers are required to file with the FCC a list of counties, or portions of counties, that they seek to exclude from these requirements. Wireless carriers must report any changes to their exclusion lists within 30 days of such changes. The exclusion lists and changes must be reported in the record of the FCC’s docketed proceeding, PS Docket No. 07-114 (http://apps.fcc.gov/ecfs/proceeding/view?name=07-114), which is publicly available online.

The FCC’s wireless 911 rules apply to all wireless licensees, broadband Personal Communications Service licensees and certain Specialized Mobile Radio licensees. Mobile Satellite Service providers are excluded.

Ask About E911 Capabilities

When replacing your handset, ask about E911 capabilities. Some providers may offer incentives to encourage customers without location-capable phones to obtain new location-capable phones. Some providers may choose to prevent reactivation of older handsets that do not have E911 capability, or they may adopt various other measures. If a provider declines to reactivate a handset that is not location-capable, the FCC still requires the provider to deliver a 911 call from that handset to the appropriate PSAP.

Avoid Making Accidental Wireless 911 Calls

Many older wireless phones are equipped with a pre-activated 911 auto-dial feature, which can lead to accidental dialing of 911. Accidental 911 calls can cause public safety personnel and resources to be diverted from real emergencies.

You can help reduce accidental 911 calls by locking your keypad. You may also consider turning off the 911 auto-dial feature if your phone has one. Check your device settings, user manual or the manufacturer’s website to learn how.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov
- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):

  Federal Communications Commission
  Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
  Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
  445 12th Street, S.W.
  Washington, DC 20554

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