New York and E-911…A Call to Action

Except for a few strange policy and public service wonks, most people don't think twice about 911. What most people know is that it's a service which exists to help people in emergencies. And aside from those nitwits who occasionally forget that 911 is for emergencies only, most people respect the motivation and expertise of the hard-working, highly trained individuals who staff the phones to help us in times of crisis.

When 911 is dialed from a traditional wireline telephone (home phone, for example), the person receiving the call receives specific information about the location of the caller including not only street address information, but also cross streets and other useful locating information. Given that a first responder has 4 minutes to get to a person in cardiac arrest, this information is time critical and its accuracy imperative.

When 911 is dialed from a wireless phone, the information received is nowhere near as specific. This is one of the reasons that I bang my head against the wall when speaking with friends and colleagues who have abandoned traditional landlines. This is a topic for another column, but be advised that if you call 911 from a wireless phone, you MUST be prepared to provide specific location information. You cannot rely on the device, regardless of what the salesperson told you, to give location specific information.

When 911 is called from behind a multi line telephone system (MLTS), there are a myriad of other issues all of which define the word "critical." For example, if you work for an enterprise (business or government) where the phone system is set to provide the entity's main listed number as caller id (or, in technical telecom terms, Automatic Number Identification/Automatic Location Information, aka ANI/ALI), the first responder may see the name XYZ Bank, but have no idea which floor, or in what location on that floor, the call was

submitted. Compounding this problem is the fact that the first responder has no number to return the emergency call except the bank's main listed number. Obviously, this creates a life-threatening problem if the first responder cannot identify where the problem is when every second counts.

Secondly, if the phone system requires that users dial a digit before making an outside call (many entities use "9"), does this mean that someone in an emergency must call 9911? Are employees aware of this? Thirdly, if the entity doesn't require that extra digit to get an outside line, are there people with what the *telecommerari* (think the unlikely combination of telecom + *glitterari*) call "fat finger disease," who dial 9 to get an outside line, and then inadvertently hit 1 twice, causing the rescue squad to respond *poste haste* when there is, in fact, no emergency but just a wrong number?

As is often the case, it's a much easier task to define the questions than offer the answers. Legally, there is no federal 911, or E 911 policy. Partially this is the result of the fact that this type of service falls under different federal government areas, making issue ownership impossible to quantify. As such, issues of E911 policy have been left to the states. At this time, (May, 2009), only 16 states (New York is NOT one of them) have taken any affirmative steps towards addressing information requirements for multi-line telephone systems. While other states (AK, AR, CO, CT, FL, IL, KY, LA, MA, ME, MN, MS, RI, TX, VT, and WA) have put in place rules and regulations addressing the type(s) and specific components of information to be required, New York has yet to act, even after the calamitous events of 9/11. That's not to say that a statewide mandated 911 compliance program would have saved lives or minimized losses on that fateful day. But, in the aftermath, considering the significant number of multi tenant facilities, behind whom hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers work, it is somewhat surprising that no such action has been taken by the New York State Legislature—particularly when similar actions have been taken by other state legislatures within the U.S.

With 34 states not taking any stand on this issue, the National Emergency Number Association (NENA or nena.org) recently re-issued its model legislation to help legislators close the gap in those states, including New York, that have yet to act. Specifically, NENA felt compelled to take this action because emergency dialing from multi-line telephone systems is a critical piece of today's communications infrastructure, and customers (wrongly) assume that these issues have all been worked out because they can simply been done because they can dial 911. "Based on information we have received from the MLTS community, we can safely estimate that only 25% of the MLTS systems have the proper programming in place to deal with emergency calls properly, including a large group of systems, (VoIP and Legacy TDM) that are exposed. It's literally a ticking time bomb, and one that is ignored too often, "said Mark Fletcher, ENP who leads NENA's MLTS Technical Subcommittee in addition to his role as Nortel's E911 Product Line Manager. Administrators fail to realize is that the information sent to the emergency responders is often either inadequate or inaccurate (or both), thus easily jeopardizing the life of a person who is experiencing significant medical distress.

With this in mind, it's time to summon the powers that be so that employers who have multiline telephone systems have frequently-tested programs in place to manage medical emergencies, both within the entity, and in its contacts with first responders. Absent affirmative steps taken by the State Legislature requiring minimum standards, enterprises are on their own to work this out. It's a matter of life and death. And, oh, by the way, employers in other states who have not provided sufficient information to assist first responders, have been held liable under theories of negligence, as well as OSHA rules, resulting in not only large verdicts, but actual multi-million dollar settlements.