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Action needed to advance the next generation 911

By Jessica Rosenworcel and Betty Wafer

Summer is here and the living is easy. It's the season for backyard barbeques, outside play, and long, leisurely nights. It's also accident season. That means the number of trips to emergency rooms multiply—and the number of calls to 911 rise.

Summer may be the busy season, but calls to our national emergency number never really stop. In fact, today we call 911 roughly 240 million times a year. More than 70 percent of those calls come from wireless phones rather than traditional landline phones. In other words, the bulk of our emergency calls come over a different technology than the 911 system was designed to use.

Technology has changed so much in our lives—including the ways we reach out in emergency. But the communications systems used by our nation's 911 have not fully kept pace.

It's not that the technology is not out there. Technical work has already been done to bring texting to 911. In addition, efforts are underway to improve the ability of 911 call centers to identify the location of emergency calls made from wireless phones. But what comes next is even bigger. Next generation 911 services can support a whole range of data and video communications. For those who call in an emergency, it will mean the opportunity to offer real-time video from an accident. It will mean the ability to provide first responders with instantaneous pictures of a fleeing suspect or emergency incident. These capabilities can make public safety both more effective and more responsive.

It's also not for lack of will. Talk to anyone responsible for taking 911 calls and you will be astounded by their steely calm. They listen to us at our most troubled and then help ensure that help is on the way. They are deeply committed to any way forward that can improve their everyday efforts to save more lives.

The challenge is remaking 911 systems to fully reflect the digital age—and that takes funding. Historically, supporting our nation's six thousand 911 centers has been a local affair. There is no national program or annual federal revenue source. But there are two things we can do to help support efforts by our nation's 911 centers to update their abilities and improve safety in the process.

First, we need to end fee diversion. Approximately \$2.5 billion is collected each year by local or state authorities to support 911 service. These funds are typically from a small line item on our phone bills identified as support for 911 service. But not all states follow through and actually use these funds for 911 purposes. In fact, in the last year for which the Federal Communications Commission has data, eight states transferred funds collected for 911 to other purposes—including uses that have nothing to do with public safety. In the past, some of those uses have included overtime pay for state workers and dry cleaning services for state agencies. This has to stop.

Second, tucked into a law known as the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 is a way to kick-start 911 modernization. This legislation authorized a series of wireless spectrum auctions in Washington. These auctions, which are still ongoing, have raised huge sums. A portion of these funds—\$115 million—was set aside by Congress for a grant program that can help support next generation 911. But this program has stalled and has yet to begin more than four years after Congress authorized its creation.

It is time to get this program up and running. It is the best near-term and national resource we have to help put next generation 911 in place. While these funds are limited, they can have broad impact if we use them wisely and fund next generation 911 projects that can be a blueprint for updating services in communities nationwide.

The single most important thing we can do is get going. Accident season is here. The calls are coming in. When the unthinkable occurs we need to make sure that our nation's 911 centers can take the call with technology built for the digital age—and not the analog past.

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