

Point of View: Moving next generation 911 forward

By Jessica Rosenworcel and Lance Terry
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Oklahoma is known for its expansive prairies and rolling plains, for its red dirt roads and iconic kicks along Route 66. But the Sooner State should also be recognized for its pioneering spirit when it comes to improving 911.

Today, across the country 911 is called 240 million times a year. When we make those calls, we need to know that help is on the other end of the line. Recognizing that our emergency number system should be a priority, the Legislature passed a law this year modernizing the state's 911 operations and laying groundwork for implementing next generation 911 services.

This legislation reflects a real need — technology has changed almost every part of our lives but the communications systems used by our 911 systems have lagged. While 70 percent of 911 calls come from wireless phones, 911 still operates on systems designed for traditional landlines.

And what comes next is big. Next generation 911 services can support a range of data and video communications. During an emergency call, it will mean the ability to send instantaneous pictures of a fleeing suspect or offer real-time video of an emergency incident, helping rural public safety telecommunicators best deploy limited resources.

So it's high time to bring our 911 systems into the digital age. Undoubtedly, this will take funding. Today, local and state governments are responsible for funding 911 call centers. But there are two things that can be done nationally to support efforts to update 911 call centers' abilities and improve safety in the process.

First, we need to end fee diversion. Each year, approximately \$2.5 billion is collected to support 911 service. These funds are typically from a small line item on our phone bills identified as support for 911 service. While Oklahoma leaves these funds in the pockets of local governments, not all states do. In the last year for which the Federal Communications Commission has data, eight states transferred more than \$223 million collected for 911 to other purposes. In the past, some of those uses included overtime pay for state workers and dry cleaning services for state agencies. This must stop.

Second, the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 includes a program that can jump-start 911 modernization. This legislation authorized a series of wireless spectrum auctions in Washington that have raised huge sums. A portion of these funds — \$115 million — was set aside for a grant program to support next generation 911 by funding projects in localities that are ready to lead the way. But the program has yet to begin.

This grant program 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 fund state projects that can create a blueprint for updating services nationwide. And in awarding these limited dollars, states that are shortchanging their own 911 programs with fee diversion should be at the end of the line.

With these steps and strong state leadership, we can bring 911 out of the analog past and into the digital age. But we need to get going.



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