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TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Uneven Implementation of Wireless Enhanced 911 Raises Prospect of Piecemeal Availability for Years to Come

GAO Highlights

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Highlights of GAO-04-55, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Communications, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

When an emergency call is placed to 911, prompt response depends on knowing the location of the caller. Enhanced 911 (E911) service automatically provides this critical information. E911 is in place in most of the country for traditional wireline telephone service, where the telephone number is linked to a street address. Expanding E911 capabilities to mobile phones is inherently more challenging because of the need to determine the caller's geographic location at the moment the call is made. Concerns have been raised about the pace of wireless E911 implementation and whether this service will be available nationwide. GAO reviewed the progress being made in implementing wireless E911 service, the factors affecting this progress, and the role of the federal government in facilitating the nationwide deployment of wireless E911 service.

What GAO Recommends

In order to provide the Congress and federal and state officials with an accurate assessment of the progress being made toward full deployment of wireless E911, we are recommending that the Department of Transportation work with state officials and public safety groups to develop data identifying which PSAPs will need to have E911 equipment upgrades. In response, DOT stated that it generally agreed with our recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-55.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-6670 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

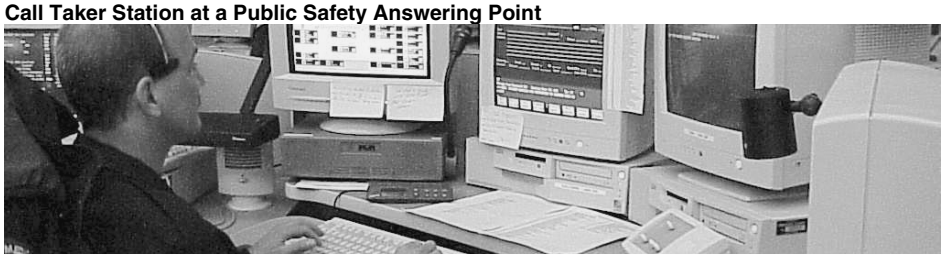
What GAO Found

Implementation of wireless E911 is several years away in many states, raising the prospect of piecemeal availability of this service across the country for an indefinite number of years to come. Successful implementation depends on coordinated efforts by wireless carriers, local telephone companies, and more than 6,000 public safety answering points (PSAPs)—the facilities that receive 911 calls and dispatch assistance. According to a database sponsored by the Department of Transportation (DOT), as of October 2003, nearly 65 percent of PSAPs had Phase I wireless E911 service, which provides the approximate location of the caller, while only 18 percent had Phase II, which provides a more precise location and is the ultimate goal of wireless E911 service. Though valuable, the database does not differentiate between PSAPs that will require equipment upgrades and those that will not, thereby limiting its usefulness in accurately assessing progress toward full implementation. Looking forward, 24 state 911 contacts said in response to a GAO survey that their state will have Phase II implemented by 2005 or sooner; however, all other state contacts estimated dates beyond 2005 or were unable to estimate a date.

Key factors hindering wireless E911 implementation involve funding and coordination. The wireless carriers, states, and localities must devise the means to fund more than $8 billion in estimated deployment costs over the next 5 years. Some states and localities have established funding mechanisms (such as E911 surcharges on phone bills), but others have not done so or have used their E911 funds for unrelated purposes. In addition, there is also a lack of coordination in some cases among the wireless carriers, local telephone companies, and PSAPs that can lead to delays in wireless E911 implementation. States with knowledgeable and involved coordinators were best able to work through these coordination issues.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and DOT are involved in promoting wireless E911, but their authority in overseeing its deployment is limited because PSAPs traditionally fall under state and local jurisdiction. FCC has set deadlines on the wireless carriers' E911 responsibilities and has taken actions to identify best practices and improve coordination among the parties. DOT is developing an action plan and clearinghouse for wireless E911 planning, implementation, and operations.

Call Taker Station at a Public Safety Answering Point



Source: photograph by Yasmin Fleming, Frederick County, Maryland, 911 Center.