

Missouri 911 Centers Struggle to Afford Modern Technology

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The latest battle in the telecommunications revolution is being fought in Linn County's 911 dispatch center. Call 911 from somewhere in the deeply rural county and it takes precious minutes – and sometimes hours – to locate where that call is coming from.

The problem isn't about wires. It's not about computers.

It's about money.

Missouri is one of two states without a wireless surcharge funding program and one of 11 without statewide 911 coordination, according to the National Emergency Number Association and the National Association of State 911 Administrators. This means counties are on their own to make up for poor funding and are left struggling to keep up with technological changes.

Traditionally, telecommunications technology relied on information being sent through copper wires from one place to another.

In recent years, however, networks have been transitioning from these "copper" systems to IP networks. According to NASNA Director Evelyn Bailey, Emergency Services IP network technology works similarly to how the internet sends information, allowing for more efficient data transfer.

"IP is fast," Bailey said. "Copper networks are like a horse and buggy by comparison to a rocket ship in terms of the speed that a 911 call gets through the network."

These modern networks allow for the implementation of newer technologies like geographic information systems-based routing and location, Bailey said. And according to Paul Linée, principal analyst at the Emergency Communications Strategies consulting firm, the modern networks also allow for "next generation" 911 technologies such as the ability to receive video and images from a cell phone at the time of the call to give responders more information about the emergency.

Twelve states already have IP 911 networks, and three more are in the process of obtaining them, according to Bailey. Without a statewide wireless surcharge, Missouri isn't on track to make the same upgrade.

Linn County, like many others in mid-Missouri, relies on a local sales tax for funding. 13 counties in mid-Missouri, though, depend on landline surcharges to keep their call centers afloat, according to the Missouri 911 Directors Association.

As landline usage decreases, these counties are struggling to maintain their call centers, and won't likely be able to implement modern networks. In fact, Linn County transitioned from a landline surcharge to a local sales tax about three years ago because of this decrease, according to Linn County 911 dispatcher Bob Garr. But even with a funding alternative to landline surcharges, Linn has still only just now been able to implement so-called "Phase II" 911 service, a '90s-era technology that provides dispatchers with automatic GPS data on a wireless caller's location.

Bailey says failing to upgrade to IP will leave even the small towns with Phase II tech falling behind other telecommunications systems.

“As the telephone companies in Missouri and in surrounding states start to decommission their copper networks ... and replace them with IP,” Bailey said, “then these little places that are still using really severely antiquated technology at this point are going to ... perhaps have even a less reliable service because everything else around them is IP except for 911. ... It's a horrible thought.”