Text-To-911

Quick Facts

- Today most consumers cannot reach 911 by sending a text message from their wireless phone.
- In limited areas of the United States https://www.fcc.gov/general/9-1-1-master-psap-registry, however, it is now possible to use certain wireless telephone services to send a text message to 911. This means that in such areas, if you are unable to make a voice 911 call, you can type your message on your wireless phone and send it to a 911 operator. **But even where text-to-911 is available, if you are able to make a voice call to 911, and if it is safe to do so, you should always make a voice call to 911 instead.**
- The four largest wireless telephone companies (AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon) have voluntarily committed to make texting to 911 available by May 15, 2014 in areas where the local 911 center is prepared to receive the texts.
- By September 30, 2013, if you attempt to send a text to 911 where text-to-911 service is unavailable, you will receive an immediate "bounce-back" message that text-to-911 is not available and that you should contact emergency services by another means, such as by making a voice call or using telecommunications relay services (the latter for consumers who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability).
- For more information and/or updates regarding text-to-911, please visit https://www.fcc.gov/text-to-911. For links to FCC proceedings about text-to-911, please visit: https://www.fcc.gov/document/text-911-bounce-back-message-order, and https://www.fcc.gov/document/text-911-further-notice-proposed-rulemaking.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is text-to-911 and why would I want to use it?

It is the ability to send a "short message" (SMS) or other kind of text message to 911. Texting during an emergency could be helpful if you are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability, or if a voice call to 911 might otherwise be dangerous or impossible. But if you are able to make a voice call to 911, and if it is safe to do so, you should always make a voice call to 911.

How can I find out if my area has text-to-911 capability?

Ask your wireless phone company if text-to-911 is available in your area. You can also ask your state legislators or public safety officials if your local 911 center is prepared to accept text-to-911 messages. Public information lines, such as 211 or 311, also may have more information on text-to-911 service availability in your area. (Also, see information on specific areas where Text-to-911 is available https://www.fcc.gov/general/9-1-1-master-psap-registry.)

If text-to-911 is available in my area, what type of wireless phone or service do I need to send an emergency text?

Check with your wireless phone company. In general, you must have a text-capable wireless phone and a wireless service subscription or contract with a wireless phone company. You may also need a "wireless data plan." Remember, you can make a voice call to 911 using a wireless phone that does not have a service plan, but you cannot send a text message to 911 without a service contract that includes texting.

Why isn't text-to-911 available everywhere in the country?

Text-to-911 is a new capability that may require upgrades to local 911 centers and coordination among wireless phone companies, equipment vendors and manufacturers, and state and local public safety agencies. It is likely to become more widely available over time as wireless phone companies provide text-to-911 capability and 911 centers modernize their systems to accept text messages.

If I am able to text-to-911, will the 911 center automatically know my location?

Texting to 911 is different from making a voice call to 911 in this respect. When you make a voice call to 911, the call taker will typically receive your phone number and your approximate location automatically. This is called "Enhanced 911" or "E911." However, in most cases when you text 911 from a wireless phone, the call taker will not receive this automated information. For this reason, if you send a text message to 911, it is important to give the 911 call taker an accurate address or location as quickly as possible, if you can.

If text-to-911 is available to me, why should I use it only when a voice call to 911 is not an option?

Voice calls to 911 are usually the most efficient way to reach emergency help. For example, voice calls allow the 911 operator to more quickly ask questions and obtain information from the caller, while two-way communication by text can take more time and is subject to limits on the length of text messages. In addition, when you make a voice call to 911, the call taker will typically receive your phone number and the approximate location of your phone automatically.

What are the FCC's rules on 911?

The FCC's 911 rules require the following:

- Wireless phone companies must transmit all 911 voice calls to 911 centers (also known as Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs).
- Wireless phone companies must send information about your telephone number and location to a PSAP when you make a 911 call so you can get help more easily.
- Wireless phone companies, as well as certain text messaging applications, must provide, no later than September 30, 2013, automated "bounce-back" messages in instances when you attempt to send a text message to 911 in an area where text-to-911 service is unavailable. The bounce-back messages will inform you that text-to-911 is not available and direct you to contact emergency services by another means, such as by making a voice call or using telecommunications relay services (if you are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability).
- The FCC does not currently require any companies to transmit text messages to 911 centers. However, the FCC currently is seeking public comment on proposed rules that would require

wireless phone companies and certain other text message providers to begin transmitting text messages to 911 in the future.
- The FCC does not have authority to issue rules regulating 911 centers, and so it cannot require these centers to accept text messages.

For More Information

To learn more about FCC programs to promote access to telecommunications services for people with disabilities, visit the FCC's website at https://www.fcc.gov/general/disability-rights-office.

Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

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