



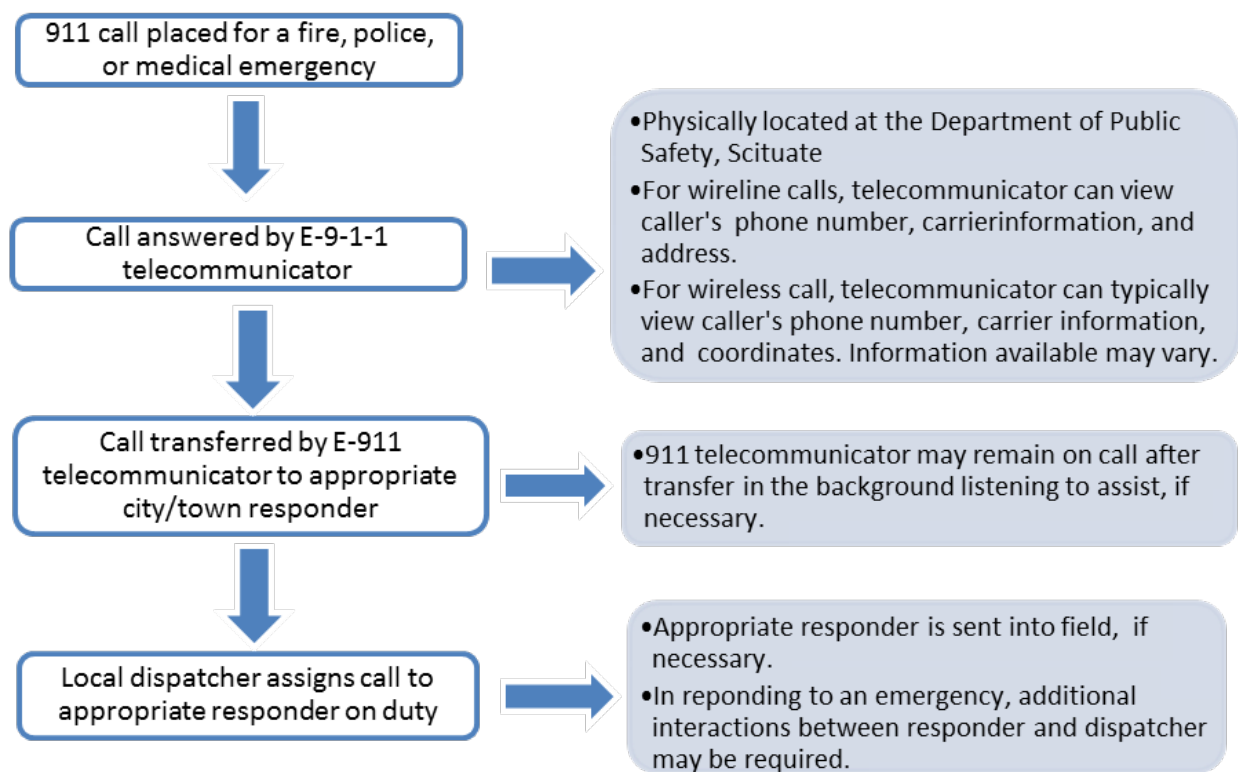
SENATE FISCAL OFFICE  
ISSUE BRIEF  
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## Public Safety Dispatch Operations

JANUARY 7, 2014

### E-911 OPERATIONS

Rather than to local police or fire departments, E-911 is the first point of contact for 911 emergency calls. Beginning in 1988, statewide emergency 911 services were established in Rhode Island. Through the Department of Public Safety (DPS), the E-911 Uniform Emergency Telephone System transfers all 911 police, fire, and rescue calls to the appropriate local agency (fire, police, etc.) for a response. In 2013, approximately 535,000 911 calls were received, with about 75.0 percent of calls made from wireless phones.



E-911 seeks to answer each call within three rings, however, during periods of high call volume, sometimes calls cannot be answered immediately. If no telecommunicators are available to answer a call, that call will fall into the queue. Within this queue, callers receive an automated message notifying them that they have reached 911 and will be connected with the next available telecommunicator. Calls placed into queue are answered in the order in which they are received, not due to the cause or reason for call. Currently, E-911 does not possess the ability to prioritize calls that fall into queue based upon emergency or need of caller.

The amount of time a telecommunicator spends on the line with a given caller depends upon the nature of the call as well as whether the call was made by a wireline (landline) or wireless (cellular) caller. In some

instances, E-911 remains on the phone with a caller even after a transfer is made to a local responder. Such calls include:

- Calls regarding an attempted or contemplated suicide;
- Pre-arrival medical instruction by telecommunicator is required;
- Occurrence or indication of domestic violence;
- Caller is a child and guardian or caregiver is incapacitated or requires medical assistance.

## **WIRELINE VS. WIRELESS CALLS**

### ***Wireline (Landline) Calls***

When a wireline call comes through E-911 and into the DPS headquarters in North Scituate, all subscriber information is readily available to the telecommunicator as soon as the call is answered. This includes address, name of subscriber, and carrier information. Additionally, if the caller and their phone number is registered with the Special Needs Emergency Registry through the Department of Health (DOH), the telecommunicator will have additional information about the caller at their disposal. This can be particularly useful in emergency situations that require dispatchers to send out responders to the caller's location.

The telecommunicator verifies all information with the caller as well as identifies the nature of the call or emergency. As soon as this occurs, the call is then transferred to a local public safety entity. According to E-911 staff, this typically occurs within a matter of seconds.

### ***Wireless Calls***

In the instance of a 911 call made by a wireless phone, the information available to the telecommunicator differs. The cell phone number, location in terms of longitude and latitude or x-y coordinates, and the phone carrier are available. On occasion and depending upon the call location and phone carrier, the location information is limited and the telecommunicator can see a general area or radius as to where the caller is located, rather than the exact x-y coordinates. E-911 can make a request to the carrier for additional subscriber information, if necessary, including sending out a "ping" if the cell phone is on to determine the exact location of caller. Take note that the phone carrier will not exercise this ability without a warrant for the Office of the Attorney General or other law enforcement as a matter of policy.

Unlike a wireline call, the transfer to a local responder may take longer as the telecommunicator must try to determine the location of wireless caller. Depending upon the number of variables relative to the area from which the call is being placed, the attempt to identify the exact location of the caller may not be possible.

## **LOCAL DISPATCH OVERVIEW<sup>1</sup>**

According to E-911 staff, a majority of 911 entities in other states are responsible for dispatch activities. However, local entities in Rhode Island are responsible for the actual dispatch of responders. Once the call is transferred from E-911 to the appropriate local entity (fire, police, or emergency medical services (EMS)), the information available to and viewed by the 911 telecommunicator is not directly transferred to the local entity. After the local dispatcher receives the call, he or she will have to determine the nature of the emergency, caller location, and other relevant information and enter it into the computer aided dispatch (CAD) system.

Testimony from local dispatchers during meetings of the Joint Municipal Shared Services Study Commission indicated that not all emergency calls flow through E-911 to local dispatchers, as many calls come through the local dispatch center's (police, fire, and EMS) basic seven digit telephone number. Although many local fire and police agencies are generally organized in a similar manner, actual operations vary between communities.

**Public Safety Dispatch Operations**

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Regarding calls received by local police departments, assignments to responding officers are typically prioritized based upon type of emergency. Depending upon the community, some departments assign specific officers to a geographic area and are responsible for responding to callers within that area.

Calls received by fire departments are typically responded to in the order in which the calls were received. Again, actual protocol may vary somewhat between communities. To ensure that there is no delay in responding to a call made to a fire department, a number of communities have mutual aid agreements in place which enable departments to request assistance from neighboring communities in the event that their own internal resources are insufficient or unable to respond to an emergency.

**OTHER LOCAL POLICE, FIRE, AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICE (EMS) DISPATCHER DUTIES**

Dispatchers in local police, fire, and combined operations are often responsible for duties in addition to dispatching. According to testimony provided during meetings of the Joint Municipal Shared Services Study Commission, other responsibilities include:

- Responsible for operating the Rhode Island Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (RILETS) Terminal. The system itself is housed at the Rhode Island State Police headquarters.
  - Interagency messages
  - Wanted person and property confirmation
  - FBI rule mandates 24-hour terminal monitoring
- Cell block video and audio monitoring
- Alarm monitoring (fire and police)
- Security camera monitoring (fire and police)
- Clerical duties
- Telephone switchboard duties
- Police building physical security control
  - Remote operation of secure doors
  - Remote visitor greeting during nighttime hours
- Special projects

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<sup>1</sup> Take note that this is a general overview, and actual departmental protocol and procedures may vary between and within municipalities.