

Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of)	
)	
Wireless E9-1-1 Location Accuracy)	PS Docket 07-114
Requirements)	

REPLY COMMENTS OF CONSUMERS UNION

I. Introduction

Consumers Union applauds the Commission for its proposal to revise the benchmarks that wireless carriers must meet in order to accurately determine the location of 9-1-1 calls made from cell phones. The current 9-1-1 location system for landlines and VoIP services is highly effective and much progress has been made in recent years in the ability to locate wireless callers outdoors. However, more needs to be done to improve the ability of emergency first responders to locate emergency calls made indoors, especially in dense urban areas and in buildings with many floors, where longitude and latitude information alone is inadequate to locate a caller. This is especially true in light of the fact that consumers are replacing their traditional landline phones and relying on cell phones as their sole means of communication. Consumers Union believes that the Commission's proposed standards go a long way to ensure that first responders are able to quickly and accurately reach all consumers. The standards should be adopted and implemented without delay.

II. THE PROPOSED STANDARDS ARE NECESSARY IN LIGHT OF CONSUMERS' INCREASING RELIANCE ON CELL PHONES TO MAKE EMERGENCY CALLS

Consumers are increasingly using cell phones as their primary or only method of communication, and new standards for indoor calls are necessary to reflect this fact. When the

Commission first introduced its location accuracy rules, consumers used wireless service as a complement to their landline service at home. At that time, in February 2003, according to original research conducted by Consumer Reports, a third of CR subscribers bought their wireless phone to be able to reach a 9-1-1 operator when away from home.¹

Since that time, millions of Americans have chosen to “cut the cord” and replace their traditional landline service with wireless service. Today, the number of 9-1-1 calls from indoors is increasing. To have lesser location accuracy for wireless calls made indoors is unacceptable. According to the FCC, thirty-four percent of adults lived in wireless-only households by the second half of 2012.² Importantly, consumers in rural areas, low-income communities, and communities of color who rely on cell phones as their sole communications service could be disproportionately and negatively impacted.

The current 9-1-1 system suffers from weaknesses that make it difficult to locate wireless devices indoors, especially inside of buildings and in dense urban settings. Clearly, this can be a life-or-death matter for consumers in those situations who are incapacitated or otherwise unable to communicate their location information to an emergency call center.

Furthermore, we agree with the Commission’s proposal to supplement the new standards with performance disclosures, and we disagree with commenters who suggest that they are unnecessary or overly burdensome. Consumers Union strongly believes that the policy goal of ensuring the public’s safety strongly is critical, and that reporting requirements can help improve accountability, spur improvements to the public safety system, and help ensure that consumers are aware of any limitations so they can plan accordingly ahead of time for unanticipated emergencies.

¹ See 911 Calls: More Trouble Ahead?, CONSUMER REPORTS (Feb. 2004), <http://consumersunion.org/pdf/FEB04CELL911.pdf>.

² *In re Implementation of Section 6002(B) of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993*, Sixteenth Report, 28 FCC Rcd 3700 (2013).

III. CONSUMERS SHOULD BE ABLE TO DEPEND ON ACCURATE AND QUICK RESPONSES FROM EMERGENCY RESPONDERS IN ALL SITUATIONS

Consumers need better assurances that when they place an emergency call from a cell phone, first responders will be able to locate them quickly and accurately. At Consumers Union, we have heard from consumers who are still concerned about the reliability of cell phones in times of emergency and their ability to communicate location information. For example, one consumer wrote to us to saying, “I am ready to discontinue my land-line and go to cell phone only but I am still worried about 911 not showing my address and hang onto the land-line for that reason alone.” Another story we received highlights just how important improved location accuracy can be in practice. Jonathan R. of Mason, OH wrote to us about one experience calling 9-1-1 from his cell phone: “The operator was unable to identify where I was calling from, and didn’t recognize the street names I gave. It took about 2 minutes for the dispatcher to figure out that I was in a different county and then an attempt to transfer me to the proper county resulted in a dropped call. Luckily the incident I was calling about . . . calmed down and the involved party had left.”³

Furthermore, we agree with commenters who point out the importance of reliable wireless service on this proceeding. Improved location accuracy standards are of no use if calls cannot go through in the first place, and improved resiliency in networks can help ensure that emergency first responders can successfully do their job. As we have previously explained, 9-1-1 service requires an adequate level of backup power and the Commission should continue its work in ensuring the resiliency of networks after disasters and during power outages, when emergency services may be especially needed.

³ These stories are on file with Consumers Union and can be made available upon request.

IV. LOCATION ACCURACY STANDARDS WOULD BENEFIT A WIDE VARIETY OF CONSUMERS

Improved standards would greatly benefit consumers in a wide variety of situations. When an injured person calls 9-1-1, their injury may prevent them from being able to explain their location to a dispatcher. A child may have to call 9-1-1 on behalf of an adult, and may not be able to explain their location to the dispatcher. Disabled persons and others in emergency situations may have difficulty verbally relaying their location to an operator. And in densely-populated urban areas, simply locating the longitude and latitude of a consumer may not be enough to pinpoint the particular floor of a caller in an apartment or office building. The proposed standards would benefit consumers in these and many other situations.

V. Conclusion

Consumers Union urges the Commission to quickly adopt the proposed standards. The improved location accuracy standards will help save lives. The Commission should make it a priority to ensure that all Americans can access critical first responder services, regardless of whether a call is made indoors or outdoors, and regardless of the technology that is used to make the call. The Commission's proposed standards go a long way to ensure that first responders are able to quickly and accurately reach those in need of help in all situations, and will provide consumers with the certainty and reliability they expect and deserve to have when calling 9-1-1.

Respectfully submitted,



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