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FCC to Rule On 911 Access For Web Phones

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In February, a 17-year-old in Houston tried to make a 911 call on her family's Internet phone after an intruder shot her parents in their home. Last month, a woman in Torrington, Conn., failed to reach a 911 operator using her Internet phone as she sought medical attention for her infant son.

Both cases highlight a shortcoming of Internet phone technology: It isn't automatically configured to transfer emergency calls through the normal channels. In Houston, the family hadn't registered as required in order to have emergency calling from their Internet-based phone. In the Connecticut case, the call was transferred to an unmanned administrative line at the local 911 call center.

As the popularity of cheaper, Internet-based phone systems increases, so does political pressure to require providers to automatically link their customers to the 911 system. The attorneys general of Texas and Connecticut have filed suit against Vonage Holdings Corp., a New Jersey Internet phone provider, claiming it failed to adequately disclose the limitations of its emergency calling system. Members of Congress have urged swift action. And now, federal regulators are trying to resolve the thorny issue of making old services work with new technologies -- without damaging that technology's innovative, entrepreneurial potential.

The Federal Communications Commission is set to rule on the issue Thursday and is expected to set strict new 911 requirements for most Internet phone providers. Public safety groups and traditional telephone companies support the idea, citing the need to support the general public's expectations for emergency calling. But the anticipated requirements, which would take effect 120 days after an FCC order is finalized, are coming too quickly to address all the technical problems, according to some of the companies involved.

"This is a big obligation, and it's being imposed on the industry in a very short time frame," said David Baker, vice president of law and public policy at EarthLink Inc., an Internet-service provider that also resells Vonage. "We all have an interest in making 911 available," but for now, the technical hurdles can't be overcome in the FCC's timeframe, he said.

Widely available for only about two years, Internet phone service is expected to grow to more than 1.2 million users at the end of this year from about half a million users at the end of last year, according to In-stat, a market-research firm. It will continue to increase as large cable companies such as Comcast Corp. join upstarts such as Vonage to offer the service.

Connecting an emergency call from an Internet phone isn't as simple as hooking up the line.

Most Internet-based phones look and operate much like a traditional phone -- except that they are connected to a high-speed Internet line instead of to the traditional phone network. When a call is made, the Internet phone company connects it to the local phone system.

Users sometimes assume Internet phones come with the standard public safety feature that transmits the caller's address along with the call to the emergency operator.

But where conventional phones have a fixed address, Internet phones have no such geographic tie: A user with a laptop, for example, could make calls from anywhere there is an Internet connection. Companies have different technologies for routing calls into the phone network and on to local emergency call centers, but ultimately it requires the customer to specify where the phone is located.

Politicians and business executives agree the public has a right to reliable 911 service, but some telephone companies are skittish about the FCC regulating technology that until now has thrived free of regulation.

"I'm very nervous about the regulatory net catching the wrong fish," said Vinton G. Cerf, senior vice president of technology strategy at MCI Inc., which sells its Advantage Internet phone service to its business customers. "I have mixed feelings about requiring [911] because I'm very worried about the societal dependence on it," he said, "but I don't want things that look like the old service to be treated like the old service because we know it's not an old service."

Indeed, the FCC's challenge lies in defining how to address a new, broad category of services that straddle the intersection of computers and phones. The commission's expected decision will require Internet phone providers to register customers before turning on their service, according to agency staff. It will also require providers to allow customers to update their location if they travel or move.

The commission is not expected to require 911 connections for services such as instant messengers, Skype, Free World Dialup, or other computer programs that allow users to talk to each other but not make phone calls outside their particular system.

FCC action would be welcomed by public safety officials such as Steve Souder, the director of the Montgomery County emergency communications center, which last month advised residents that Internet phones might not connect to 911 service.

"It took an agonizing 15 years to get wireless carriers to make 911 calling work," he said. "We cannot afford the same kind of time" to resolve the issue for phone service over the Internet, he said. Although cell phones, like Internet phones, are not fixed geographically, a caller's position can be determined using global positioning satellite systems and other technology.

Critics of the FCC's pending action say the measure goes too far, too fast -- requiring companies, for instance, to essentially keep track of where their users are when they place a call, a feat that Internet phone providers contend is not yet technically possible.

"If they come out and say, 'you have to have this,' it won't work" in the time frame they want, said Bryan Martin, chief executive of Santa Clara, Calif.-based 8x8 Inc., which has more than 40,000 customers for its Packet8 service. The industry is coming up with ways to help emergency centers instantly identify an Internet caller's location, but such a fix won't be available within 120 days, he said. Depending on how firm the rules are, Packet8 may have to contact its customers to get their location information or shut down service for customers who haven't registered an address, he said.

Internet phone proponents are also urging the FCC to ensure that regional phone companies cooperate with routing calls to the proper 911 center. Internet phone providers should have access to the 911 network at reasonable rates, they say, and not be overcharged by the regional phone companies that own those systems. Regional phone companies such as Verizon Communications Inc. and SBC Communications Inc. that are moving into the Internet phone business themselves say they are working to make the 911 system available to competing services such as Vonage.

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