

NEMSIS Use and Priority for GNIS Codes Guide

Date

February 5, 2015

May 1, 2024 (Added Military and Census GNIS recommendation)

Authors

N. Clay Mann – NE MSIS P.I.

Josh Legler – NEMSIS Consultant

Jennifer Correa – NEMSIS Business Data Analyst

Overview

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) includes geographic names for all known places, features, and areas in the United States that are identified by a proper name. GNIS is the geographic name component of The National Map. The NEMSIS Version 3 Standard relies on GNIS codes to identify geographic locations and mailing locations. To learn more about the GNIS codes, please go to the [Geographic Names FAQ](#) webpage.

Purpose

The purpose of this description is to define what type of GNIS code is appropriate for each type of location. Elements that collect the state information use the two-digit ANSI/FIPS code. Elements that collect the county information use the ANSI/FIPS code which combines the two-digit state code and the three-digit county code. These state and county codes are not an issue, since these codes are unique and exclusive. The codes in question are GNIS codes used to identify more specific locations such as cities, unincorporated areas, etc.

The NEMSIS Version 3 data elements that rely on a GNIS code with more specific locations include:

Elements	Interpretation
sFacility.08	City or township where located
dContact.06	City, Mailing address
dFacility.08	City or township where located
dLocation.07	City or township where located
dPersonnel.05	City, Mailing address
ePatient.06	City or township where located
eScene.17	City or township where located (best approximation)
eDisposition.04	City or township where located

A community with a GNIS Feature Class “Civil” code represents a political division formed for administrative purposes with legally defined boundaries (borough, county, incorporated place, parish, town, and/or township). The naming convention of many civil codes lists the cities as “City of Cleveland” or “Village of Wicker Park” or “Arden Town.”

A location assigned a GNIS Feature Class “Populated Place” code represents a named community with a permanent human population, usually not incorporated and with no legal boundaries, ranging from rural clustered buildings to large cities and every size in between (e.g., metropolitan areas, housing subdivisions, modular home communities, and named neighborhoods).

A location with a GNIS Feature Class “Census” code represents a statistical area delineated locally, specifically for the tabulation of Census Bureau data (census designated place, census county division, unorganized territory, various types of American Indian/Alaska Native statistical areas). This is distinct from a civil and populated place.

A location with a GNIS Feature Class “Military” code represents a place or facility used for various aspects of or relating to military activity. The NEMSIS TAC recommendation is that a “Civil” code be used when possible. If a civil code does not exist for the specific location, a “Populated Place” code should be used. If there is not a “Civil” or “Populated Place” code that corresponds with the city, use a “Census” or “Military” code when possible.

Currently, the NEMSIS TAC does not have a way to reconcile the discrepancy between the GNIS information and the USPS information for mailing purposes. NEMSIS requires the GNIS information for the incident city and destination city, and USPS information for the scene ZIP code and destination ZIP code, but allows free text for city elements in the ePayment section, which is more likely to be used for mailing purposes. Utilizing the city and zip code combination to designate the GNIS city code may require additional review. Not all city and zip code combinations can be used to easily determine the GNIS city code.

There may be instances where a city and zip combination do not result in an appropriate GNIS code. The USPS may recognize it as a place but GNIS does not. In cases where an appropriate GNIS code cannot be easily found, it may be necessary to select the nearest city with a GNIS code. Using Fort Meade SD 57741 as an example, the nearest city with a GNIS code is Sturgis. Both the [Sturgis \(Populated Place\)](#) and the [City of Sturgis \(Civil\)](#) codes include coordinates that suggest they cover the Fort Meade 57741 zip code area.

Additional Sources

GNIS Codes Website: <https://www.usgs.gov/us-board-on-geographic-names/download-gnis-data> GNIS Codes Lookup: <https://www.usgs.gov/tools/geographic-names-information-system-gnis>

GNIS FAQ site: <https://www.usgs.gov/us-board-on-geographic-names/what-geographic-names-information-system-gnis>