

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Emergency 9-1-1 Services

Recent events have highlighted important differences in attempting to contact Emergency 9-1-1 Services (such as Police, Fire, and Ambulance) using VoIP technology as opposed to using traditional landline telephone technology. **It is critical that you understand the limitations of VoIP 9-1-1 Services.**

What is VoIP?

Unlike traditional landline telephones (such as Bell Canada telephone services), VoIP telephone services use a computer modem and a computer-based Internet connection to transmit voice conversations. Competitive pricing has attracted many consumers to VoIP telephone services.

What are the differences between VoIP and Traditional Telephone Service?

Unlike traditional landline technology, VoIP services:

1. may not automatically display the caller's telephone number and location so that the call-taker can call back, or immediately direct emergency services to the caller's location, if the caller is disconnected or incapacitated;
2. are not usually automatically directed to the nearest emergency response centre. Most VoIP service providers direct 9-1-1 calls to a central call centre before manually re-routing the calls to the local emergency services dispatcher which can result in response delay times;
3. may not have current information as to the nearest emergency response centre or the caller's address which can undermine the prompt and accurate deployment of emergency services; and,
4. cannot usually operate if there is an electrical or Internet system failure. (Although traditional landline telephone service providers usually provide emergency back-up power on their systems, it is important to remember that even with traditional landline services your digital telephone set may require electrical power to operate. Consider keeping an analog phone set available for use during power outages if you subscribe to a traditional landline service.)

What should you do?

- **Immediately inform yourself of your VoIP's 9-1-1 limitations.** In 2005, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the public authority responsible to regulate Canadian telecommunications, directed all VoIP service providers to notify consumers regarding the availability, characteristics, and limitations of their 9-1-1 service and to update this information with existing customers at least once every 12 months.
- Verify that you can access 9-1-1 with your phone. **Do not make test 9-1-1 calls** but check with your VoIP service provider to confirm service and emergency calling features.
- Be sure to keep your registered location current with your VoIP provider particularly if you move.
- If the power is out, your VoIP service may be out too. Consider purchasing a back-up power supply and/or retaining your current landline service for 9-1-1 purposes.
- Inform all potential callers (including children, caregivers, etc) about VoIP 9-1-1 limitations.
- Post your complete address and telephone number near your phone.
- Find out which police, fire, and ambulance service(s) should respond to your 9-1-1 call and have their local phone numbers on hand to provide to the VoIP call taker.
- Consider or plan alternate methods for contacting emergency services during a power outage or when the Internet connection is lost.

Tips for all 9-1-1 callers:

- Stay calm and dial 9-1-1,
- Give the location of your emergency and your call back number,
- Identify the type of help you need (Police, Fire, Ambulance),
- Stay on the line and fully answer 9-1-1 call taker's questions to the best of your ability,
- Don't hang up until the call is complete,
- If you are disconnected, hang up and dial 9-1-1 again, and
- Follow any directions provided to you by the 9-1-1 call taker.

