



August 2008

Bringing 911 Into the 21st Century

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H.R. 3403, called the “New and Emerging Technologies 911 Improvement Act of 2008” or the “NET 911 Improvement Act of 2008”, is a compromise version of legislation intended to update the nation’s 911 laws for Internet phone services. It was presented to President Bush for signature on July 15, 2008 and he signed it into law on July 23, 2008. While the FCC already has rules requiring Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) providers to offer E-911 service to their customers, the law clarifies the FCC’s authority to require VoIP providers to provide E-911 service and also makes it easier for those VoIP-providers to offer E-911 service to their customers.

The bill, which was first introduced more than three years ago, gives VoIP providers access to the country’s 911 infrastructure at the same rates, terms and conditions as telecommunications carriers, and provides them the same liability protections enjoyed by those carriers. It authorizes VoIP service providers to provide customer location information to public safety answering points in an emergency by giving the public safety personnel and interconnected VoIP providers the same liability protections when handling 911 calls from VoIP users as from mobile or wired telephone service users. The law precludes the FCC from creating a technology-specific 911 and E-911 mandate. Looking to the future, the law encourages modernization of the country’s 911 system by requiring the National 911 Coordination Office to establish a national plan to migrate the country’s 911 system to an IP-based emergency response network and allowing 911 PSAP grants to be used for IP-based equipment.

Passage of the law was supported by numerous telecommunications and public safety groups, including the National Emergency Numbering Association, the National Cable and Telecommunications Association and the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology. Under the new law, the FCC has 90 days from the date of enactment to issue implementing regulations.