

Do's and Don'ts of 9-1-1

When the 9-1-1 number was inaugurated in [Haleyville](#) (Ala.) as the result of an AT&T proposal, it was intended as an easily-remember, no-coin method of reaching the correct law enforcement, fire and EMS agencies. However, since 9-1-1 procedures are under the control of local agencies, many different policies have developed for the proper use of 9-1-1 since its first use. Today, officials estimate that over 270,000 calls are made to 9-1-1 each day in the United States.

Although the term "9-1-1" has come to mean the entire public safety communications system, in fact, it's simply a [dedicated telephone system](#) for relaying calls from the public. It is not the **only** method of reaching the police, fire or EMS agency, nor does it include many other telephone, radio and computer systems that an agency relies upon to communicate.

A 9-1-1 system is considered either Basic or Enhanced. A Basic 9-1-1 system provides three-digit dialing, no-coin is required from pay telephones and intelligent routing to the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) that handles the area where the phone is located. An Enhanced 9-1-1 system adds the ability to display the caller's address and telephone number at the PSAP for the dispatcher's reference. Some 9-1-1 systems also have the ability to automatically ring-back the caller on hang-up, to lock a line open for tracing, or the ability to transfer callers to other agencies or telephone numbers with a single button.

For further information on 911, see the [glossary](#).

In general, 9-1-1 is an emergency number for any police, fire or medical incident. Some jurisdictions allow citizens to dial 9-1-1 for **any** type of police, fire or medical situation. In some cities, this has resulted in a flood of 9-1-1 calls that agencies cannot promptly receive, answer or respond to.

The following section describe the Do's and Do Not's of 9-1-1 under its original "emergencies only" purpose.

- Do not program 9-1-1 into your auto-dial telephone. You won't forget the number, and programming the number invites accidental dialing of the number. Also, please do not dial 9-1-1 to "test" your phone or the system. This needlessly burdens the dispatchers and system with non-emergency calls.
- If you live in a region that is subject to natural disasters (earthquake, tornado, hurricane, etc.), pre-plan a method of communicating with family, friends and relatives **before** an incident occurs. Choose any emergency contact outside the area that will be affected by the disaster. Make them the relay point for those who want to contact you. After the disaster hits, you can make just **one** telephone call to your contact, and have that information relayed to all those you care about.
- Dial 9-1-1 **only** for an emergency. An emergency is any serious medical problem (chest pain, seizure, bleeding), any type of fire (business, car, building), or any life-threatening situation (fights, person with weapons, etc.). Most jurisdictions also urge citizens to use 9-1-1 to report crimes in progress, whether or not a life is threatened.

Do **not** dial 9-1-1 for a non-emergency. Instead, dial the agency's listed 7-digit non-emergency telephone number. A non-emergency incident is a property damage accident, break-in to a vehicle when suspect is gone, theft of property (when suspect is gone), vandalism (when suspect is gone), panhandlers, intoxicated persons who are not disorderly, or cars blocking the street or alleys.

Do **not** pick up the telephone and put it down if you don't hear a dial-tone--you'll tie up the telephone network and delay obtaining a line. Stay on the line until you hear the dial-tone. If you hear a fast-busy, all circuits are busy--try again later. If you reach a recording, the telephone system isn't available for your call--try again later.

- In many large cities, 9-1-1 calls are answered by a dispatcher if one is available. However, if all call-takers are busy on other calls, the 9-1-1 call is answered by a call distributor that holds the call, and then automatically routes it to the first available call-taker. Do **not** hang up if you reach a recording, and try to call back. **Stay on the line** and your call will be answered in order. If you hang up, your call will be delayed because you will be placed at the end of other callers.
- Your 9-1-1 call will automatically be routed to the police, fire or EMS agency that handles the area where the telephone is located. In general, 9-1-1 calls are answered by the area's law enforcement agency, who either handles the call or transfers it immediately to the appropriate agency.
- If you dialed 9-1-1 in error, do **not** hang up the telephone. Instead, stay on the line and explain to the dispatcher that you dialed by mistake and that you do not have an emergency. If you hang up, a dispatcher will call back to confirm that there is no emergency. If you don't answer, a police officer or deputy must be dispatched to confirm that you are OK. This will needlessly take resources away from genuine emergencies.
- Briefly describe the type of incident you are reporting. For example, "I'm reporting an auto fire," or "I'm reporting an unconscious person," or "I'm reporting a shoplifter." Then stay on the line with the dispatcher---do not hang up until the dispatcher tells you to. In some cases, the dispatcher will keep you on the line while the emergency units are responding to ask additional questions or to obtain on-going information.
- If your call is answered by a law enforcement agency and you are reporting a fire or medical emergency, the call-taker will transfer your call---**stay on the line** while the call is transferred. The call-taker who answers will need information about the incident.
- Let the call-taker ask you questions---they have been trained to ask questions that will help prioritize the incident, locate it and speed an appropriate response. Your answers should be brief and responsive. Remain calm and speak clearly. If you are not in a position to give full answers to the call-taker (the suspect is nearby), stay on the phone and the dispatcher will ask you questions that can be answered "yes" or "no."
- Be prepared to describe your location and the location of the emergency. Although an Enhanced 9-1-1 system will display your telephone number and location, the dispatcher **must** confirm the displayed address or may ask you for more specific location information about the victim or suspects.

If you are a cellular caller, your telephone number and location will **not** be displayed for the dispatcher's reference. You must be able to describe your location so emergency units can respond. Be aware of your current city or town, address, highway and direction, nearby cross-streets or interchanges, or other geographic points of reference.

Cellular 9-1-1 calls are frequently routed to a central PSAP that could be many miles from your location. Be prepared to give the dispatcher your **complete** location---city or town, address or location, inside or outside, what floor or room, etc.

- Be prepared to describe the persons involved in any incident. This includes their race, sex, age, height and weight, color of hair, description of clothing, and presence of a hat, glasses or facial hair.
- Be prepared to describe any vehicles involved in the incident. This includes the color, year, make, model and type of vehicle (sedan, pick-up, sport utility, van, tanker truck, flatbed, etc.). If the vehicle is parked the dispatcher will need to know the direction it's facing. If the vehicle is moving or has left, the dispatcher will need to know the last direction.
- Be patient as the dispatcher asks you questions. While you are answering the dispatcher's questions, he/she is entering or writing down the information. If you are reporting an emergency, most likely a response is being made **while** you are still on the line with the dispatcher.
- Listen to the dispatcher's instructions for assistance if you are in danger yourself. The dispatcher may tell you to leave the building, secure yourself in a room or take other action to protect yourself.
- Don't hang up until the call-taker tells you to. Follow any instructions the dispatcher gives you, such as meeting the officers at the door, or flagging down the firefighters at the curb.
- If you are able and have training, apply first aid to any patients who need it. Give the victim reassurance that help is on the way. Secure any dogs or other pets that may interfere with the emergency response. Gather any medications the patient is taking and which the medical crew will need to take with the patient.