



# Bring wireless 911 up to date

By Jessica Rosenworcel - 01/14/14 05:22 PM EST

OPINION | This past summer, Mary Thomas suffered a stroke in New York City. Ms. Thomas knew something was wrong and mustered up the strength to call 911. But the stroke had taken its toll. Her speech was slurred. She was unable to clearly tell the dispatcher — an emergency medical technician named Joann Hilman-Payne — where she was.

So the first responders turned to technology. The tower information for Ms. Thomas's phone gave an address for the call. But the address was wrong. It turns out that on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, it can be easy to get lost. Lots of buildings, lots of floors, lots of apartments stacked high in the sky. In fact, first responders in New York followed several false leads trying to track the call. All in all, they searched for eight hours before they found Ms. Thomas.

This is an incredible story. Because thanks to the superhuman efforts of the EMT who stayed on the line — for a full straight eight hours — Ms. Thomas never lost consciousness and was taken to a hospital to recover.

Like Ms. Thomas, there is one telephone number every one of us knows by heart but none of us ever hopes to use. That number is 911.

We call the 911 system when we are most in need: when emergencies strike, when crises mount and when our health and safety depend on getting assistance to us quickly.

The 911 operators and platforms that support the system across counties and states are remarkably similar. At these 911 call centers, you will find everyday heroes who answer approximately 240 million emergency calls a year with steely calm. They help police, fire and emergency medical technicians locate callers when help is critical. In emergencies, as in real estate, it is all about location.

Today, these 240 million calls come in from a mix of landline and wireless phones. But wireless calls are leading the pack. In fact, on average, more than 70 percent of calls to 911 nationwide are made now from wireless phones. That is more than 400,000 calls per day.

This makes sense. We are now a nation with more wireless phones than people. For many of us, our mobile phones are always in our pockets, in our purses and on our persons, no matter where we are or where we go. Plus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 2 in 5 households has cut the cord. That means the number of calls we make to 911 using our wireless phones is only going to grow.

But our policies governing 911 are not yet on board with this trend. That is because they are not built for the modern wireless era.

Consider this: Today, if you call 911 from your landline phone, public safety officials automatically know your location. If you call 911 from your wireless phone outdoors, public safety officials will automatically know your location, sometimes to within 50 meters under location accuracy standards developed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). When public safety officials know your location in an emergency, it means

they can send help even if circumstances are dire and you do not know where you are or you are unable to speak. But if you call 911 from a wireless phone indoors and do not know your location, you better cross your fingers and pray, because no location accuracy standards apply.

This is an unacceptable gap in public safety communications. There may well have been a time when we believed wireless phones would only be used outdoors. But today they are used everywhere, inside and out.

It is time for our public safety policies to keep pace. The FCC should update its rules to require location accuracy standards for 911 wireless calls made from indoors. We must make this a priority. If you are faced with an emergency and dial 911 on your wireless phone, no matter where you are — indoors or outdoors — you want first responders to find you quickly.

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