



# GUIDELINES FOR 911 CENTERS: MITIGATE COVID -19 VACCINATION DISTRIBUTION COMMUNICATION



DEFEND TODAY,  
SECURE TOMORROW

## 911 CALL OVERLOAD

As states, localities, tribes, and territories continue to distribute COVID-19 vaccines and develop operational guidance about vaccination programs,<sup>1</sup> government agencies should consider the potential impact of public interest on communication systems capacity. Residents looking for information about the vaccine may overwhelm dedicated public safety lines, including 911. As a result, this influx of traffic to government systems may create network congestion and intermittent call blockage and degrade end-user experience. Ultimately, the overload may result in the inability for 911 centers<sup>2</sup> and other partners sharing the same communications circuits (e.g., county phone systems) to make or receive calls. Health departments may also experience similar incidents on dedicated phone lines as calls may surge following vaccine distribution announcements.

To effectively address these potential issues, decision-makers and leadership should work with 911 centers, health departments, and other public safety stakeholders to better inform the public about dialing dedicated lines instead of calling 911. Likewise, the public should be educated on vaccine information retrieval best practices, such as accessing health department web sites and be reminded to use 911 only for emergencies.<sup>3</sup>

## ! HOW TO AVOID DISRUPTIONS

To avoid circuit overloads and other potential 911 disruptions, decision-makers and leadership are encouraged to coordinate with 911 management, local health departments, and public safety IT departments to ensure the redundancy and resiliency of communication systems. It is recommended that public safety partners and communications providers:

- Assess communications network status and closely monitor workload of the 911 circuits; consider implementing diverse routing or isolating 911 circuits during initial vaccine distribution announcements to avoid congestion and potential network outages.
- Establish multiple temporary phone number(s) or repurpose existing seven- or 10-digit numbers to answer higher-than-normal call volume during initial vaccine distribution announcements.
- For dedicated vaccine phone lines, design and implement phone trees to: (1) direct callers to non-911 alternative numbers providing vaccine information; (2) provide callers multiple options to reach the proper informational entity; and (3) direct them to web-based resources when possible.
- Consider including a recording with information on vaccine distribution before the phone tree to help callers avoid congesting dedicated public safety administrative lines. Coordinate with public safety partners (e.g., public information officers, local hospitals, Statewide Interoperability Coordinators) to routinely remind the public that 911 is for emergencies only using established communication channels (e.g., press releases, social media accounts, radio announcements, local news segments).
- Train staff to use available resources (e.g., [Government Emergency Telecommunications Service](#) [GETS], [Wireless Priority Service](#) [WPS], [Telecommunications Service Priority](#) [TSP]) in instances of congestion.
- Develop a dedicated webpage to provide information on vaccine distribution and conduct outreach to inform the public of its existence in a coordinated manner with partners; monitor the status and cybersecurity of associated webpages to ensure availability.

## + ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information, please visit [cisa.gov/publication/communications-resiliency](https://cisa.gov/publication/communications-resiliency) or email [publicsafetycomms@cisa.dhs.gov](mailto:publicsafetycomms@cisa.dhs.gov). See [cisa.gov/emergency-communications-pandemic-guidelines](https://cisa.gov/emergency-communications-pandemic-guidelines) for guidance that supports public safety partners across all levels of government when developing plans and actions regarding governance, procedures, staffing, and disinfecting facilities in response to a pandemic. Use the [Ten Keys to Improving Emergency Alerts, Warnings, and Notifications](#) to deliver timely and actionable messaging about vaccination programs.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has released [guidance](#), including the [COVID-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook for Jurisdiction Operations](#) (Section 12) for state, territorial, tribal, and local public health programs and their partners to develop and update their vaccination plans.

<sup>2</sup> 911 centers include emergency communication centers, public safety answering points, public safety communication centers, emergency operations centers, and other public safety command centers.

<sup>3</sup> Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, ["Guidelines for Executives: 911 Center Pandemic Recommendations"](#), May 2020.

### BEST PRACTICES FOR INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

- ✓ **Inform** state and local health departments of the potential impact to critical services and the possibility of overloading phone lines
- ✓ **Provide** the public with alternative numbers and remind them not to dial 911 for vaccine information
- ✓ **Provide** awareness to information technology (IT) departments to better prepare and potentially isolate any circuits and monitor the status of those networks
- ✓ **Consider** temporary circuits dedicated to this operation