Priority Telecommunications Services for First Responders

By Dorie Chassin and Tim Runfola

The ability to communicate and share information across jurisdictions and disciplines is vital for public safety personnel in managing their day-to-day activities, as well as in responding to major emergencies. However, during major events, such as natural disasters or other emergencies, traditional landline telephone circuits and cellular phone networks often become congested, leading to degraded or interrupted communications for emergency responders. As a result, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) provides priority telecommunications services to national security and emergency personnel enabling them to communicate with one another during disasters. Successful call completion rates during large scale, such as the Super Bowl and the Boston Marathon bombing, have shown that these services drastically improve response operations. By familiarizing themselves with these services and implementing them when necessary, government leaders and emergency personnel will be better able to ensure that they have access to reliable, resilient communications capabilities when they are needed most.

Priority Services for Emergency Responders

OEC has provided the following priority telecommunications services to federal, state, local, territorial and tribal emergency personnel, as well as industry personnel in support roles, to ensure ongoing communications under all circumstances:

- ➢ Government Emergency Telecommunications Services
- ➢ Wireless Priority Services
- ➢ Telecommunications Service Priority

Government Emergency Telecommunications Service

The Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS) is a nationwide landline priority telecommunications service that currently serves more than 325,000 users. By utilizing GETS, users are able to communicate even during the highest levels of network congestion. During the March 2014 ice storms in Kentucky, GETS provided priority telecommunications to key personnel. Richard Bartlett, Emergency Preparedness and Trauma Coordinator for the Kentucky Hospital Association, noted, "I had to contact a hospital in central Kentucky which was experiencing a power failure, and then had a generator failure on top of that. They eventually got it back up, but the unit was struggling to keep running. When I tried to reach out to them to look at potential assistance and discuss possible evacuation options all the telephone circuits into the region were overloaded. All I was getting were 'fast-busy' indications, or messages that 'all circuits were busy.' I used my GETS card, and through that system's priority access to multiple networks and paths I was able to connect to the hospital." Because of GETS, Mr. Bartlett was able to connect to the hospital, provide subject matter expertise, and discuss potential life-saving options.

Similarly, prior to Superstorm Sandy in 2012, emergency support personnel prepared for potential congestion and network outages by testing the GETS system and ensuring that users were properly trained to use the service. Brian J. Allen, Group Vice President and Chief Security Officer of Time Warner Cable, testified that, "The Government Telecommunications and Wireless Priority Services functioned effectively, and helped to coordinate communications with government responders.[1]" FCC data shows that during the storm**,** 25 percent of commercial cell sites lost power, but over 99 percent of calls made via GETS were successfully completed. Despite the loss of power, first responders and government personnel were able to effectively communicate before, during and after the event.

Public safety officials, first responders, and Critical Infrastructure Key Resources (CIKR) personnel can apply for GETS through the DHS GETS website.

Once approved by OEC, GETS subscribers receive a calling card that provides access authorization through a unique dialing plan and personal identification number.
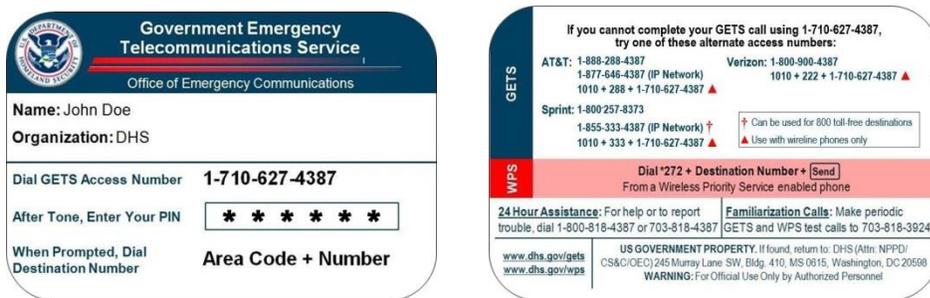
There is no initial sign-up fee or monthly recurring charge associated with the GETS program. The cost of a GETS call is typically 7 to 10 cents per minute.

Wireless Priority Service

Wireless Priority Service (WPS) is OEC's cellular companion to the GETS program and currently serves more than 125,000 public safety personnel. Cellular telephones are often used as the primary backup means of communication by first responders in the field. However, due to the use of cellular phones by the general public in times of emergency, as well as first responders, wireless networks are more likely to experience congestion with calls not connecting or being dropped. Through WPS, emergency responders using cellular telephone are given priority access over non-emergency calls during high levels of congestion. WPS allows authorized public safety personnel to gain access to the next available cellular radio channel in

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[1] Written Testimony of Brian J. Allen, Group Vice President and Chief Security, Time Warner Cable, Before the Federal Communications Commission's Post-Superstorm Sandy Field Hearing Panel#2: Assessing Network Resiliency-Lessons Learned from Sandy, February 5, 2013, http://apps.fcc.gov/ecfs/document/view;jsessionid=WZCmRTQWmmQJQzr6Gr02XjyyD2pvW8qzk3RppPdGvQBJylbggQNv!956499833!NONE?id=7022117684

order to initiate calls during an emergency simply by dialing *272 followed by the destination number.

Similar to GETS, WPS serves as a vital communication tool for public safety personnel and first responders during emergencies, as well as planned events. During response operations to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, 92 percent of calls placed through WPS were successfully completed, providing emergency personnel with mission-critical voice communications capabilities. During the response, OEC also expedited 152 WPS enrollment requests in order to provide priority access for additional personnel on the cellular networks. Matthew Metzger, Director of Operations of Boston College Eagle EMS, noted, "WPS was absolutely amazing. I was in a group of 30 people, almost all emergency responders, when the emergency occurred, and no one could get a line out. We could get a text message, but not call. So I used WPS by simply dialing *272 before the destination numbers and it connected right through. Nobody else in the group even knew about GETS/ WPS until that afternoon."

In addition to emergencies, WPS is implemented and tested during large-scale planned events, such as the recent 50th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and sporting events, such as collegiate football games. Boise State University football stadium can hold up to 35,000 people and is often at capacity during games which can create the potential for congestion of cellular phone lines. In an effort to alleviate network congestion and ensure the completion of crucial calls, the public safety team supporting Boise State has begun using WPS during football games. Buddy Jacob, City of Boise Division Manager, Information Technology Communications Division, recently commented, "It was crucial to communications at a recent 2014 game when the Civil Support Team detected radioactive material at the stadium. It turned out that an individual watching the game had just had a medical test using a radioactive tracer and was still emitting a detectable level of radiation. WPS allowed the Civil Support Team to stay in constant communications with Boise State Security and the Event Command Post as they identified the source of the radiation, and then allowed them to make a call to the hospital to discuss the situation and ensure the well-being of the individual[2]."

WPS, when used in conjunction with GETS, provides priority access for emergency responders on both the landline and cellular portions of the public telephone network. Together, these two communications tools ensure that emergency responders are able to connect and stay connected with one another when networks are congested or degraded.

Current carriers for WPS include AT&T, Sprint, Verizon, T-Mobile, and U.S. Cellular, CSpire, GCI, SouthernLinc, and Cellcomm The current cost for WPS subscribers includes a one-time $10 activation fee (typically waived by the carrier); a $2-$4 monthly service fee, depending on the carrier; and a 75 cents-per-minute charge for WPS calls. WPS charges are in addition to the carrier's basic cellular service plan.

Additional service information and application procedures are available on the WPS website at.

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[2] Emergency Communications Forum, Department of Homeland Security, Office of Emergency Communications, Volume 15, spring 2015.

Telecommunications Service Priority

OEC also manages and operates the Telecommunications Service Priority (TSP) program, which is mandated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Following hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and other natural or man-made disasters, telecommunications service vendors often experience a surge in requests to restore and/or install vital voice and data circuits. Through TSP, any federal, state, tribal, territorial, or local entity, as well as private industry or foreign government that has telecommunications services supporting a public safety mission is eligible to receive priority restoration services or initial installation.

The TSP program has been applied to more than 85,000 public safety agencies across multiple critical infrastructure sectors. Currently, state and local organizations recognize the importance of TSP as it relates to contingency, and make up the largest constituency for TSP restoration assignments. For example, in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, TSP helped facilitate the rapid restoration of damaged circuits and processed more than 200 requests to install new circuits for the response community.

The cost for TSP is established by individual state public utility commissions and, as a result, varies from state to state. However, the typical costs consist of a one-time fee (an average of $100) to start the service and approximately $3.00 per month to maintain it. Additional information on the TSP Program is available online.

OEC priority telecommunications services remain instrumental in maintaining mission-critical voice communications before, during, and after emergencies and large-scale events. As communications capabilities move forward into the 21st century, it is critical that public safety officials continue to train on the implementation and use OEC's priority services. Through these programs, OEC continues to ensure that first responders and emergency personnel continue to have access to reliable, resilient communications capabilities, even when disaster strikes.