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Report to the Legislature on School 911 Issues
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This report is submitted per the requirement found in Act 178, Sec. 34, to follow up on the status of schools transmitting their building and room location information as part of a call to 9-1-1.

The Enhanced 911 Board undertook an initiative to encourage schools that were not already providing building and room location to begin to do so. Our initial survey, conducted over the summer and fall of 2013, found that few schools were currently doing so. As we were preparing to do the survey, we spent some time with the Legislature and obtained some funding that would enable us to cover certain costs associated with necessary changes. To be sure, we never intended to provide all of the funding that might be required, and ultimately, it is up to each school (just as it is for each private entity that has its own phone switch) to determine whether and when to comply with this request.

We knew going into this project that there was likely a number of ways that schools could provide that information. The solution for each school varied, as did the cost. We tried to time this initiative so that schools could begin to look into their individual circumstances and come up with a solution that could be funded through the E-Rate program as well as the regular budget process. Finally, we engaged Marian Kenseth, who has had a long working relationship with many of the schools, to help ensure that the options available to schools were understood, and with her assistance ran a series of poorly attended workshops on the Education Agency learning network.

In late 2013, we were asked to ask the Attorney General's office for a legal interpretation of the underlying statute we rely on as authority to seek compliance with the requirement to send both the building address and room number with all 911 calls placed on landline phones. The AG's office determined that the statutory language was ambiguous. That opinion was interpreted by some to mean that there was no requirement to provide both street and building and room location information as part of a call to 911. We were unsuccessful in gaining support to clarify the statute.

From our perspective, this remains an important public safety issue, and we will continue to support voluntary compliance. In an emergency, it will not always be possible for the person calling 911 to correctly identify their location. Not having good location information will slow down the response time which could carry unacceptable consequences.

There are some schools that are in the middle of completing this work, and there are likely some schools working towards completion that we are not aware of. Nonetheless, given the number of schools in Vermont, it is clear that more work needs to be done.

The solutions to this problem range from simply cataloging room location and entering it into a data base (the first year costs of which this office offered to cover), to disconnecting the school phone switch and going back to renting phone lines from one of the telephone service providers in the state (the cost of which used to be fundable under the E-Rate program, more on that to follow), to the extreme example of having to replace a school's phone system. Small schools were most likely to be able to avail themselves of one of the first two options, while larger schools were more likely to need to replace their systems. But even in the more extreme case, there are arguably other reasons for undertaking this work that go beyond the need to provide address and room location information. Many schools put in their own phone switches years before this "requirement" came into being, and those systems are so old now it is hard to get spare parts to keep them operating. Because they were implemented before the Enhanced 9-1-1 statute was enacted, there is no way to go back and modify those older systems so they are capable of transmitting street address and room location.

We were provided \$10,000 in capital funding to help cover the first year costs for those schools that only need to create an account they can use to manage their own phone records. Because we had expended only a small portion of that funding, and based on the lack of activity, we returned the unused portion of capital funding. The Legislature provided other funding as part of the E911 budget that we still have available for those schools that only need to establish an account so they can manage their own records. As noted above, we have never had and do not expect to ever have all of the funding that may be required for every school to address this issue.

We recently learned that decisions have been made at the federal level regarding E-Rate funding. Depending on factors like the number of free and reduced school lunches and whether a school is located in a rural or urban setting, the E-Rate program provided at least a partial offset for voice phone services. The federal government is beginning a process to phase out support for basic phone services, as part of a two year experiment, but it is possible that the funding that was available a year ago to help offset the cost of making the transition to a new phone service will go away.

This office remains committed to assisting the schools as best we can. However, if there is going to be an overall solution it will require each school to commit to the planning and determine what solution best meets their needs, and not assume that each and every school in the State has to buy an expensive digital phone system.

We are grateful to those schools that have already completed this work. We hope that as those schools that have completed the work talk to others that have not completed this work and will provide information about costs and the level of effort required so that others may choose to comply. Absent voluntary compliance or a change in statute to clarify that this is a requirement, the 911 Board is without a mechanism to ensure this work is done.