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Contact: Sonya Carius, (800) 332-3911

National Emergency
Number Association 

Latest FCC Ruling Will Delay Needed Life-Saving 9-1-1 Services

Columbus, Ohio (September 16, 1999)—The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) is alarmed and disappointed with the recent ruling for cellular 9-1-1 calls. On September 15, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) modified its rules requiring life-saving location technology. In its ruling, the FCC extended compliance periods for phone manufacturers and wireless telephone companies to comply with the FCC's 1996 rule, which requires location information for 9-1-1 calls.

NENA President, William H. Hinkle, noted "after carefully reviewing the ruling, it is clear the FCC has attempted to accommodate industry and free competition here, but the real purpose of the 1996 rules were to promote public safety. The real losers in this ruling are the victims, and the hundreds—maybe thousands—of cellular callers who cannot be found because this technology is not in place." Hinkle continued, "we are upset because the technology exists today to start finding people. Getting this technology in place now, or sooner rather than later, should have been the focus of the FCC ruling."

Not only did the FCC allow for more time, the ruling also left unresolved serious technical issues that must be addressed before GPS-based technology can be implemented. In short, the ruling assumes that important industry standards that will be developed will allow digital phones with different digital technologies to use GPS-based technology. Additionally, the very common scenario of roaming callers that dial 9-1-1 will not be found under the FCC rules. The FCC is also assuming that analog phones and networks can be equipped to serve GPS-based handsets. That's a serious problem when more than 80 percent of the country is served by analog-only service.

"The lives of Americans should have been the only consideration behind the ruling," Hinkle emphasized. "Unfortunately, the FCC allowed itself to become overwhelmed in debates about technology. In 1996, the wireless industry and representatives from public safety agencies made an agreement that required location identification by the year 2001. This new ruling extends parts of that agreement to the year 2004, and likely beyond. With more than 100,000 cellular 9-1-1 calls daily, extending that deadline is unacceptable to us. Somehow, we have lost that these 100,000 calls are literally pleas for help in emergency situations. We need to remember that these calls are the difference between life and death—they are not faceless statistics," Hinkle concluded.

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