

Toddler Dies After 911 Call Over VoIP

Edmonton's emergency services have issued a warning about the use of voice-over-Internet-protocol (VoIP) phone service following the death of a Calgary toddler. Eighteen-month-old Elijah Luck died after his family called 911 over a VoIP phone and the ambulance was dispatched to their former home in Ontario instead of their current home in Calgary. It took two ambulances 40 minutes to get to him thanks to one ambulance being dispatched to the wrong city. The tragic death of 18-month-old Elijah Luck demonstrates the critical differences between the 911 services of traditional land-lines and phone companies that now use voice over Internet technology. Elijah Luck went into medical distress and his family made an emergency call for an ambulance. However thanks to the nomadic VOIP service they were using the emergency services were shown the wrong address information and dispatched an ambulance in Mississauga, Ontario, more than twenty-five-hundred miles away. Comwave says the Internet phone technology is transportable so there's no physical address attached to the numbers. Cellphones work better than "nomadic" connections -- like those used by VoIP phone providers Comwave and Vonage -- because emergency responders get a phone number and a location of the nearest cellphone tower, but are still more limited than landlines, said Terry Owen, director of technology services with the City of Edmonton's community services branch. Devon Card, branch manager of operational services for the City of Edmonton, said enhanced 911 -- available through fixed VoIP systems, like those offered by Shaw puts you through to an emergency communication centre in the same city as the call, and automatically provides the address and telephone number if the call is disconnected or the caller cannot speak. After waiting a half an hour for the ambulance the parents rang again from a landline and an ambulance arrived six minutes later, though the baby was pronounced dead upon reaching the Alberta Childrens Hospital. Fire rescue services spokeswoman Nikki Booth was not sure if delays have happened in Edmonton because of VoIP. "People need to be asking a lot of questions," Booth explained. In a press release, Card said it is up to the consumer to research how to access 911 with VoIP phones. "You don't want to find out about those limitations during an emergency. Consumers need to be asking questions so they have a full understanding of their service," Card said. Fixed landlines and VOIP services automatically route an emergency call to the nearest call centre. Nomadic VOIP services however do not always give the correct information and so, as in this case, the call can be routed to the wrong call centre and the emergency operator can be given the wrong address information. This is why many VOIP services, such as Skype, specifically give the disclaimer that they are not to be used for emergency calls. Paul Godin, a spokesperson for the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, said the CRTC is working on enhancing the service. The CRTC ruled in 2005 that phone providers must inform customers of limitations yearly. Comwave representative Allison George said that following the incident in Calgary, the company will now inform customers of limitations with 911 twice a year by e-mail, instead of just annually. The Canadian authorities are now looking at better ways to deal with nomadic VOIP services alongside making consumers more aware of the limitations of the service in an emergency context. According to the Vonage website, customers need to activate 911, and some customers cannot get even basic service. "You don't want to go into where does the fault lie? It's just so tragic." George said from Toronto. "It's more if you're a VoIP subscriber, please understand how this service differs and why. George said Comwave customers do not have the option of enhanced 911, and customers are asked to confirm location when on the phone with emergency services personnel. George said Comwave phones will not turn on until customers acknowledge limitations with 911. Standard wireline phone still offers the most reliable service where emergency dispatch operators instantly have your name and address even if you are unable to speak or get disconnected. "What we want people to do is make sure that they have a good, clear understanding of the phone service they subscribe to and what that looks like and how that can connect with 911," said Brochu. All phone companies in Canada are regulated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

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