

January 18, 2019

MEMORANDUM

To: Chair González and Members of the Gender Equity, Safe Communities, New Americans & Education Committee

From: Lise Kaye, Central Staff

Subject: December 2018 E911 System Outage

During the recent nationwide CenturyLink outage, Seattle's E911 dispatch centers (known as Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs) first lost 911 telephone connectivity on Thursday, December 27 at approximately 12:46 am. The system became operational at 1:18 am, with some reduced functions.¹ The second complete outage occurred at about 8:20 pm that same day and lasted until approximately 7:00 am Friday morning, December 28. CenturyLink initially determined the outages were caused by a hardware failure in its system; the company has 30 days to submit a Final Communications Outage Report to the Federal Communications Commission.²

Staff from the Seattle PSAPs and Seattle's Office of Emergency Management will brief the Committee on events during the outage and lessons learned, particularly the need for local and state E911 Continuity of Operations Plans and improved coordinated public messaging. Staff do not yet have a clear picture of the extent to which the outage delayed emergency responses and/or whether Century Link has a recoverable record of dropped calls. This memo provides brief background on the E-911 system and a summary of public notices provided to the community during the outage in preparation for your Committee briefing on January 23.

Background

Washington Military Department's Emergency Management Division manages Washington State's 911 services. The E911 program³ is funded by excise taxes from land line, wireless and Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) phones. The State distributes a portion of the excise taxes to counties. King County's E911 Program Office distributes a portion of the excise taxes to 12 PSAPs, which provide 911 call answering and dispatch services for local jurisdictions. Seattle operates two of these PSAPs: one within the Seattle Police Department (SPD), which handles the highest volume of calls in the County, and one at the Seattle Fire Department (SFD). Fire and emergency medical calls to the SPD PSAP are routed to the SFD PSAP, which then dispatches its emergency responders.

¹ During that interim period following the first outage on Thursday, December 27, the Seattle PSAPs experienced difficulties in connections with their language interpretation services and, intermittently, with call transfers.

² 4.11 C.F.R. Title 47

³ The "E" in "E-911" refers to more advanced telecommunications functions including automatic location identification, call transfers and call-back numbers.

Public Information

As shown in the following table, state and local agencies and media outlets sent a variety of alerts about the 911 outage. The alerts ranged from very brief notifications lacking alternative phone numbers to extensive lists of emergency phone numbers for multiple agencies. Individuals may have received duplicate and/or inconsistent messages from state and local agencies and media outlets. Those not signed up for County or city notifications or cell phones may not have been notified.

Time Sent	Organization	Message
8:55 pm, 12/27	Seattle PD via Twitter	<i>If you are having difficulty connecting to the Seattle 911 Center, please call 206 583-2111, 206 625-5011 or text 911. City of Seattle technicians continue to work with @CenturyLink representatives to ensure our 911 service remains uninterrupted.</i>
9:26 pm, 12/27	King County via Twitter	<i>If you have an emergency in King County, contact your local police or fire agency using their local ten-digit emergency number or use your cell phone to Text-to-911. (Subsequent messages provided and corrected emergency numbers for PSAPs in King County and the Washington State Patrol)</i>
9:49 pm, 12/27	King County to Media Outlets	<i>King County asks that you let your readers, viewers, and listeners know that the 9-1-1 system in Washington State is down at this time. No calls are getting through to the 9-1-1 centers, either on landlines or cell phones. People who are having an emergency in King County can call the ten-digit emergency number for the police or fire agency in their area on a landline or cell phone, or they can use Text-to-911 on their cell phone. There is no estimate for restoration of 9-1-1 service. No additional details are available at this time.</i>
10 pm, 12/27	AlertSeattle enrollees	<i>SPD AND SFD-Safety Alert-If you have an emergency and cannot connect to Seattle 911, please call 206 583-2111, 206 625-5011 or text 911. Seattle technicians are working on the matter.</i>
10:38 pm, 12/27	ALERT King County enrollees	<i>911 is down in Washington State. In an emergency contact your local police or fire agency. Check local media for more information and alternate phone numbers.</i>
11:30 pm, 12/27	State EMD to cell phones	<i>Widespread 911 outage in WA. In case of emergency, call local police or fire department.</i>
12/28	KIRO	<i>KIRO reported one emergency phone number for “King County” and “Unincorporated areas”, one number for “Eastside” and one for “South King County” as well as separate numbers for the cities of Bothell, Burien, Enumclaw, Issaquah, Redmond, Renton, Seattle, Snoqualmie/ North Bend and Woodinville. (King County encompasses all or part of 39 cities.)</i>
6:16 am, 12/28	KOMO	<i>KOMO reported emergency phone numbers for King County (outside Seattle), and the cities of Bellevue and Seattle and advised those whose area is not listed to “try calling your local non-emergency line.”</i>
12/28	KING5	<i>King5 reported emergency phone numbers to Western Washington PSAPs, to Police Departments for the Cities of Bothell, Enumclaw, Lake Forest Park, Issaquah, Redmond, Snoqualmie, Seattle, the Seattle Fire Department, the King County Sheriff’s Office (whose PSAP serves unincorporated King County and contracts with 10 cities), NORCOM (the PSAP for much of East King County) and Valley Communications (the PSAP for much of South King County.)</i>

cc: Kirstan Arestad, Central Staff Director