

FIND THE PHONE

The ECC's phone system, the internet and the phone company can all help in searches for cellular callers who don't identify their location.

By Joanie Best

What is the first question you ask when you answer an emergency phone call? It's the one thing you need to know to send help immediately: location. But in an age when 97% of Americans own a cell phone (according to a 2021 Pew Research Center report) calls can come from anywhere in the world.¹ If you don't know a caller's location, what is a public safety telecommunicator to do?

Your first thought may be to trace it. In most states, cell phone companies will not trace a phone's location without exigent circumstances, meaning a human life is in danger if the location of the phone and caller is not found. So what if it's not that type of call, but you hear enough background noise to know the person on the other end needs help? Here are some ways to find the location of a wireless phone when the caller unable to speak.

First, rebid your phone system's automatic location identification (ALI) screen. Rebidding, or retransmitting, narrows the area where the caller is possibly located. The accuracy of this method depends on service coverage in that area. In 1996, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implemented wireless enhanced 9-1-1 over two phases (wireless E9-1-1 phase 1 and wireless E9-1-1 phase 2.) When you answer the emergency call, it's in phase 1 and directs the location on your mapping screen to the nearest tower.

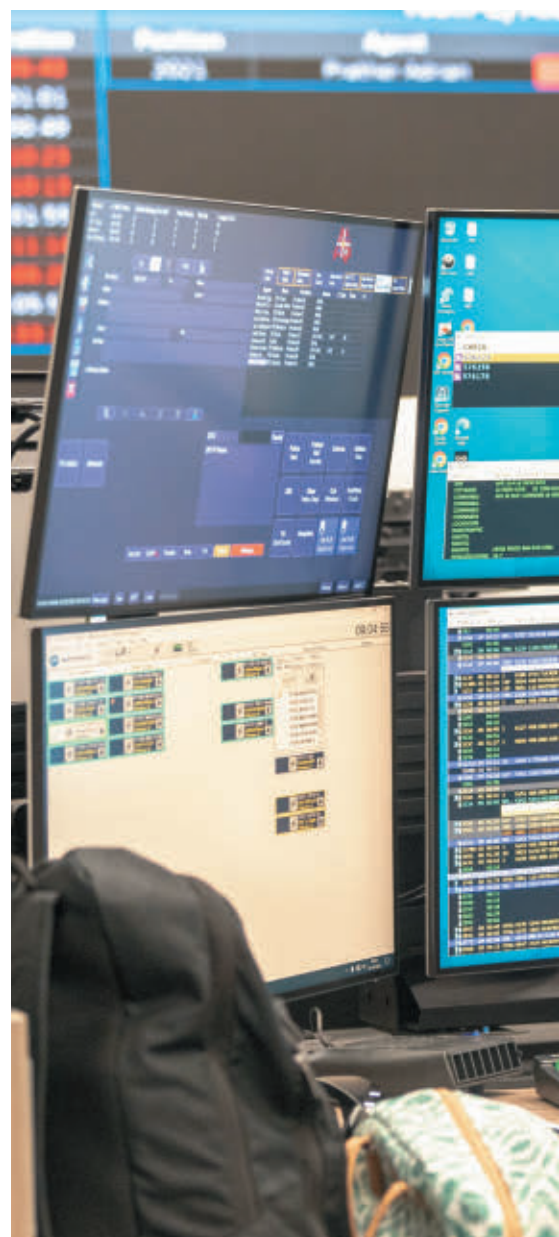
By retransmitting, the call location goes into phase 2 and provides the estimated longitude and latitude of the phone, making it easy to send first responders on their way to an area if not the exact location. In fall 2018 I answered a wireless 9-1-1 call, and all I could

hear was an active scuffle and a female voice begging for someone to stop hitting her. The caller could not answer my questions and left me on an open line. I began retransmitting the ALI over and over as my partner sent law enforcement to one of the busiest streets in town.

The plot on my map moved down the road with each rebid like it was in a vehicle. I stayed connected with the open line call for several minutes until it stopped at a local high school. It was Friday night, and there was a football game, which meant a lot of people. As officers arrived on the scene and checked behind buildings and alleyways, I heard one of them identify himself as an officer on the open line. The rebidding of the ALI screen quite possibly had saved this woman's life.

Phase 1 and phase 2 technology provides an estimated location, but it is not precise though certainly better than nothing.

While retransmitting your ALI screen, you're multitasking. As your screen reloads the next step is to run the phone number provided by the enhanced 9-1-1 phone system through your agency's records management system (RMS). Suppose your agency has had dealings with this phone number before, and the pertinent information was added to the call correctly. In that case, the RMS could pull



up names attached to that phone number or even a direct address.

From there your options to find your caller are almost limitless. I refer to this stage as the rabbit hole of identification. By searching a phone number, you could find the person's mother's, brother's, cousin's or aunt's name who could lead to your subject, but sometimes it takes a little more effort than just hitting submit or search in an RMS field.

Another option to trace an emergency could be by the IP address. If you received life or death information via texting, email, an app or another form, you could Google

an IP address, and the internet indicates a general area for the address.

Of course not all searches will be successful. Recently, one of my team members took a call from a suicide hotline stating a subject was threatening to overdose on medications. The suicide hotline called my center in Arkansas because the caller had given them our zip code. The hotline provided us with the IP address and told us that it was pinging in the Dallas, Texas, area five hours south. But their policy was to contact us because they were given the zip code. My teammate searched our mapping system and traced the cell phone through

the provider. She used clues of a location and IP address provided by the suicide hotline. My teammate called the area in Dallas where the IP was pinging and gave them the same information. To my knowledge, the caller has not been located.

Many of these applications are free to use; their companies offer free training on how to use them.

If none of the above actions produce results, follow your agency's policies and procedures to begin a trace on a wireless phone through a cellular phone company.

There will be times when you hit a brick wall with phone companies, but don't give up.

Knowing where your caller is can mean the difference between life or death.



ROBERT LEVY PHOTOGRAPHY

Ask teammates who may think of something you aren't considering.

Knowing where your caller is can mean the difference between life or death. In a perfect world, every emergency line you answer would be from a landline that automatically gives your caller's address. But we don't live in that world anymore. Most callers believe that you know exactly where they are the second their call is answered. If the caller doesn't give you their location at your request, try asking for it in a different manner. Express your desire to help them, but stress that you need them to help you with the location of

their emergency before a responder can be sent. Be sympathetic; nobody calls 9-1-1 on a good day. Remain calm and don't get frustrated, as that can only heighten the stress on an already stressful call.

With this being said, the technology and mapping world for public safety telecommunicators is ever-evolving.

NG9-1-1 technologies will provide us with options to visually see what the caller is explaining or even text you if it's unsafe for them to make a phone call. Telecommunicators will always be at the forefront of a response for help. ●

***Joanie Best** began her dispatching career at the Fort Smith Police Department in Arkansas in March 2008. She has been active in dispatch in one aspect or another since then and accepted the role of 911 Director of Communications for Crawford County, Arkansas, in June of 2021. She currently works in the private sector.*

REFERENCE

1. Pew Research Center. "Mobile Fact Sheet." 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

CDE EXAM #65183

1. What is the first question that should be asked when an emergency phone call is answered?
 - a. What is your emergency?
 - b. Who did it?
 - c. Where is your location?
 - d. Why did they do it?
2. Updating your phone system's automatic location identification (ALI) screen to narrow the mapped location of a caller using a cell phone is called _____.
 - a. Redo
 - b. Rebid
 - c. Rewind
 - d. Recognize
3. Google this information to help show a general area of an address.
 - a. House color
 - b. Phone ID
 - c. Pet name
 - d. IP address
4. If a telecommunicator fails to find a caller with technology and other methods _____ may be able to help.
 - a. The boss
 - b. A brother
 - c. Teammates
 - d. The sheriff
5. If all else fails from the provided resources, you should always follow your agency's _____ to begin a further trace of a location.
 - a. CAD commands
 - b. Policies
 - c. Event log
 - d. Warrant entry
6. What is the name and acronym for a program that can provide you an exact address of a landline emergency call?
 - a. Google maps GM
 - b. Wire taps WT
 - c. Computer Aided Dispatch CAD
 - d. Automatic Location Identification ALI
7. When attempting to establish the location of a caller, good strategies include
 - a. Aggressively demanding their address
 - b. Asking for their location in a variety of ways
 - c. Remaining calm without getting frustrated
 - d. Both b & c
8. What can you do if your caller doesn't automatically volunteer their location?
 - a. Ask in a different way
 - b. Repeat yourself calmly
 - c. Let them know you need their help to help them
 - d. All of the above
9. _____ technologies will provide us with options to visually see what the caller is explaining or even text you if it's unsafe for them to make a phone call.
 - a. Internet
 - b. NG9-1-1
 - c. Cell phone
 - d. RMS
10. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implemented Wireless Enhanced 911 over _____ phases.
 - a. 2
 - b. 8
 - c. 1
 - d. 4

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