



*Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors*

*Lee Holloway*  
*Chairman of the Board*

March, 2005  
For Immediate Release  
Contact: Chairman Lee Holloway 414-278-4261

**CLARIFYING THE DEBATE ON HOW WIRELESS 911  
CALLS ARE HANDLED IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY**

**Milwaukee, WI** – Dialing 911 for help is the most important phone call a person can make and every call must be treated as a life and death situation. That's why Milwaukee County government is committed to deploying the latest technology so that every distress call can be handled quickly and correctly. The County will soon join other communities in the State and throughout the country when enhanced 911 (E911) services will be fully operational.

Beginning this summer, when cell phone users dial 911 to request emergency services, the operator will be able to determine the owner's name, number and the caller's actual location to help the process of dispatching emergency service personnel. This is a critical service that is already available for 911 callers using landline phones and will undoubtedly be credit for saving lives.

**Public Safety Answering Point Designation**

While E911 service will be provided in Milwaukee County beginning in just a matter of months, City, State and County officials have begun a public debate over what governmental entity is best suited to answer 911 wireless calls in Milwaukee County. Due to technology limitations in routing cell phone calls, all wireless 911 calls originating in Milwaukee in Milwaukee County are currently answered by the Milwaukee County Sheriff's public safety answering point (PSAP).

The debate has intensified due to a State law requiring the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors to designate which governmental entity will serve as the (PSAP) for all wireless 911 calls in Milwaukee County. Along with this designation comes the opportunity to receive grant funding from the state to assist in upgrading existing 911 equipment to E911.

Recently, the Milwaukee County Board's Judiciary, Safety and General Services Committee designated the Milwaukee

County's Sheriff Department as Milwaukee County's PSAP for 911 cellular calls. This action was based in large part on the following considerations:

- The Sheriff's PSAP currently answers all wireless 911 calls and does a dependable job in transferring calls to other PSAPs as necessary.
- Available data suggests that the number of calls that require transfer to other PSAPs is minimized if the Sheriff initially receives all the calls.
- The Sheriff intends to complete the planned upgrade this summer to E911 service regardless of which PSAP is designated by the County.
- The Wireless 911 Fund may reimburse County taxpayers millions for funds already expended and future costs to complete the upgrade and provide the service countywide for the next three years.

This designation allows the Sheriff's Department to continue its function of answering all Milwaukee County wireless 911 calls while transferring calls to other municipal bodies as required.

### **Who should receive the Grant**

Currently, both the City of Milwaukee Police Department and the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department have beefed up their infrastructure with state-of-the-art communications equipment and are in the process of upgrading their PSAPs to E911 service. However, neither system is currently capable of pinpointing cellular calls' location. As a matter of public safety, whichever entity is given the PSAP designation and grant funding, clearly both the City and County will continue to expend tax dollars to upgrade their communications equipment.

The stance that the County Board is taking is that the fairest solution would be to use the grant funds to offset the cost of the E911 upgrade shared by all county taxpayers, not just those of one municipality. Clearly, this is appropriate since all County residents pay for and receive the benefits of these vital services.

### **Milwaukee County's Policy Issue: Regional governance / Future consolidation**

When drafting the E911 legislation, State officials encouraged the consolidation of public safety answering points by allowing only one designated PSAP in each county to receive grant funding. Milwaukee County, unlike some other counties, does not have a single, consolidated PSAP where all 911 calls are routed and all emergency services are dispatched. That's why many PSAPs, including the County and City of Milwaukee, will be upgrading to E911 technology so that they also know the cell phone caller's location when calls are transferred to them for dispatch. So the real policy issue is the need to develop one consolidated dispatch center to receive *all* 911 calls and dispatch emergency services countywide.

In designating the Sheriff as the County's PSAP, the County Board is simply taking the first step toward creating a regional E911 call center. If the County Board designated one municipality, it is unclear as to how issues such as service performance standards or service fees that might be charged to other local governments would be addressed in

a manner that affords all residents political representation.

It is important that a shared governance structure be fashioned before approving the transfer of a countywide service to a single municipality. In its present location in the Sheriff's Department, local governments can raise concerns about 911 wireless service issues to a county-wide elected Sheriff, County Executive or County Supervisor. That would not necessarily be the case if a single municipality were to be given the PSAP designation.

In the future, consolidation of public safety answering points can occur at either the municipal, county or regional level. But I believe that Milwaukee County government is currently the only logical entity to lead that debate because of its inherent shared governance structure that includes elected representation from all 19 local municipalities. Although the County Board is currently positioned to take the lead in the debate, that certainly doesn't preclude locating a consolidated call center in the future at a facility owned and operated by the City of Milwaukee or another governmental entity. But until a multi-jurisdictional agreement is in place, Milwaukee County is the right and proper choice.

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