

Are You Really a Priority to Your Wireless Carrier?

Article by Salvatore Cassano

I'm not a technologist, but I know that it's misleading when wireless carriers try to convince first responders that their network is always on. Does that mean it's always available? No. After all, the sun is always on, but it's not sunny every day. Always on is the price of admission to the modern world. Does your electric company brag that your electricity is always on? No, because it should be.

Priority access is critical

What first responders really need is to make sure that they have priority access to that network. Yes, citizens need to be able to use their phones to call their family members and friends during an emergency. But first responders have a right to be at the front of the line. After all, our work is to save everyone's families and friends. That's what makes emergency communication such a priority for first responders.

If I need something to help put out a fire and save lives, I want to make sure I have it right away—whether it's equipment, staffing, or communication. You can't wait for your team to show up to a disaster. And you can't wait for your cellphone to connect you to everyone you need to talk to in the middle of a tough, fast-moving situation. I want to be prioritized by my network, no matter if I am calling someone on another carrier or a landline.

Who gets priority?

It's important to know that wireless carriers define first responders differently. Some are strict, keeping the list short—police, fire, EMT, and related public-safety agencies (the kind that are likely to receive 911 calls). Others leave the door open wider to include commercial entities, such as drywall installers and landscaping companies. Restricting priority access to actual first responders makes sense.

So before you sign on to a wireless carrier, be sure to ask how they define priority access. Who gets it? And what does it really mean during an emergency? Because



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2010 to 2014. During his distinguished service, Cassano was honored five times for bravery and received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. He was instrumental in rebuilding the New York City Fire Department after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Cassano continues to serve as an advisor and consultant, applying his expertise to new challenges.

despite what some people believe, there isn't a dedicated network reserved exclusively for first responders. We have to make sure we're getting priority and preemption on existing wireless networks. We share the same public communication highway with citizens. But when a hairy situation comes up, first responders need to be at the very front of the pack, fast.

Emergency communication means interoperability

As the first responder community knows, many groups respond to an emergency, and we don't always share the same technology. That's just the way we work. But when it really matters, we need to be able to communicate across all networks, technologies and services. In technical terms, we need interoperability. Entire agencies shouldn't have to be on the same network to have priority with each other. That's just wrong. Services that allow cross-carrier priority are the right approach.

I was involved in early discussions about improving first responder communications after 9/11. The consensus was that anyone's device had to talk to everybody else's device, no matter what it was or what network it was on. That's not the way it's worked out in real life. Some carriers try to confine priority calls to their network alone. Others don't. Telling the difference means asking questions.

Look for interoperability

Before you sign a wireless contract, make sure that the provider is truly committed to interoperability—not just communication on their network. No matter what kind of discounts or deals they're offering, ask the critical question—during an emergency, can I talk to everyone? In an event where there are lots of agencies involved, interoperability is extremely important. It saves time, and it could save lives.

I can't even count how many agencies we had responding to Superstorm Sandy in 2012—city, state, Federal, the National Guard. And I can't stress enough how important it was for all of us to be able to get through to each other. Real public-safety communication comes down to being able to connect all the critical responders, no matter what.

Your wireless network isn't just technology—it's people

It's important that all public-safety agencies realize that their wireless carrier should provide priority access—not just to their network—but also to their people and expertise. If I call my wireless carrier with a problem, I want them to come in with a solution. Not a discount or an offer. Your carrier should provide an expert contact who meets with you on a regular basis. Someone honest who comes in with ideas that help, not just sales pitches.

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Making your ongoing needs a priority

Finally, your wireless carrier needs to meet your needs today, but also have a vision of the near future, so you can take advantage of the latest technologies. Again, questions help draw out the facts. Are they investing heavily in their network, and keeping it safe with the latest security? Are they offering 5G to first responders? Can they help you make new capabilities enabled by 5G, such as high-def video and situational awareness, part of your work?

Like first responders, your wireless partner needs to be looking ahead for new ideas and innovations—the kind that can streamline communication and help all of us do our jobs better. Your wireless carrier should make you and your needs a priority—now and in the future. So you'll be ready for whatever challenge comes next.