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CSEC and ECAC's Roles in the 9-1-1 Federal Grant Project

The federal grant program is good news for the State of Texas and is only the second time ever that a federal grant has been given for 9-1-1 funds.

The 9-1-1 Federal Grant Program was created by the U.S. Departments of Transportation and Commerce to fund roughly $110 million to states. States will have the opportunity to modernize 9-1-1 call centers and enhance current technologies specifically for Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1).

"This is positive for the nation and Texas," Commission on State Emergency Communications (CSEC) Executive Director Kelli Merriweather said. "All the 9-1-1 entities in Texas have common goals and objectives that we can help meet through this opportunity."

The 9-1-1 Grant Program will last a period of four years and the federal agencies will distribute grant funds to eligible states based on population and public road mileage. CSEC has been charged as the state agency overseeing the federal grant for Texas. With the help of the Emergency Communications Advisory Committee (ECAC), CSEC will compile all the grant requests for all the 9-1-1 entities that submit an application. CSEC's Executive Director will serve as the State 911 Coordinator and essentially be the communicator between the federal government and the ECAC.

The ECAC is comprised of two individuals from each of the different 9-1-1 entities in Texas. There are two individuals who represent the Regional Planning Commissions, two individuals that represent the Emergency Communications Districts and two individuals who represent the Municipal Emergency Communications Districts.

The ECAC meets regularly to coordinate the implementation of NG9-1-1 and to provide input regarding the current federal grant opportunity.

In the first part of the grant process, ECAC reviewed the initial application packages and the required certifications.

CSEC received about a dozen grant requests that the ECAC will request additional details on to move forward with the grant. For the second part of the grant, eligible applicants will have to submit a much more detailed package with a project plan, a project budget and a supplemental project budget.

The ECAC will be charged with reviewing the requests and making decisions on what requests meet criteria for the grant funds to move forward. They will help ensure 90 percent of grant funds may be used for the direct benefit of PSAPs and involve integrated telecommunications services. The other 10 percent of grant funds will be used to assist in administrating the grant.

The availability of the federal grant program is excellent news for Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG911). One of the biggest challenges for many entities is the amount of funds available to transition to NG911. 9-1-1 entities have expressed concerns with transitioning to NG911 due to the costs of equipment and other needed upgrades, but thanks to the federal grant project, some of these costs will be alleviated.

Challenges and Rewards of Implementing Text to 9-1-1

"Text-to-911 implementation is making great progress."

– Vonda Payne, CSEC

"Troubleshooting on the network side to ensure text-to-911 works is important."

– Juan Chapa LRGVDC

The need for text-to-911 continues to increase each day in the deaf and hard of hearing community. Their reliance on TTY devices is becoming less as technology continues to evolve. Text-to-911 is also an important resource for individuals in situations where, if they were to speak out loud, their safety could be compromised.

The Commission on State Emergency Communications (CSEC) 9-1-1 Program has been working on implementing text-to-911 services with the Regional Planning Councils (RPCs) since 2014 and has been making great progress. While there are still some technical challenges for Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) in getting text-to-911 enabled, many of the initial issues have been resolved.

"There were some concerns from a few PSAPs about possible increase in workloads," Project Manager Vonda Payne said. "Since then, several RPCs have enabled text-to-911 and have had great success."

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has rules in place that require wireless providers to enable text-to-911 in PSAPs that request the service. The FCC has given providers up to six months to enable this texting feature. CSEC will continue to work with all RPCs to ensure they are capable to receive texts by the end of Fiscal Year 2019.

Each RPC has had its own unique challenges and success stories when implementing text. Concho Valley Council of Governments and Permian Basin Regional Planning Commission both agree that one of their most challenging text-to-911 issues is how they will take texts in Spanish. Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council's (LRGVDC) Juan Chapa said other challenges with texting have included texts potentially being routed to the wrong PSAPs making for long response times.

"We potentially need to upgrade to routers that can support texting to help with this issue," Chapa said. "Troubleshooting on the network side to ensure text-to-911 works is important too."

There have also been success stories. In North Central Texas Council of Governments last year, a woman texted 9-1-1 in what started out as a simple "help". Through text messages, the woman was able to convey to the 9-1-1 call-taker that she was on I-30 in an RV and she was shot three times. The woman had been abducted and was reaching out to 9-1-1 for help. Because of text-to-911 services, this woman's life was saved.

In LRGVDC, a similar instance occurred where a young lady texted-to-911 for assistance during her abduction and was able to receive help. It is stories like these that show text-to-911 is helping save lives.

Out of the 299 PSAPs in the CSEC program, 208 PSAPs are capable of receiving text-to-911 services. This accounts for approximately 69% of the program.

"Text-to-911 implementation within the CSEC program is making great progress. All RPC 9-1-1 programs are required to have text-to-911 deployed," Payne said.

Implementing Text to 9-1-1 cont.

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What resources are available to RPCs?

Since 2017, CSEC has made available tools to help RPCs educate the public on Text-to-911 services. These resources can be found in the Text-to-911 toolkit and include:

• Text to 9-1-1 Brochure

• Text to 9-1-1 Press Release Template

• Text to 9-1-1 PSA

With these tools, RPCs can help educate the public on text-to-911 services through email, newsletters, mail-outs and social media. To view all the toolkit resources, visit the CSEC website under the 9-1- tab and click on Text to 9-1-1.

"Short Message System (SMS), or what we now know as text, is going to be replaced by Real Time Text (RTT) because this is a good solution for the deaf and hard of hearing community." – Kevin Rohrer, CSEC

What is the future of text-to-911 with transition to Next Generation 9-1-1?

Even though text-to-911 is not fully implemented yet throughout the program, there are already changes on the horizon in the way texts will be received at the PSAPs. The newest form of texting being utilized is Real Time Text (RTT). RTT is a text-based form of communication where each text character will appear on the receiving device as it is being typed on the sending device. This will allow for a more conversational flow of communication. Also, with RTT a person does not have to press "send" for the text to reach the call-taker.

In 2016, the FCC amended its rules to allow IP-based wireless carriers and manufacturers to support RTT and set rules in place for transition from TTY to RTT. Wireless carriers and manufacturers will need to enable users to initiate, send, transmit, receive and display RTT communications so that they are in accordance with the FCC's rules.

"Short Message System (SMS), or what we now know as text, is going to be replaced by RTT because this is a good solution for the deaf and hard of hearing community," CSEC Chief Technical Officer Kevin Rohrer shared. "It works as an application on your phone that directly connects you to a call-taker much like instant messaging."