



By Martha K. Carter

# 9-1-1: Nearing 50 Years of Dependable Emergency Assistance

**F**eb. 16, 2018, will mark 50 years since the first 9-1-1 call was placed in Haleyville, Alabama. In the decades since, 9-1-1 has become one of the most well-known brands of all time. Children are taught at the earliest possible age to call 9-1-1 in an emergency. And the people who answer these calls embody one of the most special, life-saving professions in the world. I know this from my own experience having worked in the 9-1-1 profession for over 29 years.

People call 9-1-1 in their most desperate, dangerous and scary moments. If you are fortunate, you will never need to call. But if you must, you are connected to a highly-trained, calm voice, which provides life-saving instruction and ensures that first responders arrive as quickly and safely as possible.

In fact, the 9-1-1 system is so second-nature and reliable that it is easy to underappreciate. The 9-1-1 professionals, who answer your calls, dispatch responders, and protect lives and property, are not often seen on TV or in the movies. They undergo extensive training, may work 12-hour shifts, and at any moment's notice become immersed into an emergency, such as to coach a parent through life-saving infant CPR, or to talk a person through suicidal tendencies. They also warn approaching responders of any dangers, coordinate incident response, and serve as a lifeline to injured police and firefighters. They finish one call, often without closure or knowledge of outcomes, and must be ready to answer the next call. Although it takes a very special kind of person to do this job, they are continuously exposed to a high level of stress that is hard to imagine.

The occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first 9-1-1 call is a great opportunity to raise awareness and celebrate the amazing work that 9-1-1 professionals from every corner of the U.S. perform every day. They are true heroes—the first of the first responders—at times the only and best hope to save a life.

The 50th anniversary is an opportune time to confront the fact that 9-1-1 profoundly lags behind in technology. It may come as a great surprise to many that as dependable and life-saving as the 9-1-1 system is, it is essentially based on the same technology of many decades ago. The network itself relies upon technology that was long ago abandoned by just about every other commercial and critical infrastructure industry.

Today's wireless communications options available to the public vastly exceed what's available at 9-1-1 centers. This is why, despite public expectations to the contrary, 9-1-1 can still only accept basic voice calls and, in some cases, limited texts (always call if you can; text if you can't). Sending photos, videos or other data to 9-1-1 is rarely possible, and we are nowhere close to such a capability in a uniform manner throughout the country.

This means that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary should also be a call to action. We need to modernize our 9-1-1 systems and prepare 9-1-1 professionals to meet the challenges of these new technologies. One way in which APCO is trying to assist our nation's 9-1-1 professionals is through the release of the Project 43 report, *Broadband Implications for the PSAP*. The goal of Project 43 is to help public safety telecommunicators, PSAPs, PSAP directors, 9-1-1 authorities, elected and appointed officials, and others in the public safety community better leverage existing technology capabilities and prepare for the evolving broadband communications technologies that will impact PSAP operations and, at the same time, improve support to field responders.

The gulf between the current status of 9-1-1 and today's state-of-the-art commercially available communications is so vast that it requires action by Congress to provide the funding needed to close this gap.

APCO has been a leader in seeking to raise awareness of the protective roles that 9-1-1 professionals play and secure federal funding to modernize the 9-1-1 system.

But what it all comes down to is the professional workforce that is there to help every day, every hour, every holiday, and throughout any disaster that may impact them and their families as well. As we celebrate this milestone, let's be sure to thank those "behind the headsets" for their service. ●

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