

Senate Bill 1250

911 Emergency Reliability and Public Safety Act

Senator McGuire

Summary

Imagine being in an emergency situation, picking up your phone to call 911, and having no service or dial tone. Unfortunately, millions of rural Californians are faced with that reality several times a year.

Major cities can have close to four million residents, and are therefore covered by federal reporting thresholds when there is a data or 911 outage. However, hundreds of communities across the Golden State are sparsely populated, which means they will never reach the threshold for federal reporting requirements. In an emergency or catastrophic situation, lack of access to emergency services can have significant public safety ramifications on these smaller towns and communities.

Over the past few months rural communities were affected by several service outages resulting in 911 call centers going offline. These outages did not reach the federal Network Outage Reporting System (NORS) thresholds, therefore telephone utilities were not required to communicate with local and statewide emergency officials. SB 1250 is simple; require telecommunications providers to report rural 911 outages to the appropriate public safety agencies.

Background

Public Utilities Code Section 451 states in part: “Every public utility shall furnish and maintain such adequate, efficient, just, and reasonable service, instrumentalities, equipment, and facilities, including telephone facilities, as defined in Section 54.1 of the Civil Code, as are necessary to promote the safety, health, comfort, and convenience of its patrons, employees, and the public.”

The Federal Telecommunications Commission (FCC) currently requires that outages that last 30 minutes and have the potential to affect 900,000 user minutes to be reported through the NORS system. This threshold is high, which means rural and some suburban communities never qualify for the reporting standards.

Problem

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has stated due to “sparse population, service outages in these [rural] areas often do not rise to the NORS reporting threshold.” 911 is a core aspect of our nation's emergency response and disaster preparedness system. While the PUC

and FCC have a shared responsibility to oversee all components of 911 services, there is currently no requirement that directs telecommunication carriers to report outages that fall below the federal threshold.

The FCC recently validated the importance of telecommunications reliability when it stated broadband internet service has “steadily shifted from an optional amenity to a core utility” and is now “taking its place alongside water, sewer, and electricity as essential infrastructure for communities.” The need to treat telecommunications as a “core utility” could not be more apparent to rural customers such as: residents, first responders, courts, local governments, hospitals, airports, banks, schools and local businesses all of which are most impacted by the loss of 911 service.

Failure to report 911 service outages can wreak havoc on rural communities, and put the public's safety at risk. Previous 911 outages along the North Coast have resulted in ambulances needing to be staged at busy intersections, an inability to access electronic patient medical records and court documents, debit and credit card transactions could not be processed, cancelled college classes. Additionally, the U.S. Coast Guard was required to fly their entire Northern territory due to federal mandates with no knowledge of when service would be restored.

Solution

To adequately provide rural residents the public safety they deserve, SB 1250 requires telecommunications carriers to report outages in rural areas of the state.

SB 1250 requires carriers to:

- Inform the CPUC, county and state Office of Emergency Service (OES) offices within 30 minutes of outages that last 30 minutes or longer in duration, or have the potential to affect 75,000 user minutes in rural areas of the state and;
- Provide the CPUC and Cal OES a secondary more detailed report within 120 minutes and;
- Provide a detailed summary of the outage to the CPUC within 20 days, and what steps are being taken to avoid similar outages in the future.

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