

TWO-WAY VOIP SERVICES MUST PROVIDE ACCESS TO EMERGENCY CALL SERVICES

As innovative communications services such as those providing telephony-like services over the internet are introduced, it is vital that they provide emergency access to police, fire and ambulance assistance. From 2 November 2007, providers of voice over internet protocol (VoIP) two-way services are obliged to provide free-of-charge calls to emergency call service numbers.

Many VoIP services already have free-of-charge access for emergency calls, but the changes mean that all providers of two-way VoIP services must provide access to the Triple Zero (000) emergency call number and the text-based relay service emergency number (106) for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. Two-way VoIP services are services that can make calls to and receive calls from a public switched telephone network, including dial-in and dial-out services.

To alert emergency call service operators to ask callers for location information, those VoIP services must

also be flagged in the Integrated Public Number Database (IPND), a national database of all listed and unlisted public telephone numbers and relevant customer details.

There are various models for providing telephony-like services over the internet, but some involve technical solutions that can make it more difficult to provide access to emergency call services or reliable calling line identification information. Consumers need to be aware that some VoIP services currently have limited or no connectivity to the emergency call number.

The changes followed extensive consultation with carriers, VoIP providers, emergency service organisations and consumer groups. In addition, ACMA and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) recently wrote to more than 40 Australian providers of VoIP services, urging them to find technical solutions so that all users of VoIP services can have

access to the emergency call numbers.

Emergency call services are operator-assisted services designed to connect callers to an emergency service organisation in a life-threatening or time critical situation. ACMA regulates emergency call services through the *Telecommunications (Emergency Call Service) Determination 2002*.

Australia's primary emergency call service number is Triple Zero (000), which can be dialled from any fixed or mobile phone. There are also two secondary emergency call service numbers—112, which is available from all GSM mobile phones and 106, which connects to the text-based relay service. All calls to the emergency numbers, whether from fixed, mobile or payphones, are free of charge.

Emergency calls are initially handled by emergency call persons. The *Telecommunications (Emergency Call Person) Determination 1999* specifies Telstra as the emergency call person for 000 and 112 and Australian

Communication Exchange Ltd for 106. Emergency call persons determine from the caller which emergency service is required and establish the caller's location using information from the IPND and the caller. The call is then switched to the answer point for the requested emergency service.

The amendments implement recommendations in DCITA's 2005 report, *Examination of Policy and Regulation relating to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Services*, which is on the DCITA website (www.dcita.gov.au).

The *Telecommunications (Emergency Call Service) Amendment Determination 2007 (No. 1)* and accompanying explanatory statement are on the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to For licensees & industry: Licensing & regulation > Telecommunications: Telecommunications regulation > Voice over internet protocol (VoIP) > Emergency Call Service and VoIP Services).

Voice Outlook Project coordinating VoIP regulation

While the emergence of voice over internet protocol (VoIP) services as an alternative to traditional telephony has offered consumers increased choice, it has raised new issues for the regulators and the industry. Some of these were addressed in late 2005 in the *Examination of Policy and Regulation relating to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Services* report by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA).

As part of its implementation of the report's recommendations, ACMA introduced a new 0550 numbering scheme for location-independent communications services and took steps to ensure VoIP users have free access to emergency services. VoIP services are also to be flagged in the

Integrated Public Number Database to indicate to emergency service operators that they may need to ask the caller for location information.

ACMA has now established a Voice Outlook Project to coordinate and develop regulation for longer-term issues related to voice and other services being offered on IP-based next generation networks. The project team will coordinate ACMA's work on regulation and compliance issues, and work with DCITA and other government agencies on the future of voice service regulation.

ACMA has also been working closely with the industry body, Communications Alliance, on matters such as VoIP quality of service, interconnection and information provision. A key concern for

Communications Alliance is ensuring that VoIP customers are provided with accurate and comprehensive information by their service providers.

Communications Alliance has recently published a booklet—*So you want a VoIP phone service?*—which outlines a step-by-step process to help prospective customers. It covers issues such as capacity of internet access, types of service, emergency services access and service quality. Communications Alliance has also prepared a *VoIP Service Provider Guide*, which provides service providers with answers to the questions raised in the customer booklet. Both publications are on the Communications Alliance website at www.commsalliance.com.au. ACMA provides regulatory information for

VoIP service providers on its website at www.acma.gov.au (go to Licensing & regulation > Telecommunications regulation > Voice over internet protocol (VoIP)).

