DHS and FCC Offer Excellent Priority Communications Programs for Public Safety

NPSTC is a federation of organizations whose mission is to improve public safety communications and interoperability through collaborative leadership.

On April 15, two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, injuring hundreds and killing three spectators. Cell phone service was understandably overwhelmed as those present tried to determine the safety of their loved ones, although texting and messaging continued to be available.

Getting calls through during an emergency like this one is essential for 911 call centers, police, fire, EMS, healthcare providers, critical infrastructure providers, and key leaders to carry out their duties. There are three excellent priority communications programs in to help ensure that these vital calls get through the network and that telecommunications services are restored or added on a priority basis. The programs, offered by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in conjunction with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should be an important aspect of any communications reliability strategy--especially for those who rely on telecommunications services to effectively respond to emergencies on a daily basis. These programs provide national security and emergency preparedness services that should be used in an emergency.[1]

Who Should Enroll? You should enroll in these programs if your organization is a federal, state, tribal, and local police department, fire department, public safety answering point or 9-1-1 call center, EMS entity, essential healthcare provider or any other organization that uses telecommunication services necessary for the public health, safety, and maintenance of law and order.

Wireless Priority Service (WPS) is a federal program that authorizes cellular communications service providers to prioritize calls over wireless networks. Participation in the WPS program is voluntary. Participating service providers typically deploy WPS in stages until service is available in most coverage areas and functionality has reached full operating capability.

Authorized users dial *272 on a WPS-enabled device to receive calling queue priority. WPS calls do not preempt calls in progress, but provide priority status over cellular communications networks. [To get priority status over the wireline communications network, you need to use the Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS). WPS and GETS can be used in combination program.]

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[1] Source: www.fcc.gov

The FCC sets the rules and policies for the WPS program; the National Communications System (NCS), a part of DHS, manages the WPS program. The WPS program is in effect **all the time**--it is not contingent on a major disaster or attack taking place.

WPS is widely available from Alltel, AT&T (formerly Cingular Wireless), Cellular South, Edge Wireless, SouthernLINC, Sprint Nextel, Sprint PCS, T-Mobile, and Verizon Wireless.

Why should I get WPS? If you rely on cellular communications services on a daily basis to perform critical national security and emergency preparedness functions, including those areas related to safety, maintenance of law and order, and public health, you need WPS. By dialing *272 on your WPS enabled device, your call receives a calling queue priority over regular calls, thereby greatly increasing the probability (90%) that your cellular call will get through the network, even with congestion.

This program can be extremely beneficial during a major disaster or attack in which the telecommunications infrastructure is damaged and the lives and property of the American public is most at risk.

How do I enroll? By filling out an online application and a point of contact for your organization. In your application, you will need to certify that your mission meets national security and emergency preparedness requirements as set forth in the WPS program information. If your organization qualifies, the WPS Program Office will contact your cellular communications service provider and complete the process. WPS is an added feature to your phone; the software changes necessary are handled by the WPS Program Office. You do not need to do anything with your phone or take it to your cellular communications service provider.

What does it cost? A one-time activation fee of $10, along with a monthly fee of $4.50, and charges of 75 cents per minute apply to WPS.

[Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS)](#) is a federal program that prioritizes calls over wireline networks. Users receive an access card (GETS card), which has both the universal GETS access number and a Personal Identification Number (PIN). [To get priority status over cellular communications networks, you need to use the WPS) program. GETS and WPS can be used in combination.] The NCS, a part of DHS, manages the WPS program. The GETS program is also in effect **all the time**--it is not contingent on a major disaster or attack taking place.

Why should I sign up? If you rely on wireline communications services on a daily basis to perform critical national security and emergency preparedness functions, including those areas related to safety, maintenance of law and order, and public health, you need WPS. By using your GETS card number, your call receives a calling queue priority over regular calls, thereby greatly increasing the probability (90%) that your wireline call will get through the network, even with congestion.

How do I enroll? By filling out an online application and providing a point of contact for your organization. In your application, you will need to certify that your mission meets national security and emergency preparedness requirements as set out in the GETS program information. If your organization qualifies, the GETS Program Office will send GETS cards to you.

What does it cost? There is no cost to apply or to obtain a GETS card. A charge of 7 to 10 cents a minute applies to all calls made through the GETS.

[Telecommunications Service Priority (TSP)](#) is an FCC program that directs telecommunications service providers (e.g., wireline and wireless phone companies) to give preferential treatment to users enrolled in the program when they need to add new lines or have their lines restored following a disruption of service, regardless of the cause. The FCC sets the rules and policies for the TSP program; the NCS, a part of DHS, manages the TSP program. The TSP program is in effect all the time--it is not contingent on a major disaster or attack taking place. Federal sponsorship is required to enroll in the TSP program.

Why should I get TSP? If you rely on telecommunications services on a daily basis to perform critical national security and emergency preparedness functions, including those areas related to safety, maintenance of law and order, and public health, you need TSP. It is an insurance policy of sorts: by enrolling your critical communication lines in the program, by law (FCC regulations), your telecommunication service provider must restore your lines or add new lines according your priority status level. Your telecommunications service provider **must** take these actions **before** it can service any of its non-TSP enrolled customers.

This program can be extremely beneficial during a major disaster or attack in which the telecommunications infrastructure is damaged and the lives and property of the American public is most at risk. In such circumstances, telecommunications service providers' restoration crews are often overextended and only those customers enrolled in the TSP program will have their communications services restored in a timely manner.

There are five TSP priority levels. Federal, state, tribal, and local police departments, fire departments, EMS units, and similar entities qualify for Level 3 under communication services necessary for the public health, safety, and maintenance of law and order. The higher priority levels, Levels 1 and 2, include National Security leadership and certain military communications lines. Very few circuits receive a TSP priority Level 1 or Level 2 assignment. If an organization does not enroll its circuits in the TSP program, its telecommunications service provider cannot restore those lines until it has restored all TSP lines in priority levels 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

How do I enroll? By filling out an online application and, if you are not a federal entity, by having your federal sponsor approve your application.