

## **CONSUMER ALERT**

### **MIKE COX ATTORNEY GENERAL**

The Attorney General provides Consumer Alerts to inform the public of unfair, misleading, or deceptive business practices, and to provide information and guidance on other issues of concern.

#### **INTERNET PHONE SERVICE ("VOIP") WILL YOU BE ABLE TO REACH 9-1-1 IN AN EMERGENCY?**

A new kind of phone service heavily advertised in Michigan offers inexpensive "Voice Over the Internet" telephone calling, also known as "VoIP." VoIP technology allows you to make telephone calls using a broadband Internet connection instead of a regular phone line. While VoIP may offer less expensive calling, consumers need to educate themselves before replacing their traditional telephone service with VoIP. There are many important differences between VoIP and traditional telephone services, including some that are less than obvious.

One of the most important differences relates to emergency 9-1-1 service. Some VoIP service providers may have limitations to their 9-1-1 service. For example, when a person calls 9-1-1 from a wireline telephone, emergency service providers automatically know the caller's location and can direct the correct emergency personnel to that location even if the caller is not able to provide an address. This is not always true for 9-1-1 calls placed from an Internet-based phone. Because VoIP services can be used wherever you travel, as long as a broadband Internet connection is available, the location of the caller cannot automatically be determined. Routing of 9-1-1 calls is based on the address the customer registers with the VoIP provider, rather than the address from which the call is actually made, if they are different.

In addition, VoIP service may not work during a power outage, or when the Internet connection fails or becomes overloaded.

In May 2005, the Federal Communication Commission adopted rules requiring providers of interconnected VoIP services to supply 9-1-1 emergency calling capabilities to their customers as a mandatory feature of the service by November 28, 2005. "Interconnected" VoIP services are VoIP services that allow a user to receive and make calls to the traditional telephone network. Under the FCC rules, interconnected VoIP providers must:

- Deliver all 9-1-1 calls to the local emergency call center;
- Deliver the customer's call back number and location information where the emergency call center is capable of receiving it; and
- Inform their customers of the capabilities and limitations of their VoIP 9-1-1 service.

#### **Tips for VoIP subscribers:**

- Provide your accurate physical address to your VoIP service provider to ensure that emergency services can quickly be dispatched to your location. Be familiar with your VoIP service provider's procedures for updating your address and promptly update address information in the event of a change.
- Verify that you can access 9-1-1 with your phone by checking your VoIP provider's Web site. DO NOT dial 9-1-1 to test your access to the emergency response network.
- Be sure to activate the emergency calling feature of your service plan, if applicable.
- Have a clear understanding of any limitations of your 9-1-1 service.
- Inform children, babysitters, and visitors about your VoIP service and relevant limitations.

- Consider keeping a land line phone to access 9-1-1 emergency services.

Valuable information about VoIP, including how it works, the advantages and limitations, and 9-1-1 service, is available on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Web site:  
<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/voip.html> or [www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/voip911.html](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/voip911.html).