

# LIFELINES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

## Client:

U.S. Department of Homeland Security/  
National Communications System

## Challenge:

Develop a service that allows emergency calls to go through, even when a crisis or natural disaster overwhelms local land and wireless networks.

## Solution:

GETS and WPS, priority telecommunications services that integrate local, cellular, long-distance and federal networks to bypass congestion for authorized callers.

## Results:

Even under high levels of network damage, destruction and congestion, federal, state and local emergency managers and first responders can place emergency calls within seconds.

## For more information:

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## Priority Phone Service: A Lifeline for First Responders

When a tornado ripped through Enterprise, Alabama, in March 2007, every second was critical for first responders on the scene.

"We knew we had children trapped in the local high school," recalls John James, a fire service development coordinator for the area. "We needed to call in the National Guard and also contact our employees for deployment. Because the power had been damaged, our normal phone lines were failing."

His team turned to GETS, the Government Emergency Telecommunications Service, which CSC helped develop, implement and manage for the National Communications System. GETS provides priority telephone service for 200,000 national security and emergency preparedness users in times of crisis.

## Emergency responders get priority

"Without GETS, I truly believe we would have been seriously delayed in getting anything accomplished, which could have meant failure for our lifesaving mission," James says. "Had I not been able to access a landline phone through GETS and establish direct contact with the field teams, we would have had to wait hours until the main telecommunications systems were able to handle the call volume."

GETS, and its cellular telephone companion, the Wireless Priority Service (WPS), are nationwide priority telephone services intended for use during high network congestion, as in a natural disaster or terrorist attack, when phone networks can become overwhelmed by anxious callers or network damage. These are precisely the times when emergency

workers need calls to go through. GETS and WPS give these authorized callers priority access to the resources in the public switched telephone network (PSTN).

According to Tom Otto, CSC director of the GETS/WPS program, the two services complement other communications systems, working together to give users additional options in a crisis.

"A lot of the people that we deal with are first responders or emergency managers and they have a wide variety of tools, including public safety radios and cellular telephones," says Otto. "GETS is another tool in their communications toolbox so they can complete a call when they absolutely have to."

GETS is a calling card system, providing access authorization and priority handling in the PSTN. After dialing 1-710-NCS-GETS and entering a personal identification number, the user enters the destination number and the call receives non-blocking service to the destination, usually within a matter of seconds.

The GETS and WPS calls are given priority in the telephone networks by use of queues, alternate routing techniques, multiple re-tries and exemption from restrictive network management controls. No other calls in the United States' public telephone networks enjoy these priority features. Except for GETS and WPS, federal law forbids such priority calls in the networks.

## Fifteen years of mission-critical delivery

GTE, later acquired by CSC, originally won the systems integration contract in 1993 for the GETS program. A limited capability was in place by the fall of 1994 and the initial operating capability by October 1995. CSC has been supporting the service ever since.

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The CSC team integrated the efforts of more than 20 local and cellular carriers and equipment vendors to deliver GETS and, later, WPS. The services use three types of networks:

- Local networks provided by local exchange carriers and wireless providers
- Long-distance networks provided by the major interexchange carriers
- Government-leased networks, including the Federal Technology Service (FTS), Defense Switched Network (DSN) and Diplomatic Telecommunications Service (DTS)

Otto emphasizes that GETS and WPS are unique in their use of public systems.

“Only the NCS has leveraged the entire public network and imbedded a capability like this, and CSC has been privileged to be the lead technical integrator from the start,” Otto explains.

Otto says that modifying and using existing technologies and networks keeps costs down, but the team keeps an eye on

emerging technologies and can add them to the service as needed. His team is currently leading an Industry Requirements Working Group for migrating GETS and WPS to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology.

## Success when it counts

Today, GETS and WPS consistently achieve a top-scoring “5 out of 5” on customer satisfaction surveys. But the real mark of success is a simple phone call that gets through at the right time.

“As an emergency worker with nearly 20 years experience in fire services and emergency management, the one lesson I have learned is that reliable, accessible communication is the most important resource in an emergency. It can mean the difference between saving lives and losing lives,” James says. “In a crisis, every second counts.”

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