



## Cellphone 911 rates wrong: ethicist

By Jorge Barrera CanWest News Service

OTTAWA — A car crash 17 years ago launched Toronto management consultant Eamon Hoey's quest to end what he says is "gouging" by cellphone companies through their 911 service rates.

Hoey, 66, could not remember where he was and the operator could not pinpoint his location because he was using a cell. Hoey, who had done work with the telecommunications sector since the 1970s, began digging into the issue.

"Their rates don't reflect their true costs," said Hoey. "The costs are born by the (ground line) carriers from whom they buy the service. (Cellphone companies) don't provide 911 agents, they don't provide the non-blocking, specialized 911 network."

Others have come to the same conclusion. University of Ottawa law professor Errol Mendes said cellphone companies should provide 911 services for free because they make their money off publicly-owned spectrum frequencies.

"While not a legal requirement, it is profoundly an issue of corporate responsibility," said Mendes, who also works as United Nations adviser on business ethics. "If they fail to do the right thing, ultimately society has to step in through the government."

It would be a public relations coup to offer free 911 services, said Mendes.

"I would switch to the first company that offers to do it," he said.

The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association called on their provincial government in November to force cellphone companies to turn over their monthly 911 fees to municipalities, which carry the cost of providing emergency services.

The wireless industry argues that it costs a lot of money to provide 911 call service.

"(The monthly charge) is used to pay for our costs to pay for 911 to work on cellphones," said Telus spokesperson Chris Gerritsen. Telus charges 75 cents a month for 911 service. "It is used to maintain our networks and the upkeep of our database."

Telus reroutes 911 calls in areas without the service to a company operator, who connects the caller to the nearest emergency post. The rerouting service is the industry standard, said Marc Choma, spokesperson for the Canadian Wireless Telecommunication Association.

Rogers and Bell Canada would not reveal their rates. A \$6 million class action lawsuit launched against Bell in Yellowknife, NWT, states the company also charges 75 cents a month.

Bell, however, said the fee is justified because they have to triangulate the location of 911 callers through three cellphone towers.

Choma said about six million 911 calls are made on cellphones every year and 50 per cent of 911 calls in urban centres are over cellphones.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission regulates fees charged to cellphone providers for access to the 911 network, but not how the companies pass on the cost to their customers.

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