

Opportunities to End Public Safety Inequities by Transforming B.C.'s 9-1-1 Emergency Communications System

E-Comm 9-1-1 (Emergency Communications for British Columbia Inc.)

Submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act

February 2021

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s, 9-1-1 has been the lifeline that links most British Columbians in crisis with emergency services. Today's system was developed more than 30 years ago, and as a result, there are a number of historical barriers and disparities that need to be addressed. This includes the fact that there are still significant numbers of rural, remote and Indigenous communities that lack basic 9-1-1 communication services. Where it is available, 9-1-1 does not always meet the needs of B.C.'s diverse communities. As an institution, 9-1-1 emergency communication is meant to instil a sense of safety in people, but—particularly for B.C.'s most vulnerable and marginalised populations—this is not always the case. For many people, there is an aversion to calling 9-1-1 out of fear of being wrongfully arrested or mistreated by emergency service agencies. Questions about police mandate and funding have resulted in a new level of scrutiny of emergency services, highlighting the need to overhaul the 9-1-1 response system. There is considerable support for alternative services to play more of a role in response to mental health and addiction emergencies, gender-based violence and in working with, and meeting the needs of, racialized, Indigenous, and marginalised communities.

The purpose of this submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act, is to outline E-Comm's position on the need and opportunity to transform 9-1-1 emergency communication services to help ensure that all British Columbians have equal access to communication with first responders, that the most appropriate type of responder can be dispatched, and that all callers are treated with dignity and respect. Ultimately, this will lead to a higher degree of social trust in the entire public safety system.

E-COMM: WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

As the primary emergency communication services agency for British Columbia, E-Comm is the first point of contact for 9-1-1 callers in 25 regional districts throughout the province, handling nearly two million 9-1-1 calls annually (99 per cent of B.C.'s 9-1-1 call volume). For more than 20 years, the organisation has played a pivotal role in keeping British Columbians safe and helping to protect communities. As the *first*, first responders, E-Comm's staff provide a critical entry point to emergency response by working behind the scenes to connect people with police, fire and ambulance.

E-Comm also provides emergency call-taking and dispatch services for 10 municipal police departments and 23 RCMP detachments in the Lower Mainland and on south Vancouver Island. In addition, for those same agencies, E-Comm answers police non-emergency calls made to 10-digit front desk numbers. The organisation is also responsible for providing call-taking and dispatch services to 40 fire departments across B.C. and operates the largest multijurisdictional, tri-service widearea radio network in the province used by police, fire and ambulance personnel—a literal lifeline for first responders.

In the next few years, Canada will roll out Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1), the CRTC-mandated modernization of aging 9-1-1 infrastructure with Internet-based technology. E-Comm's top priority during this implementation will be to ensure B.C.'s 9-1-1 system continues to operate in a highly-effective, resilient and responsive manner. NG9-1-1 will create many new opportunities to leverage modern communication tools and enhance access to emergency services, allowing E-Comm to better meet the evolving needs of its public safety partners and the people those agencies serve, and to use this opportunity to make 9-1-1 service across the province more cohesive and more equitable for all British Columbians. *(Full scope of E-Comm services in Appendix B to E)*

VISION

Safer communities in British Columbia through excellence in public safety communications.

MISSION

Deliver exceptional emergency communications to the public and first responders that help save lives and protect property.

VALUES

Our values guide how we carry out our work. Developed and defined by our staff, we are proud of our values: Respect, Integrity, Collaboration, Accountability and Service.

OUR SERVICES FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA'S POLICE AGENCIES

9-1-1 CALL-ANSWER FOR 25 REGIONAL DISTRICTS

See Appendix A for a list of areas in B.C. without 9-1-1 service

- Nearly two million calls from the almost five million British Columbians served by E-Comm every year.
- Out of those calls, 65 per cent are transferred to Police, 30 per cent to Ambulance, 5 per cent to Fire.
- Our goal is to answer 95 per cent of 9-1-1 calls in five seconds or less. In 2020, E-Comm answered 98 per cent of 9-1-1 calls in five seconds or less, surpassing our service level target.
- Specialized 9-1-1 services that E-Comm offers include access to an interpretation service for more than 170 languages and a dedicated texting service for people who are Deaf/Deaf-Blind, Hard-of-Hearing or Speech Impaired.

POLICE EMERGENCY CALL-TAKING/DISPATCH FOR 33 AGENCIES

- E-Comm is responsible for answering more than 650,000 police emergency calls in the Lower Mainland and on south Vancouver Island (approximately half of all police emergency calls made in B.C. every year).
- As the first (and sometimes only) point of contact for the public, E-Comm call takers are a critical extension of our police partners.
- E-Comm police call takers answer 9-1-1 calls on behalf of police agencies and have a direct connection to the public, who often mistakenly think they are talking to a police officer.
- The primary responsibility of a call taker is information gathering and inputting event details into a computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system that automatically provides call details to the police dispatcher who is accountable for mobilizing agency response.

POLICE 10-DIGIT NON-EMERGENCY CALL-TAKING/DISPATCH FOR 33 AGENCIES

- Nearly 700,000 police non-emergency calls are answered and handled by E-Comm annually in the same service regions as for emergency calls.
- Non-emergency calls are valid police matters that while still important, do not require immediate action from officers (e.g. noise complaints, residential break-and-enter with time delay and no suspect).
- E-Comm call takers are trained to answer both emergency and non-emergency calls, prioritizing calls that come through the 9-1-1 line at all times.

OUR SERVICES FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA'S POLICE AGENCIES

POLICE DISPATCH FOR 33 POLICE AGENCIES

- A police dispatcher is on the radio with first responders helping to coordinate a response.
- Dispatchers rely on call takers to gather and deliver information that allow dispatchers to be the 'eyes and ears' of police officers, providing those first responders with critical intelligence even before they arrive on scene. The primary responsibility of dispatchers is officer safety.
- E-Comm follows the policies and procedures of the agencies that it dispatches for. This includes determining appropriate units to dispatch, the size of the response, and even if a response is warranted (agencies specify which calls for service they will respond to). For example, some police agencies respond to all motor vehicle accidents while others respond to only those with injuries.

WIDE-AREA RADIO NETWORK

- E-Comm owns and operates the radio network used by more than 30 police agencies and other ambulance and fire personnel across Metro Vancouver and parts of the Fraser Valley.
- An integrated emergency communications system is critical to public safety. Before E-Comm, emergency radio services were fragmented and police, ambulance and fire agencies couldn't communicate with one another effectively as they were all using separate radio systems.
- Approximately 12,000 radios are currently in use across the Lower Mainland with around 4.4 million radio transmissions being made each month.

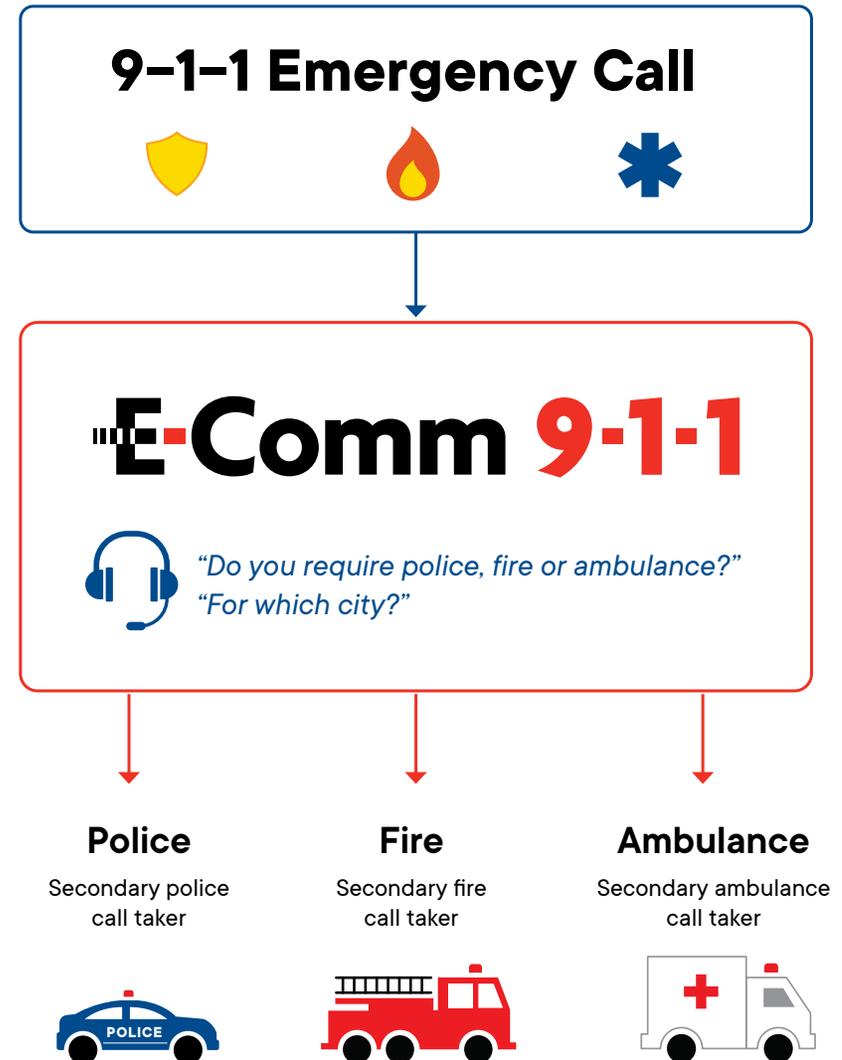
HOW 9-1-1 WORKS

E-COMM'S ROLE IN POLICE EMERGENCY/ NON-EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

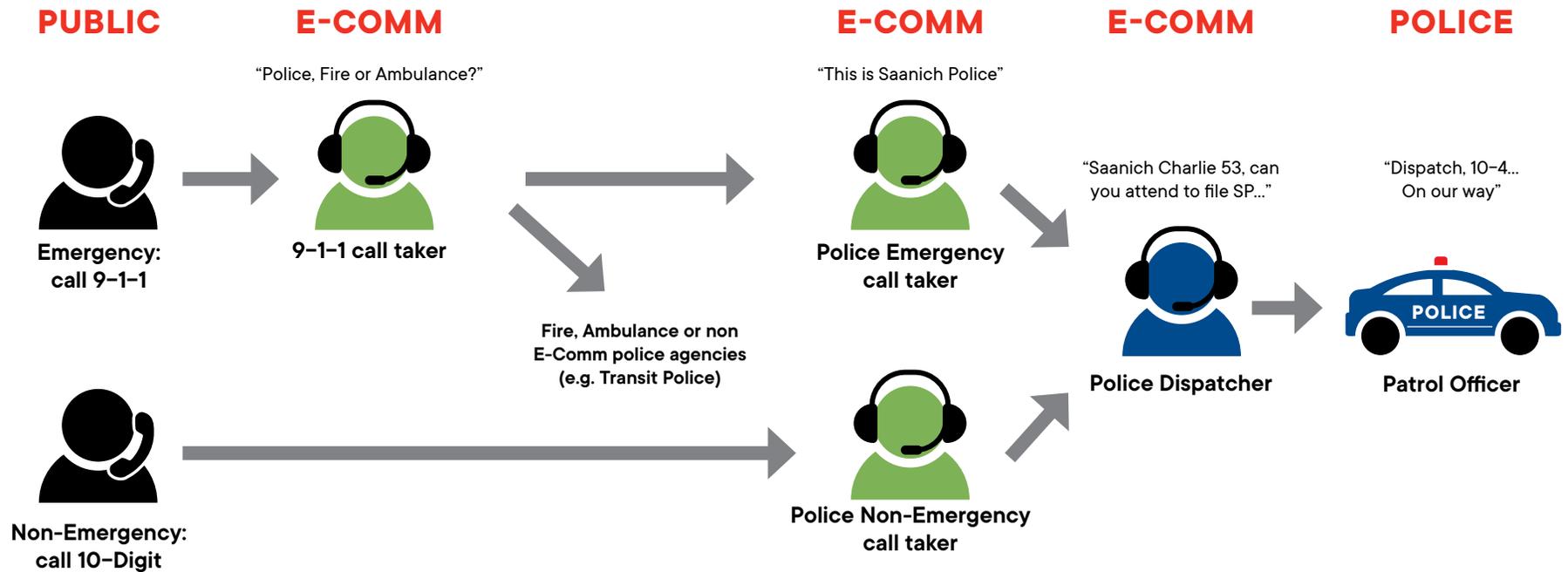
In most parts of British Columbia, if someone has an emergency and dials 9-1-1, the call will come to E-Comm first. More than 95 per cent of 9-1-1 calls are answered in five seconds or less. The 9-1-1 call taker will ask, "do you need police, fire or ambulance?" The call taker will also confirm for which location and then connect the caller as quickly as possible to the agency the caller has requested. If a caller is unsure which service they need, call takers are trained to ask a few quick questions to help determine the appropriate agency.

Once a 9-1-1 caller has been transferred to the emergency service agency they've requested, a police, fire or ambulance call taker will start asking questions to help them coordinate a response to get people the help they need.

Because E-Comm provides police and fire call-taking services for 73 agencies across B.C., in some cases this means 9-1-1 calls are transferred to police and fire call takers that are located within one of E-Comm's two emergency communications centres. In other cases, including all calls for the ambulance service, the calls are transferred to agencies outside of E-Comm that provide their own dispatch service.



HOW 9-1-1 WORKS



E-Comm first opened its doors in 1999 for Lower Mainland radio, 9-1-1 and initial police dispatch work.

After more than 20 years of public safety service we are proud to have a 90 per cent public confidence rating for our services.

Since 1999, E-Comm has steadily grown our partnerships with police departments and RCMP detachments in both urban and rural areas. Our original facility in east Vancouver supports our Lower Mainland police partners while our Saanich location opened in 2019 to support our Vancouver Island partners.

OWNERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

E-Comm was established in 1999 under the provincial Emergency Communications Corporations Act, and is owned by the municipalities and public-safety agencies served by our Lower Mainland radio network. The organisation operates under a not-for-profit model and annual budgets are set to break-even. E-Comm is financed by funding streams that are specific to each service line. At this time, we are funded exclusively by those organisations which utilize our services on a cost-recovery basis. Shared (corporate) support services are jointly funded between service lines, based on a carefully balanced cross-funding formula.

Our Board of Directors includes representation from the provincial government, the RCMP and BC Emergency Health Services, as well as the communities and the fire and police agencies that we serve. E-Comm is designated an Emergency Communications Corporation under the ECC Act of British Columbia and as such is subject to its stipulations. The key internal governing document is the Members' (Shareholders') Agreement.

E-Comm has 25 shareholders who between them hold 55 voting shares as defined by the Members' Agreement.

E-Comm's Board of Directors has 20 seats comprised of 10 municipal, 2 provincial government, 1 BCEHS, 1 RCMP and 2 Police Board representatives, as well as 4 independent Directors.

E-COMM AND THE PURPOSE OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE

The Special Committee's terms of reference, although focused on the Police Act, also task the Committee with making recommendations to the Legislative Assembly concerning other related legislation (such as the Mental Health Act) and agreements (such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). More specifically, the Special Committee states as its purpose to inquire into, and make recommendations to the Legislative Assembly on:

- “the role of police with respect to complex social issues including mental health and wellness, addictions, and harm reduction”; and
- “whether there are measures necessary to ensure a modernized Police Act is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”.

E-Comm believes the delivery and oversight of emergency communication services is an essential component of addressing these priorities. E-Comm's mission *to help save lives and protect property through exceptional emergency communications* prompts us to share our observations on the needs of some of our society's most vulnerable members, our police partners' efforts to support them and our views on opportunities to achieve better outcomes for everyone.

We are also motivated to support our provincial government partners whose mandates directly relate to the inquiry of this Special Committee:

- In the **Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions**: “With support from the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General, lead work to invest more in community-based mental health and social services so there are more trained front-line workers to help people in crisis, and free up police to focus on more serious crimes.”
- In the **Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General**: “Work with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and interested municipalities to expand the successful ‘situation table’ model that connects front-line workers from different health, safety, and social service sectors to identify and help vulnerable people.”
- In the **Ministries of Municipal Affairs and Citizens’ Services** from their respective Service Plans, from goals relating to “strong, sustainable and well governed communities” as well as expansion of broadband internet to rural and Indigenous communities.
- In various ministries, improve responses to sexual assault reports and missing senior alerts, address systemic racism and concerns around mental health and homelessness, and contribute to better information sharing among public services.

Given E-Comm's role and perspective, we see two areas of opportunity in emergency communications to facilitate better outcomes in the support of vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. We also see a number of obstacles to achieving these better outcomes. In the sections below, we describe the two opportunity areas as well as the obstacles. We will offer a brief overview of successes achieved in other, relevant jurisdictions and make recommendations for a path forward in B.C.

OPPORTUNITY #1

ENHANCED 9-1-1 CALL TRIAGING AND INTERVENTION

As illustrated on page six of this submission, when members of the public call 9-1-1, they are currently presented with only three options (“police, fire or ambulance”) and in most cases not asked triaging questions to help make the appropriate choice. Unless the situation obviously calls for either fire (such as a burning building) or an ambulance (such as a heart attack), the policy is for most calls to default to police. This is a major reason why 65 per cent of 9-1-1 calls are directed to police agencies. Once a police call taker has accepted the call from the 9-1-1 call taker, agency response protocols apply exclusively (for example; Richmond RCMP).

As the number of complex social issues reported via 9-1-1 has increased, the options for addressing them has not. Police are increasingly the default responder for those events. The current design of the emergency call flow as illustrated above, with only three options of responder services and the very limited triaging protocols available to call takers, almost inevitably results in a police officer being dispatched to the scene of most incidents involving urgent mental health, wellness and addiction issues.

There is no doubt that policing mandates have evolved since 9-1-1 was first established in B.C. more than 30 years ago. As our world continues to become more socially complex, so does policing. Agencies are no longer focused exclusively on preventing and solving crime. Almost by default, their mandates have grown to more broadly consider social concerns such as mental health, addiction, and homelessness. These societal issues require police to work collaboratively with community groups and service providers, like E-Comm, who have a major role to play in terms of the information and systems we supply.

The opportunity being presented by E-Comm is to widen the options for responder services further upstream during the 9-1-1 process, and introduce more advanced triaging by call takers that would divert certain call types away from police as the primary responding agency. This would allow for the provision of a new model of service centred on alternate community-based approaches that better support vulnerable, racialized and marginalised populations. New options can be carefully and gradually introduced, and may start as telehealth solutions. Emerging technologies in the field of 9-1-1, and the mandated national transition to NG9-1-1, can help better identify caller locations and facilitate new services in pilot geographies. Triaging can potentially be applied at two points in the process:

- By the 9-1-1 call taker who can offer services beyond police, fire or ambulance and ask triaging questions to direct the call to a more suitable service, such as to an Indigenous emergency communications centre to help address cultural safety concerns.
- By a police emergency call taker trained to identify a mental health crisis or elicit other relevant information, triaging questions may determine that the best first response is not police-led or may benefit from a remote (telehealth) psychiatric de-escalation before being attended on-scene.

OPPORTUNITY #1

ENHANCED 9-1-1 CALL TRIAGING AND INTERVENTION

Obstacles in the way of this opportunity stem from local government ownership of 9-1-1 and police dispatch services in British Columbia. Unlike other jurisdictions nationally as well as internationally, where 9-1-1 policy and practices are a provincial/national responsibility, in B.C. this falls to each of the 25 regional districts that E-Comm serves. Individual regional districts are empowered to issue their own “handbook” instructing E-Comm on how 9-1-1 calls are to be handled, resulting in a level of service and response that may not be consistent and equitable across different communities.

More significantly, under the current structure, the responsibility for police emergency call-taking and dispatch services in B.C. falls to individual municipalities. While some consolidation of operations has occurred, protocols and practices of call-handling remain under the authority of individual cities and their police agencies. E-Comm sees differences in the handling of like calls among all of its 33 police partners.

Police call taker and dispatcher training and call-triaging are critical parts of any plan to offer more specialised responder services. Doing so effectively, in a way that is geographically consistent and equitable for marginalised communities across the province, will be significantly more challenging unless the fragmented and inconsistent nature of policy set at the local government level is addressed. Over the next three years, local and provincial governments, police agencies, and E-Comm will need to work together on the implementation of NG9-1-1. This is the perfect opportunity to look at how we better align emergency services across the province.

Triaging complex social calls to specialised responder services can improve the quality of care and simultaneously ease the burden on police agencies. Doing this in a manner that is geographically consistent and equitable for marginalised communities across the province will be significantly more complex, costly and at risk of failure than it needs to be, as long as policy-setting authority remains solely with local governments.

OPPORTUNITY #1:

Specialized emergency response services for complex social issues to be selection options when calling 9-1-1.

OPPORTUNITY #2

IMPROVE THE POLICE INTERACTION EXPERIENCE

Front-line emergency communication staff (call takers and dispatchers) are often referred to as the *first*, first responders, as they provide the initial line of support to 9-1-1 callers before police or other agencies arrive on the scene of the emergency. All police call takers in the province are committed to public safety, dedicated to assisting callers and the well-being of responders, and working to continuously improve their individual skills to assist the public. In the context of ministerial mandate letters and service plan goals as well as the inquiry of this Special Committee, there are several areas where fundamental and structural improvements to police emergency call-taking and dispatching could significantly contribute to advancement:

- Police call takers are historically positioned as information gatherers, but not expected to contribute substantially to the reported problem's resolution.
- Consequently, selection, training and ongoing development of police call takers is not aimed at qualifications or professional development that would meaningfully contribute to the actual resolution of reported incidents.
- Information made available to police call takers is not optimised to support the caller. For example, special medical conditions which callers or their families may be willing to share are often not available to the call taker through the systems they use.
- In primary health care, ICBC insurance and public school education, British Columbians have become much more used to remote or online service through a smartphone or a computer. This was highlighted in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed everyone to a new model of working from home and transacting from a distance. Police work has yet to embrace this transition fully and there is significant opportunity to:
 - o Relieve highly-trained patrol officers from routine interactions with the public and allow them to focus on serious crime;
 - o Make the public's interactions more convenient through the use of modern contact centre technologies and scheduling tools; and
 - o Use provincial scale to provide more specialised interaction services, such as for Indigenous callers or calls concerning special health needs.

OPPORTUNITY #2

A real opportunity exists to improve the public experience in terms of interacting with police services, by introducing a stronger focus on problem resolution and analysis by emergency call takers. Between police call takers and dispatchers, there is significant potential to do more to advance the resolution of an incident and better prepare both the caller and police for the arrival of officers. This approach can include enhanced contributions by call takers and dispatchers to understand and address issues before the arrival of police officers on the scene, and improved preparation of patrol officers for the circumstances they are about to encounter. For example, through NG9-1-1 capabilities, an Autistic person could share their condition securely and privately with officers before they arrive on scene, and personal medical information could be automatically transmitted to emergency responders ahead of their arrival. This will require upskilling of emergency communication centre-based personnel, with the possibility of including sworn members for certain kinds of activities.

One of the major obstacles to realising this opportunity lies in the fragmented structure of police call-taking/dispatch responsibility and authority as previously described. While the prize is substantial in terms of freed-up front-line officer time, faster complaint resolution by communication centre-based specialists, introduction of new technologies and overall improved public-police interaction experience, all of this will be complex to achieve. Attempting this on a scale smaller than provincial, for a municipal dispatch centre or even regional, with disjointed agency policies and pooled funding, will be financially inefficient and highly risky in terms of implementation success.

OPPORTUNITY #2:

Enhance emergency communication centres to relieve patrol officers from routine interactions and to introduce more deeply skilled communication centre resources to help resolve police calls.

E-COMM'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish provincial-level authority for 9-1-1 setting of policies and standards of service. E-Comm believes this to be a necessary condition for success of the first opportunity for improvements in policing outcomes we have identified. This would allow for E-Comm's role to evolve in terms of how police emergencies involving mental health and addiction crises are dispatched, along with cultural safety for Indigenous peoples, and specialized services for marginalised groups.

The success of introducing diversion of certain 9-1-1 calls (e.g. socially complex ones) to resources other than the traditional tri-services (police/fire/ambulance) depends in part on provincially-consistent practices across geographies, across vulnerable population segments and across racialized communities. It also enables the effective realisation of provincial government policy objectives using service providers established, and overseen at the provincial level.

The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, in their presentation to this committee, have identified that “a clear provincial vision, mandate, and priorities with required compliance by all public safety organisations” is needed to make these services more effective and efficient. E-Comm agrees, and believes that this vision and mandate must include 9-1-1.

We believe the provincial government can leverage existing legislation and entities to establish 9-1-1 policy authority at the provincial level.

2. Elevate police dispatch authority from the municipal to the provincial level, and support a single, integrated provincial call-taking and dispatch service. E-Comm believes this to be a necessary condition for success of both the first and the second opportunity for improvement in policing outcomes identified in this submission.

The majority of British Columbians live and work in, and regularly travel across, large urban areas where many police agencies of neighbouring jurisdictions share responsibilities across the geography. To provide consistent services to the public, and in turn create consistent expectations and build trust with the public when interacting with police, it is critical that changes in emergency communications scope and practices are introduced equally and seamlessly across B.C. Equal and consistent improvement is even more important to ensure that benefits to marginalised and vulnerable population segments are realised across our province. This can only be achieved if policy, technology, practices and people development of B.C.'s police emergency communication centres are consolidated under one provincial umbrella.

This is a significant undertaking that will take multiple years to achieve, with commitment from several key partners, and patience and collaboration from all. E-Comm believes there is a key role for our organisation to play in terms of this work, and has a strong desire to take a leadership role in partnership with the B.C. government and our police partners to help modernize and enhance 9-1-1 services in order to make the system more resilient, end service inequities and better serve all British Columbians.

APPENDIX

A Areas of British Columbia that do not currently have access to 9-1-1 services include:

- i.** The Stikine Region
- ii.** Significant parts of the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NOTE: Fort Nelson proper now has Basic 9-1-1 which is answered in Alberta and doesn't currently include any location information)
- iii** The Central Coast Regional District (including locations such as Haida Gwaii, Bella Coola)
- iv.** Parts of many other Regional Districts (particularly in Indigenous communities) due either to lack of administrative agreements or necessary connectivity
- v.** City of Prince Rupert also only has Basic 9-1-1 without any location information

B. [E-Comm Facts and Figures](#)

C. [About E-Comm](#)

D. [About 9-1-1](#)

E. [E-Comm Dispatch Services](#)