

Baby dies after ambulance sent to wrong province

Phone company says old address caused tragic lack of 911 support for toddler

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THE CANADIAN PRESS CALGARY—As the frantic family of a dying toddler waited in vain for help at their north Calgary home Tuesday night, paramedics were rushing to an address three provinces away in the southern Ontario city of Mississauga.

The tragic death of 18-month-old Elijah Luck demonstrates the critical differences between the 911 services of traditional land-lines and phone companies that now use voice over Internet technology.

Phone company Comwave said Thursday its emergency call centre did get a call from somebody in distress, but it "was not completed" and insufficient address information was given. "So what they ended up doing was going to plan B – which is the address that's on file for the VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) caller," company spokeswoman Alison George said Thursday. "And in this case it was an address in a completely different city." George said the combination of an expired address on file and the fact that the new address wasn't fully conveyed to operators led to a "highly unfortunate" set of circumstances for a system that was indeed working. Comwave says the Internet phone technology is transportable so there's no physical address attached to the numbers. And George says it's vital that people using such phone providers keep their emergency contact information updated, especially if they move. "You don't want to go into where does the fault lie? It's just so tragic." George said from Toronto. "It's more if you're a VoIP subscriber, please understand how this service differs and why.

"Because your phone service is not linked to a geographic address, it really is critically important when speaking to 911 that your address is fully delivered and fully understood and you're transferred to the EMS service provider in your area."

The Luck family admits that Elijah had been born premature and suffered from numerous health problems. But he seemed to be making progress. On Tuesday evening, the boy's aunt, Sylvia, said she immediately called for help after he woke up and began having seizures. She finally hung up after many rings with no answer, but an operator called back and said that they

were sending help right away. Then the line became disconnected. After about 20 minutes waiting for an ambulance, she rushed outside and began banging on neighbours' doors to get help. One of them called 911 from their phone. But by the time paramedics finally arrived, it was too late to revive the infant. Curtis Brochu, Calgary's manager of public safety communications, said Thursday that it's important for everyone to realize that different phone service providers offer different levels of 911 emergency care.

And he said the standard wireline phone still offers the most reliable service where emergency dispatch operators instantly have your name and address – even if you are unable to speak or get "What we want people to do is make sure that they have a good, clear understanding of the phone service they subscribe to and what that looks like and how that can connect with 911," said Brochu. "Because we need people to be able to have faith and confidence that when they dial 911 they will get the emergency service they require."

All phone companies in Canada are regulated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. A spokesperson in Ottawa said Thursday that three years ago the commission ordered VoIP companies to provide "enhanced 911 service" through call centres. Companies are also required to advise customers every year about the differences between the emergency services of traditional land-lines.