

Texas sues Vonage over emergency service

By *srlinuxx*

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Abbott's lawsuit, filed in the District Court of Travis Country, Texas, accuses Vonage of deceptive marketing practices by not making it clear to customers that they must sign up separately for 911 service, instead of it being automatically part of the Vonage VoIP offering.

In an announcement about the lawsuit, Abbott cited a February incident in Houston in which a family with Vonage service couldn't get through to 911 dispatchers. Joyce John tried to dial 911 from a VoIP phone in her home as burglars broke into the house and shot and wounded her parents.

John's call to 911 connected to a recording saying she would have to dial 911 from a different phone. She eventually contacted authorities from a neighbor's house. "This Houston family's moment of crisis signals a dire need for Vonage to clearly communicate to its Internet telephone customers that 911 access may not be available to them," Abbott said in a statement. "This is not just about bad customer service; it's a matter of life and death."

A Vonage spokeswoman said the company would welcome a dialog with Abbott on how to improve its 911 service. Vonage customers are told multiple times, including twice during the subscription process, that they need to take action to sign up for 911 service, added Brooke Schulz, senior vice president of corporate communications for Vonage. Vonage warns customers on their dashboard online account summary that they have not signed up for 911 service, and Vonage sends e-mail to customers who have not activated 911 service, Schulz said.

The company also tells customers on its Web site's features page that they must pre-activate 911 service, although the company also notes that "Vonage offers 911 dialing to all customers."

"We want to work with the attorney general's office to resolve his concerns," Schulz said. "We do all these things today, and if those aren't adequate, let's talk about it."

The lawsuit, filed under the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act, requests the court issue an injunction stopping Vonage from "misrepresenting" the type of emergency telephone service it offers, according to a press release from Abbott. The suit seeks \$20,000 per violation.

Because VoIP services route 911 calls through IP networks instead of the traditional telephone network, VoIP 911 service doesn't work the same way as traditional 911 service. Dispatch centers aren't able to pinpoint the address where

the VoIP call originated, unlike enhanced 911 service available with most traditional telephone service today.

Vonage on March 7 reported it had exceeded 500,000 total phone lines on its network, and it was signing up customers at a rate of 15,000 lines per week.

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