

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE



Office of Legislator Robert Trotta

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In Case of An Emergency, Does 911 Always Work? Not from Suffolk County Legislator Robert Trotta's Office...

(Smithtown, NY)... "Residents expect that if they dial 911 from a hotel, motel or office building, they will reach a dispatcher who can help. But this is not always true," said Suffolk County Legislator Robert Trotta. In fact, Trotta tried it from his office and after a long delay, he heard a recording say, "We're sorry, your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please check the area code and dial the number again." "The message was repeated a second time and then a busy sound occurred," Trotta said.

As a case in point, last December, Kari Hunt Dunn met her estranged husband in a Texas hotel room so that he could visit their three children, ages nine, four and three. During the meeting, Kari's husband forced her into the bathroom and began stabbing her. Kari's nine year old daughter did what every child is instructed to do in an emergency – she dialed 911. The call did not go through and she kept trying. She dialed four times but never reached emergency personnel. The reason was, unbeknownst to her, that particular hotel's multi-line phone system required her to dial "9" first to reach an outside line. Tragically, Kari died from the wounds suffered during the attack.

After this incident, Commissioner Ajit Pai of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began an investigation into the multi-line phone system used in hotels and motels. He sent a letter to the ten largest hotel companies and the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AH&LA) asking for data on how guests would reach help by dialing 911.

Some of the top ten companies surveyed by the FCC Commissioner have phone systems that connect directly with emergency services and the others are working with their vendors to see how their systems can be revamped.

In response to the Commissioner's inquiry, the AH&LA conducted a survey of its independent and franchise owners and found that guests reach emergency services if they dial 911 without an access code in only 44.5% of franchised properties and 32% of independent hotels. Legislator Trotta spoke with their legal counsel and learned that they would be presenting their findings at the National Emergency Number Association's (NENA) 9-1-1 Goes to Washington conference beginning on March 24 in Arlington, VA.

Having recently retired from the Suffolk County Police Department and with his 10 years of experience on the FBI's Violent Crime Task Force, Legislator Trotta is extremely interested in this public safety issue and attended the NENA conference, at his own expense, to meet with the Commissioner of the FCC, a featured speaker, and to get his input on public safety communications and direct access to 911.

Suffolk Legislator Robert Trotta does not want local businesses to incur a financial burden, but he is concerned about the safety and well-being of residents, business people traveling and tourists staying in Suffolk's hotels/motels and the employees who work in these establishments. It is his contention that most of the multi-line phone systems can be remediated to allow direct access to 911. He has also learned that some of the major vendors will make the necessary changes for free.

After attending the conference, Legislator Trotta has requested counsel to file legislation requiring hotels and motels and similar accommodations in Suffolk County, as well as Suffolk County offices, including the Suffolk County Community College, and Suffolk businesses to be able to call 911 directly. Trotta spoke with an owner of three hotels in Suffolk County, who participated in the trade association's survey, and he agreed that safety needs to come first and must be the priority. "Those companies that cannot comply would be required to have a sticker on the phone instructing the person to dial 9-911," Trotta said.

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Legislator Robert Trotta represents the 13th Legislative District, which includes Smithtown, Fort Salonga, Kings Park, San Remo, Nissequogue, Head of the Harbor, and St. James, as well as most of East Northport and parts of Northport and Commack. Legislator Trotta serves on the Legislature's Budget & Finance, Education & Information Technology, Health and the Humans Services Committees.

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