Implementation of wireless E911 is several years away in many states, raising the prospect of piecemeal availability of this service across the country for an indefinite number of years to come. Successful implementation depends on coordinated efforts by wireless carriers, local telephone companies, and more than 6,000 public safety answering points (PSAPs)—the facilities that receive 911 calls and dispatch assistance.

According to a database sponsored by the Department of Transportation (DOT), as of October 2003, nearly 65 percent of PSAPs had Phase I wireless E911 service, which provides the approximate location of the caller, while only 18 percent had Phase II, which provides a more precise location and is the ultimate goal of wireless E911 service. Though valuable, the database does not differentiate between PSAPs that will require equipment upgrades and those that will not, thereby limiting its usefulness in accurately assessing progress toward full implementation. Looking forward, 24 state 911 contacts said in response to a GAO survey that their state will have Phase II implemented by 2005 or sooner; however, all other state contacts estimated dates beyond 2005 or were unable to estimate a date.

Key factors hindering wireless E911 implementation involve funding and coordination. The wireless carriers, states, and localities must devise the means to fund more than $8 billion in estimated deployment costs over the next 5 years. Some states and localities have established funding mechanisms (such as E911 surcharges on phone bills), but others have not done so or have used their E911 funds for unrelated purposes. In addition, there is also a lack of coordination in some cases among the wireless carriers, local telephone companies, and PSAPs that can lead to delays in wireless E911 implementation. States with knowledgeable and involved coordinators were best able to work through these coordination issues.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and DOT are involved in promoting wireless E911, but their authority in overseeing its deployment is limited because PSAPs traditionally fall under state and local jurisdiction. FCC has set deadlines on the wireless carriers’ E911 responsibilities and has taken actions to identify best practices and improve coordination among the parties. DOT is developing an action plan and clearinghouse for wireless E911 planning, implementation, and operations.