911 CALL ANSWER TIMES

911 callers left waiting on hold across metro Atlanta

An investigation by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution finds emergency centers fail to meet industry standard for answering calls for help.

By Katherine Landergan and Stephanie Lamb, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

It was a cool afternoon in early January and Brittany McEntyre was lounging at her brother's apartment in southwest Atlanta, scrolling on Instagram, when a stray bullet smashed through the window.

The bullet pierced the couch, hit Brittany in the back of the neck and exited through the bridge of her nose.

Stunned, the 20-year-old mother crawled to the floor, dripping in blood, as her brother grabbed a pillow to cover the wound.

His mother screamed. Her 10-year-old son begged for someone to die 911 More than one person tried, but they couldn't get through.

"When you have a situation like this, and you try to call 911 and no one answers, what do you do? Brittany's mother, Tonya, said as she recalled the incident weeks later. "It's like you're left out there to bleed."

The McEntyrefamily' problem with 911 is all too common for residents across metro Atlanta, according to a The Atlanta Journal-Constitution found. The AJC reviewed data representing millions of calls across the metro area and interviewed dozens of people who have waited attempting high number of callers were left waiting for a 911 operator to answer. While most calls are answered within seconds, others are placed on hold for minutes at a time. Some callers wait so long that they hang up in frustration and perhaps they need an operator.

MORE ON THE INVESTIGATION

This story is part of an Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation into 911 times. For more:

Gwinnett County and a 911 call nightmare

DeKalb County has worst 911 answer times in metro Atlanta

How Atlanta is trying to improve its 911 response times

Above: A screenshot of the number of 911 call attempts into the Metro Atlanta 911 Authority, which, on January 2, 2026. Rather than wait on hold, callers in Gwinnett County, DeKalb County and Atlanta, as well as others, are actively being advised by recorded messages to call back. (Photo Illustration, photographer: Miguel Martinez, miguel.martinez@ajc.com)

Last year in Atlanta about 30% of emergency calls were put on hold for longer than the industry standard – which means they weren't answered within 90 seconds, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's review of 911 call answer times. In Gwinnett County, the 911 center failed to meet the standard for a total of emergency calls in 2025 placing those callers on hold for more than 90 seconds. In DeKalb County, it's worse. About half of emergency calls took longer than 90 seconds to answer, according to the AJC's analysis.

The AJC's investigation found that the problem worsened in recent years, reaching a dire level in some communities as the pandemic depleted the workforce. 911 operators and positions were unfilled. This left thousands of callers across the metro area on hold while in crisis.

The AJC interviewed dozens of people who shared their stories of getting placed on hold when they called 911 for help. They described feelings of terror and disbelief, and a shattered trust of the emergency services system. The callers' experiences, and the data, show that the system is failing to meet the most basic expectation of a functioning emergency system when a stranger's distress calls reflect how and are perceived. Many people who called for help and got the automatic hold message from 911 a particular field on the emergency line after a fellow guest had a seizure.

The consequences of waiting on 911 calls can be life-or-death, or be dangerous, even deadly.

"We can help provide insight, information, and direct instruction on how to stop a bleed, give CPR, get somebody out of a burning building," said Ty Wooten, a director in the International Association of Emergency Dispatch of 911 centers, later adding: "Every single second counts."

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Missing the mark

Metro Atlanta is covered by a patchwork of 911 centers run by county and city governments. The AJC requested call data from more than dozen 911 centers and found a mix of successful response times, combined with troubling delays.

The AJC measures every agency against the standard for 911 answer times, as set out by industry professionals that 90% of calls are answered within 15 seconds, and 95% of calls are answered within 20 seconds.

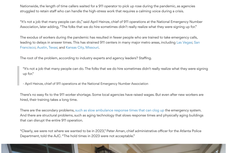
Four performing agencies included DeKalb County E-911, Gwinnett County E-911 and Atlanta E-911. Among the key findings:

- In DeKalb County E-911, just over half of calls in 2025 were answered within 20 seconds – the worst response time among the metro agencies that the AJC reviewed.
- In Atlanta E-911, which has the largest call volume in the metro region, 30% of calls in 2025 took longer than 20 seconds to answer and it took longer than 90 seconds to answer 7 percent of calls.
- In Gwinnett County E-911, it took longer than 20 seconds to answer 3 percent of calls in 2025 and it took longer than 90 seconds to answer 1 percent of calls.

Among the more successful jurisdictions were the cities of Sandy Springs, Johns Creek, Dunwoody and Brookhaven, which contract on their 911 services to a private company, through a partnership called CodeCorps. That partnership performs better than the industry standard. Additionally, the 911 centers in Clayton and Cobb counties and Roswell are answering calls at rates that rival or performed better than the industry standard.

911 calls answered within 20 seconds

The industry standard states that 95% of 911 calls should be answered within 20 seconds. Several metro Atlanta agencies fell short last year.



Excludes abandoned calls. Sandy Springs, Johns Creek, Dunwoody and Brookhaven share the same 911 system. Douglas County, Forsyth County and Rockdale County provided data for more than 12 months.

Source: Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis of 911 call data

In the middle of the pack was the Fulton County E-911 center, covers Fairburn, Union City, Palmetto, Chattahoochee Hills, South Fulton and unincorporated parts of the county. The center fell short of the industry standard in 2025, only about 84% of calls in that year were answered within 20 seconds.

Megan Sparrow has more experience with 911 than most. The 38-year-old physical therapist cares for patients around metro Atlanta who come from high-income hospital, and sometimes they need to be rushed back because of a sudden health setback.

Since the pandemic, Sparrow says she has had to call 911 frequently, often more than once a month, and estimates she has been put on hold about a half-dozen times.

One of those calls turned out to be a medical crisis. Sparrow had entered the patient's home to find her seated in blood. The woman, recovering from knee surgery, had mistakenly continued to take blood thinner medication against a doctor's instructions. When Sparrow tried to 911, she was placed on hold. The patient's family members panicked, she said, and Sparrow felt helpless.

"In that situation, that's nothing I can do," Sparrow said. "I can't make the bleeding stop."

Eventually, Sparrow got through and an ambulance arrived. But the experience was harrowing, Sparrow said. The patient was in the intensive care unit for a week.

Fewer 911 operators, longer delays

From an early age, children learn that 911 is the number to call in an emergency, when every second counts. But, in recent years, emergency communications systems have been strained in communities across the country the never below.

Nationwide, the length of time callers wanted for a 911 operator to pick up rose during the pandemic as agencies struggled to retain staff and hire new ones. The average 911 operator is now paid less than a fast-food worker.

"It's not a job that many people can do," said April Heinze, chief of 911 operations at the National Emergency Number Association, later adding: "The kids that we see in the late nineteenth-early twenties, they don't even know what they were signing up for."

The exodus of workers during the pandemic has resulted in fewer people who are trained to take emergency calls, leading to delays in answer times. The trend has hit 911 centers in many metro areas, including Las Vegas, San Francisco, Seattle and Kansas City, Missouri.

The rest of the problem, according to industry experts and agency leaders? Staffing.

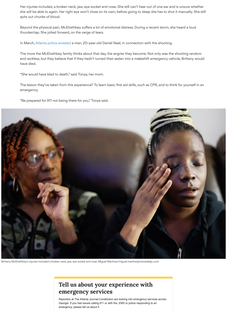
"It's not a job that many people can do. The folks that we do hire sometimes didn't really realize what they were signing up for."

– April Heinze, chief of 911 operations at the National Emergency Number Association

There's no easy fix to the 911 worker shortage. Some local agencies have raised wages. But even after new workers are hired, their training takes a long time.

There are the secondary problems, such as slow ambulance response times that can pile up the emergency system. And there are technical problems such as aging technology that slows response times and physically aging buildings that can disrupt the entire 911 operation.

"Clearly, we were not where we needed to be in 2020," Peter Arner, chief administrative officer for the Atlanta Police Department, told the AJC. "The hold times in 2020 were not acceptable."



Tonya McEntyre pictured her daughter Brittany, who died from a shooting in January, at her home in Atlanta, photo taken Wednesday, family members said they were at their sister's/daughter's home when the shooting occurred. (Photo: Miguel Martinez / AJC)

'Something out of the movies'

In Brittany McEntyre's case, more than one person at the southwest Atlanta apartment complex called 911 right after she was shot, but all were placed on hold. So the McEntyres family realized they were on their own.

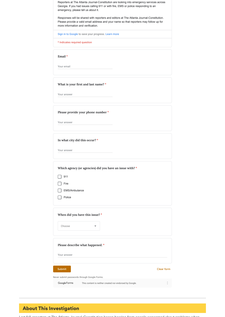
LISTEN: The McEntyres family gets through to 911

- McEntyres family member: "I'll wait! picking up!

Her brother, Cornelius McEntyre, carried his sister into their sedan, along with their mom, who held the phone as they drove to Grady Hospital. Cornelius McEntyre ignored the same message that they had to hang up, that someone would be with them as soon as possible.

It was approximately rush hour in Atlanta, and traffic was already backed up on the highway. Cornelius drove on the city streets toward Grady Memorial Hospital like a mad man, running red lights, striking curbs and exceeding 80 mph.

"It was like something out of the movies," he said. "I wasn't really trying to break the law, but the law didn't matter at the time. We had to get the law on the phone."



Instead of waiting for an ambulance, Cornelius McEntyre, left and his family drove to the hospital, driving like a maniac and sometimes waiting for the traffic lights to change. (Photo: Family trying to break the law "to save, but the law didn't matter at the time. We had to get the law on the phone." Miguel Martinez/ajc.com)

His sister's condition worsened with each passing minute the was became weaker, but always started to cheer and encourage her family members, who were in the car with her. Cornelius McEntyre, who had been a high-school athlete, finally arrived. They were able to pick her up and carry her and an ambulance. But that wasn't an option, Cornelius thought. He kept driving.

He drove, he thought, he watched Brittany in his arms, racing into the building as she flutered in and out of consciousness. The hospital staff took her to begin treatment.

The last thing she remembers is her brother, standing there, before everything went black.

"I said, 'Cornelius, don't let me die,'" Brittany recalled of that moment.

Improving the system

In the AJC's review of 27 metro area jurisdictions, some were more forthright than others.

Gwinnett County officials would not make anyone available for the 911 center available for an interview, instead issuing a statement about its response last year for 911 callers and how the issue of improving the emergency system is "a top priority for county leadership."

Atlanta E-911 is the largest agency in the state, and it frequently handles complex calls such as shootings, major traffic accidents and apartment fires, Arner said. Those complex calls take longer to resolve, thus creating a backlog.

Atlanta's center recently added staff. The call taker, but training takes about six months. When those new hires come online, Arner predicted they will be able to answer 95% of calls within 20 seconds.

"We have the tools, technology, people, processes and systems in place to meet national standards consistently, as we move through this year," Arner said.

On the other end of the spectrum is Cobb County.

Melissa Alexis, executive director for the Cobb County E-911 center, said county officials have slowed worker turnover by raising wages and improving the work environment. There's a peer support program and forward conversations for mental well-being, and workers are being encouraged to participate in improve their mental health.

These changes, Alexis said, contributed to the agency's improved answer times. Back in 2021, Cobb County E-911 was falling short of the national standard, answering about 85% of calls within 20 seconds. Last year, the center met the national standard.

"We truly try to do everything that we can to motivate our staff members," Alexis said.

Physical, mental healing of Brittany McEntrather

It has been months since the shooting and, slowly, Brittany McEntyre is healing her family is raising money to cover the costly hospital stay and subsequent rehabilitation. At the hospital, the family was told that she would never walk again. Her shortness of breath, and her ventilator, and the EPO stays can stop the emergency phone system.

Her injuries included a broken neck, jaw was cracked and nose. She still can't lean out of one ear and is unsure whether she will be able to again. Her right eye won't close on its own, before going to sleep she has to shut it manually. She still spits out chunks of blood.

Beyond the physical pain, McEntyre suffers a lot of emotional distress. Grieving a recent shore, she heard a loud thunderclap. She jolted forward, on the verge of tears.

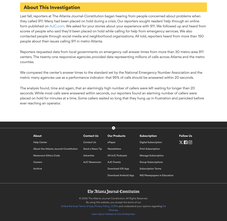
In March, Atlanta police arrested a man, 20-year-old Daniel Brand, in connection with the shooting.

The move the McEntyres family thinks about that day, the angler they become. Not only was the shooting random and reckless, but they believe that if they hadn't turned their sedan into a makeshift emergency ambulance, Brittany would have died.

"She would have bled to death," said Tonya, her mom.

"The lesson they've taken from this experience? To learn basic first aid skills, and to CPR, and to think for yourself in an emergency.

"Be prepared for 911 not being there for you," Tonya said.



Brittany McEntrather's injuries included a broken neck, jaw was cracked and nose. (Miguel Martinez/ajc.com)

Tell us about your experience with emergency services

Reporters at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution are seeking the emergency services across Georgia. If you have issues calling 911 or with EMS, OR or phone responding to an emergency, please let us know.

Responses are kept under reporters and editors at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Please provide a valid email address and your name so that reporters may follow up for more information and verification.

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* indicates required question

Email *

Your email

What is your first and last name? *

Your answer

Please provide your phone number *

Your answer

In what city did this occur? *

Your answer

Which agency (or agencies) did you have an issue with? *

- 911
- Fire
- EMS/Ambulance
- Other

When did you have this issue? *

Choose

Please describe what happened *

Your answer

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About This Investigation

Last fall, reporters at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution began hearing from people concerned about problems when they called 911. Many had been placed on hold during a crisis. Our reporters sought readers' help through an online form published on AJC.com. We asked for your stories about your experiences with 911. We followed up and heard from people who had been placed on hold while trying to report a shooting, a fire, a medical emergency. We also contacted people through social media and neighborhood organizations. All told, reporters heard from more than 100 people about their issues calling 911 in metro Atlanta.

Reporters requested data from local governments on emergency call answer times from more than 30 metro area 911 centers. The twenty-one responsive agencies provided data representing millions of calls across Atlanta and the metro counties.

We compared the centers's answer times to the standard set by the National Emergency Number Association and the metro many agencies are a patchwork of jurisdiction. Our 911 calls should be answered within 20 seconds.

The analysis found, time and again, that an alarmingly high number of callers were left waiting for longer than 20 seconds. While most calls were answered within seconds, our reporters found an alarming number of callers were placed on hold for minutes at a time. Some callers waited so long that they hung up in frustration and perished before ever reaching an operator.

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