

RECOMMENDATION

911 - PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

General: Public Safety Communications /911 was established in 1992 to handle the increased demand for services beyond Tulsa's Police and Fire Departments, including fire-related services for Berryhill, Catoosa, Oak Grove and Sperry, law enforcement services for the Tulsa County Sheriff's Office, Catoosa and Sperry, and after-hours calls for the City of Tulsa's Animal Welfare Division. Over 300,000 emergency and 250,000 non-emergency calls are handled each year (45% non-emergency). The 911 center is currently part of the Information Technology Department (IT). There are 98 funded positions in the 911 Center (82 call takers and dispatchers, 13 supervisors, 1 trainer, 1 manager, 1 administrative assistant).

Problem: Police, Fire, Sheriff's Office, City Council and citizens have expressed dissatisfaction regarding how long it takes to answer 911 calls and receive a response from the dispatched emergency service provider. There is also concern that 911 no longer maintains CALEA certification. In addition, 911 call takers and dispatchers report they are poorly equipped to timely and effectively handle calls due to staffing shortages, lack of training, technology challenges and lack of leadership.

Initial review by the MRO identified documented complaints at 0.02% of total calls. Further investigation of a sampling of complaints showed that all were addressed.

National call-taking standards (National Emergency Number Association – NENA) state that a 911 center should answer 90% of the calls received within 10 seconds and 95% of the calls received within 20 seconds. IT records indicate that calls are answered within the NENA standards only 51% of the time. Compounding the problem, calls answered at the primary answering point for routing to Police, Fire or Medical are placed in a queue where they may wait again before a call taker answers. No statistics to measure call queue times are available. IT has recently purchased software that will make this statistic available.

IT staffing figures indicate that for FY11, there was an average turnover rate of 30% and an average of 11 positions vacant due to the high turnover rate.

Comments from Public Safety: The MRO met with public safety officials representing police, fire and the sheriff's office to understand their concerns. Representatives from IT and 911 Center management were also present. All agencies are concerned about the length of call wait times. Additionally, they feel call takers sometimes rush through calls, gather insufficient or incomplete information, or are inadequately trained which might put safety of officers, firefighters and citizens at risk. All public safety groups feel that call takers and dispatchers should be specialized for either law enforcement or fire. Both Police and Fire express interest in assuming 911 dispatching duties for their departments. Both feel they could provide better training, retention and control by taking on dispatching personnel. ***Both groups intend to use sworn personnel to provide leadership to 911 staff.***

Public safety groups represented reported that it is not uncommon for three radio channels be patched to a single line due to short staffing in the 911 center. They complain that proper radio protocols are not consistently observed and that the practice of patching of three radio channels to a single line limits the number of officers who can communicate to 911, which could jeopardize officer safety.

The group expressed concerns regarding the center's CALEA accreditation. The 911 center previously maintained a public safety communications CALEA accreditation to support the CALEA accreditations held by the law enforcement agencies they support. The 911 CALEA accreditation was allowed to lapse in 2009 because IT employees were not made available to compile data, prepare reports and maintain the recertification schedule. The accredited Tulsa Police and Tulsa County Sheriff agencies were not informed of the decision nor were they asked if the lack of accreditation would negatively impact their own accreditations, which it does.

Comments from Front-Line 911 Personnel: The MRO met with a group of front-line 911 personnel to further understand the concerns brought forth by public safety groups. Morale among 911 personnel is low. Front-line 911 employees are aware of shortfalls in their service delivery and frustrated by what they view as inattention by management to the operating needs of the group. The employees blame long call wait times on short staffing, the inability to hire, adequately train and retain employees, and ineffective leadership. They said that only 3 academies were held last year, compared to 4 or 5 annually which used to be the norm. They reported that the trainer position hasn't been used to provide training since mid-August, 2010. They complained that most supervisors don't help handle calls during peak periods as was done in the past and is the standard in most 911 centers. They indicate that many times key communications are not forwarded timely which impairs call taker service delivery. Employees support the idea that call takers and dispatchers would be more effective as discipline specialists (ie, law enforcement or fire/EMS), but *believe they would be undervalued as call takers and less effective as a communications center if the center were directed by police, fire or both*. Employees feel that management of the center is more focused on attire and other trivialities than advocating for the work group and resolving problems they know make them less effective than they want to be.

Employees admit that radio protocols are not consistently observed. When there is a shortage of dispatchers, they say they have no choice but to patch the three communications channels to one.

Further, employees experience technical challenges with the tools they use to effectively manage calls. The computer-aided dispatch system (CADS) maps have not been functional since October, 2009, so call takers must enter map coordinates into Google Maps to find caller locations. CADS is scheduled to be replaced, but has been delayed twice and is now set for 9/2012, according to the IT Master Project List. Also, the status monitor which identifies the location of current incidents lost real time functionality in 2009, which delays operator response times. There is no target date for this fix except employees are told that it won't be a problem with the new CAD system.

RECOMMENDATION: CREATE A NEW DEPARTMENT – 911 PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS.

- **Director will be a 911/Public Safety Communications and dispatch professional with unique experience and qualifications to effectively lead a 911 organization.**
- **New director will be a peer to Police and Fire Chiefs and will report at the executive level.**
- **Establishes a department whose core function is emergency communications.**

Justification:

- Improve technology consistent with national standards, including leading the organization through implementation of Next Generation 911 (initiative aimed at improving 911 infrastructure to transmit text, images, video and data to 911).
- Remain current on NENA standards and ADA requirements as pertains to services for the disabled, including the blind, deaf and mute.
- Prioritize timely completion of the Computer Aided Dispatch System (CADS) upgrade and address other long-standing technology issues.
- Employ best practices in emergency communications, including recruitment, hiring, training and retaining good employees.
- Provides equal service to all emergency response agencies as a department accountable at the executive level, rather than having 911 run by a single emergency response agency (such as Police or Fire). Examples of this successful model can be found at Lincoln, Nebraska; Kent, Washington and North East King County, Washington (NORCOM).
- ***Allows Police and Fire to continue to focus on core services they provide.***
- Elevates management of 911 to director status with authority to hold service providers accountable for service delivery.

Opportunities:

- Provide leadership and direction in implementation of and advocacy for technology improvements.
- Rebuild training program, including filling trainer position with experience in curriculum development and expanding training program to leverage training expertise in police, fire and EMSA.
- ***Provide dedicated dispatchers for Police and Fire, allowing dispatchers to develop and exercise expertise in specific disciplines.***
- Structure service level agreements with served agencies to establish performance standards.
- Develop and implement strategies to offload non-emergency calls.
- Regain CALEA certification; explore partnership opportunities and funding support from law enforcement agencies to regain the certification.

Benefits:

- Positions Tulsa's 911-Public Safety Communications to become leader in emergency communications.
- Develop and implement best practice 911-specific strategies to address hiring, training and retention issues – including more academies and reactivating the trainer position.
- Improves call response times and overall customer service.
- Improves employee morale.
- Allows IT to shed a responsibility outside its core mission. (IT Steering Committee supports this recommendation.)
- ***Avoids using sworn officers in administrative positions.***
- Ensures transparency, accountability and fairness in the expenditure of 911 funds which are mandated to be used solely for enhanced 911 and wireless 911 equipment and services. Many agencies reportable directly to a served agency (generally police) receive criticism that 911 funding is not always distributed to served agencies on an equitable basis nor are funds properly spent directly on 911 services as mandated. There is pressure on public safety agencies to provide higher levels of service – more cops on the beat and more fire fighters on the trucks. Public safety agencies with control of 911 funding may inadvertently broaden and stretch the definitions of eligible 911 financed activities. A department accountable to all agencies will ensure funds are allocated fairly to efforts, initiatives and technology that supports all groups. ***Entities that have structured a separate Public Safety Communications Department report transparency and control of funding as a huge benefit.***

Implementation:

- Create Public Safety Communications Department by Executive Order.
- Hire 911-Public Safety Communications Director with proven leadership and success in a 911 center or comparable emergency communications or response operation.
- Review for revisions Executive Order 2010-03 which establishes the relationship between Public Safety Communications and the Tulsa Police Department for NCIC/OLETS access.
- Require new director to submit an implementation plan for both establishing the administrative functions of the new department and addressing the recommendations, opportunities and concerns outlined in this recommendation within 90 days of hire.