
Effective 9-1-1 Dispatching Identified

SUMMARY

Minnesota is one of 14 states in which people who dial 9-1-1 receive immediate access to emergency help, regardless of where in the state they make the phone call, according to a best practices review released today by the Minnesota Legislative Auditor's Office. For all Minnesota residents, dialing 9-1-1 connects the caller to a public safety answering point (PSAP) and, for most of the state's population, a 9-1-1 call also displays the caller's telephone number and address to a dispatcher who can summon help. In addition, PSAP dispatchers provide a vital communications link with public safety personnel in the field, for instance, relaying information about explosive materials warehoused near a fire scene.

To be effective, county and city agencies that receive 9-1-1 and other public safety calls need standard operating procedures, comprehensive training for dispatchers, and proper telecommunications equipment, among other things, according to the report. The report was prepared with input from PSAP managers, law enforcement personnel, and others involved with 9-1-1 dispatching in Minnesota. Besides using public safety industry guidelines to define what constitutes effective and efficient 9-1-1

dispatching, the review features PSAPs that have put best practices into action around the state.

One best practice the review recommends is writing disaster recovery plans as part of PSAPs' standard procedures. With such plans, PSAPs are prepared with backup facilities or other approaches when telephone or radio systems become inoperative or in the event of natural disasters. About 40 percent of PSAPs in 1996 had written recovery plans or written agreements with back-up facilities. Most of the others had unwritten plans or agreements.

Hiring the right people for the job and providing them with comprehensive training is also essential for effective and efficient public safety dispatching, according to the report. By developing realistic job descriptions and testing job applicants for the skills they will need to operate under pressure, PSAPs have a better chance of avoiding the high cost of early staff turnover. To deal with complex technology and stressful work, newly hired dispatchers must receive

thorough on-site training. About two-thirds of Minnesota PSAPs in 1996 met or exceeded most of the training requirements recommended by a national organization of public safety telecommunications officials. Further, to maintain

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Examples of Best Practices:

- For medical emergencies, Scott County uses a private ambulance service employing dispatchers trained to provide medical instructions by phone. This gives medical help to callers at the scene before an ambulance arrives and frees Scott County dispatchers to communicate with emergency personnel in the field and process other public safety calls.
- In the Clay County/Moorhead PSAP, new dispatchers undergo 16 weeks of initial training. Dispatchers emerge prepared to work smoothly with emergency response agencies in a pressure-filled environment.
- Rice and Steele counties and the city of Northfield are merging their three PSAPs into one. Participants in the merger expect increased efficiency in dispatching, improved communications between agencies, and savings in capital and operating costs.

*The report is available at our web site:
<http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9806.htm>.
For copies of either the full report or summary,
call 612/296-4708.*

a qualified dispatching corps, the report recommends that PSAPs target ongoing training to its experienced dispatchers' specific training needs.

Dispatchers both process public safety calls and provide a critical communications link with law enforcement officers and other emergency personnel on the street. Their work depends on having proper telecommunications equipment in good repair. According to the report, PSAPs need to invest in radio communications equipment and items such as "repeaters" that allow dispatchers to communicate via radio with emergency response agencies despite long distances. About 92 percent of Minnesota PSAPs reported that their equipment was adequate for successful communications between dispatchers and law enforcement for at least 90 percent of the time in 1996.

The report also recommends that PSAPs consider operating dispatch centers jointly with other PSAPs in areas where consolidation may yield better service or lower costs. Consolidating dispatching can lead to improved telecommunications technology when costs are shared among several jurisdictions. Consolidation can also produce lower operating costs and enable better communications across jurisdictions. Three

PSAP consolidations are currently pending in Minnesota.

Other practices recommended for effective and efficient 9-1-1 dispatching include: retaining records of calls and PSAP operations; measuring the performance of the PSAP and comparing it to PSAP objectives; soliciting feedback on PSAP operations from police, sheriff, fire, and other public safety agencies and coordinating responses to emergencies with them; and educating the public on what the 9-1-1 system involves and how best to use it.

The best practices review lists many examples of Minnesota PSAPs with effective and efficient practices. Unlike traditional audits, best practices reviews highlight successes in local government services. The 1994 Legislature authorized best practices reviews to identify effective and efficient service delivery.

Copies of the report, entitled *9-1-1 Dispatching*, are available from the Legislative Auditor's Office at 612/296-4708 or the Internet at <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9806.htm>. For further information, contact Jody Hauer or Roger Brooks at 612/296-4708.