

JOINT AGENCY DISPATCH: BETTER TOGETHER?

SUMMARY

Improvements in technology, budget constraints and discussions about a co-located dispatch center have led several agencies to consider combining dispatch operations for public safety agencies in San Luis Obispo County. There are several examples of successful joint dispatch operations in our county. Cal Fire provides dispatch service to all the local agencies in the unincorporated areas of the county and the cities of Arroyo Grande, Grover Beach, Morro Bay and Pismo Beach. The County Sheriff provides 911 service and Law Enforcement Dispatch service to the Cities of Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay through contracts. The contract expense formula for sheriff dispatch service provided significantly lower cost for both cities. Our interviews revealed that contracting agencies are satisfied with the service they receive. They note that separate fire and police dispatch services are superior. Additional dispatch capacity relieves stress in busy periods as well as the ability to stage or send interagency help when necessary. This action provides faster response for major incidents.

Several cities were considering a joint dispatch operation as well, with the city of San Luis Obispo providing the service. This effort was abandoned after the initial findings indicated it was fiscally unfeasible. Despite a net savings of over \$500,000 in personnel costs it was not advantageous to all four agencies. Primarily, this was a result of the 16%-32% difference in pay scales between the agencies. Paso Robles and Atascadero would incur higher costs while the city of San Luis Obispo and California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) would receive considerable savings.

The Grand Jury found that Cal Fire and County Sheriff have provided equal or superior dispatch service for less cost to several agencies in our county. The real benefit for taxpayers and residents countywide is the financial and operational efficiencies of a joint agency dispatch service. We recommended the Sheriff provide long term pricing for dispatch service to the remaining cities in the county, one with and one without the new co-dispatch center. Each of the cities should present this as a future budget option.

INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE

Improvements in technology, budget constraints and discussions about a co-located dispatch center have led several agencies to consider combined dispatch operations for the public safety agencies in San Luis Obispo County. In this report the San Luis Obispo Grand Jury (SLOGJ) reviewed dispatch operations throughout the county for potential financial, operational, and service efficiencies that may be achieved by combining dispatch operations. Although discussion about the co-located dispatch center was part of the original purpose for this report, the relocation and redesign during the investigation made accurate information unavailable at this time.

METHOD/PROCEDURE

To obtain information for this report the SLOGJ requested and received budgets for dispatch operations, personnel requirements, and call volumes for all seven cities, County Sheriff and Cal Fire. We interviewed several public safety chiefs and toured both the County Sheriff and Cal Fire dispatch centers. The 2018-19 fiscal year was our primary time frame for comparison. Due to differences in budget detail and definitions for “call for service,” exact comparisons were not possible. Some cities included administration and tech service costs while others did not. We included 911 calls and total calls for service in our report, but used total calls for service as the best proxy for call volume comparisons. We also studied how dispatch operations work when two or more services might be required (i.e. fire and ambulance for a medical emergency). We were unable to find extensive cost information for the current Co-Dispatch Center plan.

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

In 2013, the SLOGJ issued a report entitled “Consolidation of Public Safety Dispatch Systems.” It focused on the Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach attempt to consolidate their police departments and, when that failed, on the potential for consolidation of their public safety dispatch operations. They recommended “The City Councils of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach should consider consolidating the public safety dispatch systems of their respective cities.”

In 2014, Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay moved forward on contracting with the County Sheriff for Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP aka 911) and Law Enforcement dispatch. Grover Beach retained its PSAP and dispatch operation, and took over full dispatch of the Five Cities Fire Authority (FCFA) including Arroyo Grande and Oceano. In 2018, the FCFA began contracting for dispatch service with Cal Fire.

Recently, there has been discussion of a new co-dispatch center that would house both Cal Fire and the County Sheriff, with the capacity to provide service to all the cities and agencies in SLO County. In addition, there has been discussion and a feasibility study about the potential for a smaller consolidation of just Paso Robles, Atascadero, Cal Poly University and the city of San Luis Obispo. Based on these changes and renewed interest, the SLOGJ is once again, reviewing the potential for consolidation of public safety dispatch throughout the county.

NARRATIVE

Dispatchers are the starting point for most public safety events and nearly all emergencies. Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) combines a number of technologies that greatly enhance a dispatcher's ability to handle higher volumes of calls and provide real-time information about incidents and the assets that are available to respond.

Not long ago a dispatcher would require detailed knowledge about the area into which they are dispatching. Today, thanks to Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, a dispatcher is instantly provided with information about the location of the caller and the nearest police or fire personnel available to respond. Through mapping and traffic analysis CAD provides the fastest route for emergency responders. CAD allows one dispatcher to take a 911 call and collect the information concerning the call. In the case of cross service type calls, this information is transferred through the CAD system to the correct agency dispatcher. The transfer is based on geographic data related to the address of the incident. In the case of medical calls, the call is routed to the ambulance dispatcher and to fire dispatch who sends the nearest available fire crew. This ensures the fastest possible response with adequate personnel for the situation.

The public has come to expect timely response to emergency calls. The public expects their 911 calls to be answered instantly, handled professionally, and with service personnel arriving with all the key information necessary to assist them. Although dispatchers excel at multi-tasking and prioritizing, a single dispatcher can easily be over-taxed, handling multiple calls while also assisting officers and firefighters in the field. The combination of new technology and varying intensity of demand for service, make public safety dispatch a natural area for combining the dispatch service of multiple law enforcement and fire service agencies. San Luis Obispo County already has several examples of successful integration of dispatch for multiple agencies.

Cal Fire provides dispatch service to all the unincorporated areas of the county including areas like Templeton and San Miguel. Through contracts, they provide dispatch services to the cities of Pismo Beach, Arroyo Grande, and Grover Beach. In total, Cal Fire dispatches 34 fire stations and crews in SLO County. SLOGJ toured their dispatch center located at their county headquarters on Highway 1. They normally have two or three dispatchers plus a Battalion Commander (BC) on duty and can add more when conditions demand it. They do not provide PSAP (911) service directly, but did dispatch response to 12,863 calls for service (medical and fire) in 2018. The BC is empowered to send additional personnel when the situation warrants it.

Cal Fire is due to start a long-planned remodel of their headquarters in 2020. They did not include a new dispatch center in that plan in expectation that the co-dispatch center would be available. In the interim they will be moving their dispatch operation into a temporary location until either the co-located dispatch center is available or a new Cal Fire dispatch center is planned and funded by the state. The staff indicated that this could be “a long process.”

SLO County Sheriff provides PSAP (911) services to all the unincorporated areas of the County and by contract to the cities of Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay. In addition to dispatching sheriff deputies, they dispatch law enforcement officers from those two cities. In 2018 they received 134,000 calls for service in total, and dispatched nearly 24,000 emergency ambulance calls.

SLOGJ toured the Sheriff Dispatch center located in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), and made several follow-up inquiries. They have four dispatchers, a supervisor and a watch

commander on duty. Each of the agencies (County Sheriff, Arroyo Grande PD, Morro Bay PD and San Luis Ambulance Service) have a dedicated dispatcher. Any dispatcher can answer a 911 call from any of the PSAP areas they serve. The call is then posted to the correct agency dispatcher, and when necessary, backup or additional dispatch service is provided. The Watch Commander does not provide direction to the officers in Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay, but is available to monitor a developing situation in those communities and reposition resources in case they are requested. In total Sheriff dispatch has 21 full time equivalent (FTE) employees (not counting the Watch Commanders) including the five contracted for Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay. San Luis Ambulance receives emergency dispatch service at no cost from the Sheriff dispatch center.

The Sheriff dispatch center uses approximately a third of the EOC building. The remainder of the building is reserved for emergency operations in the event of an accident at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. Staff noted this building was built in 1984 and does not meet a number of current code requirements. Their space allocation is not sufficient to provide dispatch service for all seven cities. In the event the Co-dispatch Center is not available, there is a contingency plan that could provide service to all seven cities.

Both Cal Fire and SLO County Sheriff use a similar methodology to develop the pricing element for their contract service. The county sheriff dispatch service contract accounts for the direct expense of a dedicated dispatcher for each agency without any additional expense for management, administration or, of special note, building rent or capital outlay. Arroyo Grande requires three FTE's for a total of \$393,658 and Morro Bay two FTE's for a total of \$267,436.

The Cal Fire contract adds all direct dispatch costs without any additional expense for management administration or rent. Those costs are divided based on the total calls-for-service from each agency. Morro Bay pays \$71,086 and Arroyo Grande pays \$77,867.

Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay Police chiefs' report they are satisfied with the service they receive and that it is better than their in-house service, due to having multiple dispatchers available when needed, and having the fire dispatch service provided by a separate agency. Both reported that when backup is required there is better coordination than was possible with multiple law enforcement dispatch operations.

In the first six months of operation there were a few issues that were quickly resolved. Any issues today are handled between supervisors with a simple phone call or email.

Both agencies note that it would be difficult to bring back in-house dispatch service, costing over a million dollars and requiring a year or more of lead time.

Similar approval was voiced by the FCFA Chief. Although expense was essentially the same, the Cal Fire dispatchers are trained and dedicated to fire and medical response. With better technology they deliver superior emergency response. In addition, a Battalion Commander is available 24/7 to determine if additional resources are needed. This ensures adequate response from multiple agencies when required.

Cal Fire is under a general contract to provide fire services, including dispatch, to Pismo Beach and San Luis Obispo County. The county then subcontracts out the fire dispatch service provided by Cal Fire to other agencies. In addition, the county contracts Law Enforcement Dispatch services through the County Sheriff's Department to Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay.

There are many factors affecting 911 and public safety calls for service from the various agencies in SLO County. A few of these factors are population, demographics, tourism, job concentration, and homeless populations. In 2018, calls for service from the seven cities in SLO County varied from just over 13,000 for Morro Bay to nearly 60,000 for the city of San Luis Obispo. The unincorporated areas of the county generated nearly 100,000 calls for service. The 911 calls had a more dramatic distribution (911 calls are a subset of calls for service). Morro Bay totaled just over 1,000, San Luis Obispo over 19,000, and the unincorporated areas of the county over 43,000. It should be noted that the definition for calls for service may vary from agency to agency, some include calls from traffic stops, others included all the calls created in the CAD system.

A key number to note is the total base personnel (dispatchers plus supervision without management or computer tech support), in each of the cities that have in-house dispatch operations. With the exception of the city of SLO, which has 12 FTE's, the other cities have six to eight FTEs, despite

a wide range of call levels. For example, the city of Atascadero, with a call for service volume of just over 27,000, has seven FTE's and the city of Grover Beach, with a call for service volume just over 16,000, has six FTEs.

On the expense side, the cities of Grover Beach, Pismo Beach, Atascadero and Paso Robles pay in the \$650,000-\$850,000 range for their base dispatch personnel. Using a conservative figure of \$100,000 for maintenance and management of their own PSAP and radio systems, the minimum cost for a PSAP dispatch operation would be approximately \$750,000 – \$950,000.

The cities of San Luis Obispo, Atascadero, Paso Robles and Cal Poly University hired City Gate Associates to provide a Fire/Police Merger Analysis. Initial findings indicated that the merger was fiscally unfeasible, Phase I of the study was reported in May of 2020 and the Grand Jury received a copy in June, 2020.

The report highlights several key hurdles to the merging (by contract or Joint Powers Authority (JPA)) of dispatch operations. The first is the 16-31% disparity in salary and benefits between agencies. For example, Atascadero dispatcher's (Support Services Technician) salary and benefits are 27% lower than that of a dispatcher in the City of San Luis Obispo. Second, this analysis allocated cost based on the percentage of "total workload". As a result, there was a total savings of over \$500,000 in personnel costs, however it would not be evenly distributed. The cities of Atascadero and Paso Robles would pay over \$320,000 and Cal Poly and the city of SLO would save \$830,000. The analysis noted that there were solutions for the reliable radio communication between the various agencies but did not estimate any expense to achieve them. They also noted concerns by the Fire Chiefs about, 911 performance standards, dispatcher training, and dispatch of resources into other jurisdictions.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the Grand Jury report "Consolidation for Dispatch Operation for Public Safety" in 2012, the cities of Arroyo Grande and Morro Bay have worked through the governance and operational concerns and contracted with the County Sheriff and Cal Fire for dispatch service that is less expensive and is equal or better than their in-house service.

It is likely that the similar sized cities of Grover Beach and Pismo Beach could achieve similar results for their PSAP and law enforcement dispatch. For the cities of Atascadero and Paso Robles to achieve similar financial results, the County Sheriff would need to mitigate the difference in pay scales. The city of San Luis Obispo has similar pay scales to the County Sheriff and would likely realize some financial benefit from joint dispatch.

Beyond expense, there are significant service level benefits from joint dispatch. Dispatchers trained and dedicated to either fire or police operations provide a safer environment for first responders and improved service to the public. Better coordination during major incidents, where mutual or emergency aid is required, will improve response times and ensure timely additional support. The higher capacity of a larger operation will reduce the impact from turnover, illness or injury. There are challenges as well, but the recent success of agencies who contract for dispatch service indicates they can be met and still deliver more cost effective and operational service.

FINDINGS

- F1. The cities of Atascadero, Grover Beach, Paso Robles, Pismo Beach and San Luis Obispo who operate their own PSAPs, could benefit financially and operationally by contracting their dispatch operation with Cal Fire and the County Sheriff.
- F2. The County Sheriff and Cal Fire have demonstrated that they can provide cost effective and operational dispatch service that is equal or better to the smaller agencies in San Luis Obispo county through contracting.
- F3. The portion of the EOC building now allocated to County Sheriff Dispatch operations is insufficient to provide dispatch service to all seven cities.
- F4. A state-of-the-art dispatch center could be a benefit to the County Sheriff's aging building inventory, but the real benefit for taxpayers and residents countywide is the financial and operational efficiencies of a joint agency dispatch service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Cities of Atascadero, Grover Beach, Paso Robles, Pismo Beach and San Luis Obispo, should each request a proposal from the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff and Cal Fire to provide contract dispatch services and present it as an option in future budgets.
- R2. The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff and Cal Fire should modify their contingency plans for dispatch to all seven cities into a viable alternative to the proposed co-dispatch center.
- R3. The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors should require the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff to provide a clear, long-term pricing for dispatch service with and without the proposed co-dispatch center.
- R4. The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors should include the reallocation of space in the EOC building for expanded dispatch operations in their current negotiations with PG&E regarding the closing of Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant in 2025.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following people are required to respond to the findings and recommendations within the timeframe shown and in accordance with the California Penal Code Section 933.05:

The City of Atascadero shall respond to R1

The City of Grover Beach shall respond to R1

The City of Pismo Beach shall respond to R1

The City of Paso Robles shall respond to R1

The City of San Luis Obispo shall respond to R1

San Luis Obispo County Sheriff shall respond to R2 and R3

San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors shall respond to R3 and R4

The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo County Superior 322 Court by January 5, 2021. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to 323 the Grand Jury.

AGENCY RESPONSE REQUIREMENTS

The Penal Code Section 933.05 that specifies the format and methodology for agency responses is listed below. All agency respondents are required to respond to all findings and recommendations in the following manner:

- If the respondent disagrees wholly or partially with an item, the respondent must elaborate on the portion of the item that they disagree with, and provide an explanation.
- If a respondent notes that an item will be implemented in the future, the response must include a timeframe for implementation.
- If a respondent notes that an item requires further analysis, the agency must include in the response an explanation of and the scope of what will be studied and the timeframe needed for the study. The timeframe for follow-up from the agency cannot exceed six months.
- If the item will not be implemented or is not reasonable, the respondent is required to provide a detailed explanation.

933.05. Findings and Recommendations

- (a) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
- (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.
- (b) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a timeframe for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or

reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.

- (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.

| Presiding Judge | Grand Jury |
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| Presiding Judge Jacquelyn H. Duffy Superior Court of California 1035 Palm Street Room 355 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408 | San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403 |

APPENDICES, ATTACHMENTS, BIBLIOGRAPHY, GLOSSARY AND SUGGESTED READING

City of San Luis Obispo Merger Analysis May 14, 2020.