

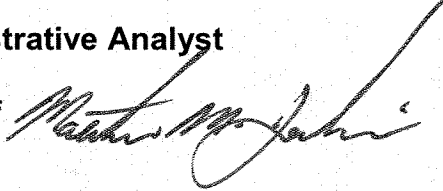
County Fire Response to Grand Jury Report "Emergency Medical Response"  
July 28, 2010



**CAL FIRE**  
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*Matt Jenkins, Fire Chief*

**TO:** Geoff O'Quest, County Administrative Analyst  
**FROM:** Matt Jenkins, County Fire Chief   
**DATE:** July 28, 2010

**SUBJECT:** Response to the Grand Jury Report "Emergency Medical Response"

This memo is in response to the FY 2009-10 Grand Jury report titled "Emergency Medical Response," released in June of 2010. The report includes seven findings and three recommendations, of which CAL FIRE/County Fire is required to respond to Findings 3 and 7, and Recommendations 2 and 3. CAL FIRE's responses are discussed below.

***Background - CAL FIRE/San Luis Obispo County Fire***

Under a cooperative agreement CAL FIRE has served as the San Luis Obispo County Fire Department for over 80 years. In San Luis Obispo County, CAL FIRE provides contract fire protection services from 21 fire stations and five support facilities to the County of San Luis Obispo, the Avila Beach Community Services District, the City of Pismo Beach, the Los Osos Community Services District and the Cayucos Fire Protection District. This service is a key component of CAL FIRE's mission, as directed and authorized by the State Legislature and statutes, to provide contractual emergency services throughout California when requested by local agencies. CAL FIRE has cooperative agreements with over 145 local government agencies in 35 of the State's 58 counties, 25 cities, 31 fire districts and 34 other special districts.

CAL FIRE/San Luis Obispo County Fire provides dispatch services to a total of 9 fire departments and CALSTAR Air Ambulance. These programs are mutually beneficial and provide for the level of service that each agency desires and can afford. CAL FIRE is a modern, full service fire protection and emergency management agency that provides all-risk emergency services. We are committed to providing Regional Fire

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Protection solutions that make the most effective use of limited emergency protection resources by efficiently sharing valuable personnel and equipment.

### **Response to Grand Jury Findings**

The CAL FIRE – San Luis Obispo Unit is required by the Grand Jury to respond to Findings 3 and 7.

**Finding 3** *"The Grand Jury found confusion between the sheriff and CAL FIRE dispatchers in the 911 calls reviewed. On the four 911 calls reviewed dispatchers refused incident commanders requests for a helicopter."*

### **CAL FIRE PARTIALLY AGREES WITH THE FINDING**

**Comments:** The four calls reviewed by the Grand Jury are not identified in the report, so we cannot speak to those specific calls. However, CAL FIRE records include a number of instances where Sheriff's dispatchers have refused incident commanders' requests for helicopters, which have caused delays. In other cases, delays occurred because Sheriff's dispatchers disagreed with CAL FIRE dispatchers, who were relaying incident commanders' helicopter requests, on whether the incident met policy 119 criteria.

Two incidents over the 2010 July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend are examples of this. In both cases Sheriffs' dispatchers questioned the CAL FIRE dispatchers despite the fact that the current policy states that the incident commander (CAL FIRE) assumes responsibility for meeting the policy 119 criteria.

Following the July 4th weekend, a meeting was called by CAL FIRE on July 8, with the Sheriff's Dispatch Center, CHP, County Health Agency, and EMSA. The agencies discussed what steps could be taken to improve dispatch response times for EMS helicopters. As a result of this meeting, it is our understanding that the Sheriff's Dispatch Center will no longer question an allied dispatch center's or Incident Commander's request for a helicopter, but instead will assume the requesting agency is taking responsibility for following Policy 119.

**Finding 7** *"Other Counties in California have combined police and fire dispatch with reported improved communication."*

### **CAL FIRE AGREES WITH THE FINDING**

**Comments:** Combined dispatching operations have resulted in improved communications in many areas. A co-located dispatch center that combines fire, sheriff and EMS can be effective in improving overall emergency and disaster response.

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There are examples of combined dispatch centers that utilize one of the agencies to dispatch both law enforcement and fire. This often causes an issue because of conflicting priorities between the needs of law enforcement and fire/EMS incident management. Agency specific dispatchers are better able to anticipate the resources necessary to provide services in the shortest time possible.

Co-located dispatching of fire, sheriff and EMS by dispatchers working for their respective agencies can be a great improvement. There can be daily collaboration but also improved interoperability of emergency responders. Each dispatcher can still specialize in their agency's needs and prioritize accordingly, but can also simply "shout across the room" if need be to ensure interagency coordination.

***Response to Grand Jury Recommendations***

The CAL FIRE – San Luis Obispo Unit is required by the Grand Jury to respond to Recommendations 2 and 3.

***Recommendation 2*** "Dispatchers must follow Policy 119 and not overrule an incident commander's request for an EMS helicopter."

**THE RECOMMENDATION HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED**

**Comments:** At the July 8<sup>th</sup> meeting held after the two incidents that occurred on the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, this recommendation was discussed. As a result of this meeting, it is our understanding that the agencies present (CAL FIRE, Sheriff, CHP, EMSA and County Health) agree on this point, and that the Sheriff's Dispatch Center will no longer question an allied dispatch center's or incident commander's request for a helicopter.

***Recommendation 3*** "The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff, SLOEMSA and the County Board of Supervisors should pursue combining Sheriff and CAL FIRE dispatch operation centers."

**THE RECOMMENDATION REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS**

**Comments:** Co-locating dispatching of fire, law enforcement and EMS would provide a good solution to helicopter dispatch delays. It would improve interoperability and collaboration of emergency response. It would also provide an opportunity to further consolidate fire, law enforcement and EMS agency dispatching under one roof if other local entities chose to do so.

Currently neither Sheriff nor CAL FIRE has a facility able to accommodate the co-locating of dispatch services. CAL FIRE currently is planning to incorporate a new Emergency Command Center (ECC) into a much needed headquarters project with the State. However, that facility is still several years away, and the current design does not include co-location of dispatch operations.

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An analysis of options for implementing this recommendation would have to be completed, including a preliminary needs assessment for a co-located dispatch facility, review of existing facilities, and cost benefit analysis of the various options. Participants in the analysis would likely include EMS providers (including CAL FIRE), the Sheriff, the County Health Agency (as the local Emergency Medical Services Agency), the County General Services Agency, and the County Administrative Office. While desirable, this ultimately is a complex solution that would require significant fiscal, political and agency resources. There are also ways of improving the EMS dispatch system without co-locating of dispatch centers, such as improvements in dispatching technology or moving the Fire and Emergency Medical dispatching functions in the County into a single dispatch agency. These possibilities should be included as part of an analysis of the various options available for improving communication and the overall effectiveness of EMS response.

***Summary***

CAL FIRE appreciates the Grand Jury's efforts in identifying deficiencies in the EMS system and the need for agencies including CAL FIRE/San Luis Obispo County Fire to make improvements. Like all agencies involved in the EMS system, CAL FIRE is committed to providing the very best service possible to San Luis Obispo County residents and visitors. We believe there are many possible solutions, and CAL FIRE is prepared to work with all of the agencies and entities in the EMS system to improve the EMS dispatching process.