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LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE TIME LAG



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8. LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE TIME LAG

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Several negative articles in various Los Angeles area newspapers regarding poor response time to 9-1-1 medical emergency calls within the City of Los Angeles prompted this investigation¹. A committee of the Los Angeles County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) found that response times in the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) began to increase when its budget was decreased. The Grand Jury believes that the Los Angeles City Council may have relied on inaccurate response time data² in making its budget reduction decision. The Grand Jury also found that LAFD does not utilize its resources to its best advantage. To be specific, the Grand Jury urges that LAFD's funding be restored, that its engine companies be reinstated, it incorporate civilian call handlers, use a non-proprietary Emergency Medical Dispatch protocol and update technical equipment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 The City of Los Angeles should reinstate the funding to the LAFD that was cut in 2008.³

While the Grand Jury acknowledges and commends the Los Angeles City Council for restoring some funding to LAFD, additional funding is crucial to place back into service the multiple engine companies' ambulances idled by previous budget cuts.

8.2 LAFD should incorporate civilians as call handlers in its dispatch center. LAFD has traditionally used sworn firefighters to answer 9-1-1 calls. Other local emergency response departments use civilian call handlers with no apparent decline in service. This would provide economic savings and allow sworn personnel to return to active emergency service.

8.3 LAFD should use a customizable Emergency Medical Dispatch Protocol to allow for call handler flexibility in responding to 9-1-1 calls.

8.4 LAFD must update the technical equipment in its vehicles and dispatch center as outlined in the November 2012 report from the task force on Information and Data Analysis (IDA). Technical innovations are also needed to reduce response times for the LAFD, such as the new Smart911⁴ system that has been implemented in other fire agencies.

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-1205-lafd-chief-20121205,0,3100712.story>

² <http://www.firehouse.com/news/10654628/lafd-officials-admit-to-exaggerating-response-stats>

³ LA Times dated December 4, 2012

⁴ http://www.latimes.com/search/dispatcher.front?Query=Smart911&target=adv_all

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury's Fire Dispatch Committee visited four different fire department emergency centers: Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD), Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACFD), Verdugo Fire Communications Center (VFCC), which serves thirteen separate fire agencies, and Long Beach Fire Department (LBFD). The Grand Jury also obtained response time data from these four agencies and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards for emergency medical response times, and attended a meeting of the Los Angeles City Council which focused on the LAFD's response times. The Grand Jury also interviewed senior members of each of the above four agencies as well as a senior leader of the union representing Los Angeles City firefighters. In addition the Grand Jury interviewed many call handlers and observed their work in "real time".

BACKGROUND

Committee members met with senior leaders in the four largest fire departments/agencies in Los Angeles County and discussed their operations and response times. Each department or agency reports response times differently but they have been simplified in the comparison chart below. Grand Jury members were also given a tour of their respective dispatch centers.

1. Los Angeles Fire Department:

- a. Sworn fire fighters are trained as call handlers and rotated through the dispatch center. A call handler's shift is fifty-six hours; they sleep on site so as to be immediately available should there be an unusual spike in calls, such as during a major disaster.
- b. The Emergency Medical Dispatch Protocol to guide the dispatcher is available both in hard copy and on the computer. This script is proprietary and modification or deviation from it is not permitted.
- c. Medical emergency calls are prioritized to determine whether to send an Advanced Life Support (ALS) or Basic Life Support (BLS) unit.
- d. LAFD transports patients as needed to a medical facility.

2. Verdugo Fire Communications Center:

- a. Civilians are trained as call handlers and work a twelve hour shift.
- b. The Emergency Medical Dispatch Protocol to guide the dispatcher is both in hard copy and on the computer. This script is customized by the medical staff, with input from call handlers.
- c. Medical emergency calls are prioritized to determine whether to send an ALS or BLS unit.

- d. Agencies affiliated with VFCC transport patients to a medical facility either with agency ambulances or by private contractors.

3. Los Angeles County Fire Department:

- a. Civilians are trained as call handlers and work a twelve hour shift.
- b. The Emergency Medical Dispatch Protocol to guide the call handler is both in hard copy and on the computer. This script is customized by the medical staff, with input from call handlers.
- c. As soon as a call is determined to be a medical emergency, it is dispatched. The caller is advised that units are en route and the dispatcher stays on line to assist as needed. Any update to the call is sent to the responding unit’s terminal.
- d. LACFD transports patients to a medical facility through private contractors.

4. Long Beach Fire Department:

- a. Civilians are trained as call handlers and work a twelve hour shift.
- b. The Emergency Medical Dispatch Protocol is on hard copy only. This script is customized by the medical staff with input from call handlers.
- c. Medical emergency calls are prioritized to determine whether to send an ALS or BLS unit.
- d. LBFD transports patients as needed to a medical facility.

The following response time chart created by the Grand Jury, shows the various agencies. It is noted that LAFD response time is six minutes, 47 seconds (6:47), which is one minute, 25 seconds (1:25) to 28 seconds (:28) slower than the other agencies.

	LAFD*	VFCC**	LACFD***	LBFD	NFPA
Time Out	1:42	:56	1:19	1:00	1:00
Travel Time	5:05	4:26	4:46	5:19	5:00
Total Time	6:47	5:22	6:05	6:19	6:00

Time Out: From call received to dispatch of equipment.

Travel Time: From dispatch to arrival on site. This includes turn-out time i.e.the time needed for firefighters to dress and get equipment rolling.

Total Time: Time from call being answered to equipment arriving on site.

Times above are averages. Agencies leave out times that are far outside the norm (outliers).

*Times based on Task Force IDA, dated 11/2/2012

**VFCC times shown are an average of all the thirteen affiliated agencies. Verdugo Fire has a “seamless” or “no borders” operation for fire and is working on a similar operation for medical responses.

***LACFD times shown are for urban response

FINDINGS

The Grand Jury found that the LAFD’s response time, as shown by the chart on the previous page, is noticeably longer than the other agencies reviewed by the Grand Jury. The following factors, which apply to all fire agencies, hamper response times:

1. All 9-1-1 calls go to the primary Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), which is the local police agency (per state regulations), with the fire department being secondary. The primary PSAP must transfer a fire/medical call to the secondary PSAP within thirty seconds (per NFPA guidelines). The primary dispatcher remains on the line to ensure that the call is transferred and that no police involvement is required.
2. Language can be a major factor as there are up to one hundred different languages or dialects spoken in LA County. According to all four fire agencies, an interpreter may have to be brought on the line to assist.
3. Cell phones, unlike hard-wired home or business phones, do not give an exact address, which is a critical piece of information needed before dispatching a unit. Newer cell phones, equipped with GPS, can now be triangulated to give an approximate location. In the past all cell phone calls went to the California Highway Patrol (CHP); now with more modern technology, 9-1-1 calls go to the nearest 9-1-1 call center. The CHP should still receive calls if the caller is on a freeway, in close proximity to a freeway or the cell phone, for whatever reason, cannot be accurately triangulated.
4. The caller’s state of mind, possibly being in a state of hysteria, could hamper getting needed information. The human factor always plays a part, even something as simple as the caller being unsure as to his whereabouts or being able to give an accurate description of the situation.
5. A principal factor that produces poor response time is the on-going problem of budget cuts.⁵ Geography can also affect response time. Calls from hilly communities with narrow roads make it difficult for fire equipment to maneuver. If a caller lives in a relatively isolated location, response time is certain to be greater.

⁵ <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/04/local/la-me-1205-lafd-chief-20121205>

FINDINGS continued

Funding: Of the above factors, the most crucial and the most obvious impediment to adequate response times is the budget issue. Once funding of the LAFD was reduced, based in part on faulty or outdated data, response times began to rise. Additionally, thirteen ambulances were idled. It is a given that fewer resources would lead directly to increased response time. The Grand Jury strongly recommends that previous LAFD budget cuts be fully restored. The Grand Jury recognizes that the LAFD is currently planning a different, yet controversial solution.⁶

Civilian Call Handlers: The Grand Jury was impressed with the use by other large agencies in Los Angeles County of civilians to handle incoming 9-1-1 calls. LAFD has for many years used sworn firefighter personnel for such duty. The Grand Jury recommends that this change. Firefighters should be fighting fires and responding to medical emergencies, not answering phone calls. Moreover, the skill set needed to obtain information from a 9-1-1 caller is not the same skill set as fighting a fire or giving emergency care. The Grand Jury believes it is a better practice to have trained civilians perform call handling functions. This would eliminate the need to rotate firefighters into the Dispatch Center. Further, call handlers should be given a dispatch protocol to follow so that the necessary information is gathered, but that protocol should not be a handicap. Dispatch call handlers should have flexibility in dealing with callers and should not be subject to discipline for deviating from a dispatch protocol.

Technology: Improvements are needed in the technology used by the LAFD. These are mentioned in detail by the Task Force that the LAFD commissioned in June of 2012. The Grand Jury learned from several fire officials that the Computer Assisted Dispatch (CAD) is thirty years old. Hardware and software must be brought up to current technology levels. This technology could include software like Smart911. The Smart911 system is designed to create a safety profile for the household, such as medical conditions, mobility, etc. This profile would appear on the call handler's screen, which could expedite response time by avoiding the need to ask certain questions.

Response Time Reports: Reports should be easy to read and understand. The Grand Jury was given response times reports in various formats, some of which were confusing. The Grand Jury believes the general public would benefit by having these response times presented in a simplified form, similar to the above chart.

⁶ Los Angeles Times dated April 17, 2013 LAFD to shift staff to medical calls

Analysis: Notwithstanding the above criticisms and concerns, the area fire departments are doing the job that is expected. Response times, though, can sometimes be a factor in the difference between life and death. There have been cases where a person has died while waiting for the medical personnel to arrive.⁷ With more funding, idle ambulances can be put back into service and there can be an upgrade of technical equipment with a consequent reduction in response times. The Grand Jury acknowledges with great appreciation the dedication and commitment of all emergency responders in Los Angeles County and hopes that responses to this report will result in an enhancement of their service to all members of our community.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Recommendation	Responding Agencies
8.1	City of Los Angeles
8.2, 8.3, 8.4	Los Angeles Fire Department

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ALS	Advance Life Support
BLS	Basic Life Support
CAD	Computer Assisted Dispatch
CHP	California Highway Patrol
IDA	Information and Data Analysis
LACFD	Los Angeles County Fire Department
LAFD	Los Angeles Fire Department
LBFD	Long Beach Fire Department
NFPA	National Fire Protection Association
PSAP	Public Safety Answering Point
VFCC	Verdugo Fire Communications Center

⁷ http://www.dailynews.com/news/ci_22241825/lafd-probes-response-time-death-teen-playing-soccer

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