

911 Ad Hoc Inquiry Committee
Recommendation to Council
April 14, 2015
submitted by Harry Haas, chairman

HISTORY

In response to public outcry over some high profile media events concerning 911 services, the Luzerne County Council voted to form an ad hoc 911 Inquiry Committee on Tuesday, January 13. The First committee meeting was held following the general meeting on Tuesday, January 24 with council members Bobeck, Dobash, Haas, Morelli, and Sorokas. Haas was selected as chair.

CHARGE

Created by Council Resolution on January 13, 2015 and set forth by the Council Chair on January 22, 2015, the commission of the 9-1-1 Ad Hoc Inquiry Committee was to:

- 1) Encourage the development of policies and procedures for emergency response and public safety in Luzerne County.
- 2) Facilitate the public discussion between and among local municipalities and County officials who are responsible for 911 response protocols and with receiving relevant input from all sources that may help in the identification and establishment of effective policies, procedures, and protocols at all levels.
- 3) Select a chair, determine the scope and parameters of its inquiry, develop and advertise a schedule of meetings, and issue invitations to those who are identified as playing key roles in the development of public safety protocols by February 13, 2015.
 - a) develop and implement the process to streamline addresses across the municipalities.
 - b) consider shortening Luzerne County response time from the state mandated time of nine minutes.
 - c) identify causes of both human error and CAD system error at 911 and target resources needed for improvement.
 - d) maximize efficiency of 1st-2nd-3rd responder choices for local municipalities.
 - e) increase public awareness of 911 on county website and develop FAQs to be placed in resident homes.
- 4) Conclude its hearings by March 31, 2015 and present a report at the April 14, 2015 regular meeting of County Council. The report shall include a recommendation to Council regarding its support of County 911 services. This ad hoc Committee shall be dissolved following the presentation of its report.

PROCESS & MEETING SUMMARIES

January 27, 2015 @ 11:00PM

Following the regular council meeting, the first formal committee meeting was held with council members Bobeck, Dobash, Haas, Morelli, and Sorokas present. Haas was selected as chair. The scope of the committee was discussed and next meeting scheduled.

February 3, 2015 @ 3:00PM

Committee members and director Rosencrans participated in the County Commissioner Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) teleconference call. The purpose was to restate the urgency of rewriting the 25-year old 911 state funding bill before its expiration on June 30. The call gave a summary of the bill draft (since named HB911) and included the rate, formula, and administration of 911 funding.

February 3, 2015 @ 5:30PM

The 911 director and leadership team participated in a round table with the committee. Strengths were identified, most notably that 98.6% of calls are answered within 10 seconds. The 2013 PEMA report also stated that Luzerne County "meets or exceeds" every area of review. The director identified the greatest need was to recruit and retain qualified telecommunicators (TCs). The reasons cited for high turnover: the general stress of the job, intense training, low wages considering the job description, mandatory overtime, losing staff to neighboring employers, and understaffing of the current compliment of 65 TCs plus the 8 part-time TCs budgeted for 2015. Luzerne County 911 was compared with York County, which staffs 80 FTEs. Furthermore, management and support staff is 20 to 44 FTEs, respectively. Lastly, public awareness options were discussed. "Smart911" is an excellent tool that would benefit citizens. Both 911 leadership and members of the public had ideas about how to improve public awareness.

February 23, 2015 @ 5:30PM

Committee members participated in an onsite tour of the 911 center. Members were able to see call taking and dispatching in action, interact with all staff members both on the floor and leadership in the office, and view features of the CAD system. Most notably, committee members: were impressed by the comprehensiveness of the computer system, observed strain on the staff who had to cover multiple zones when colleagues took breaks, received reports from TCs of nonessential traffic from responders over the radio, witnessed redundant and dropped calls that bogged the system, and experienced the general congeniality of the staff. It should be noted that the visit occurred on a low-volume night and extra leadership was in place. The tour was very helpful in understanding the operations and needs of county 911.

March 10, 2015 5:00-6:00PM

After March 3 meeting was cancelled because of inclement weather, the committee crafted a survey to be issued to all local responders paid/volunteer/regional/municipal, elected officials, 911 staff, and even stakeholders like the DA's office and crime watch groups. Surveys were issued electronically, and were given one week to return with the option to be anonymous or mailed to the clerk in order to maximize responses. The goals: 1) to share and build upon constructive ideas from across the county 2) to inform the council of specific action to improve 911. It was disappointing to see that only 66 out of 485 issued surveys (14%) were returned.

March 23, 2015 5:00-6:00PM

Comprehensive EMS Quality Improvement and Performance Review presentation from the State Dept. of Health and EMS of Northeastern PA. This report showed that response times in rural areas of the county generally lagged behind urban areas. Local responders had an opportunity to address the speakers with their concerns. The speakers reiterated that this report would not be used in any punitive way, but it is the "first attempt to gain an understanding of true performance" and remains a "work in progress." It does show that different zones have varying successes and needs throughout the county, and one size may not necessarily fit all.

March 23, 2015 @ 6:00PM

Public Input Session was based on survey results. After asking specific questions with little response, attenders spoke on what specific issues had affected their community. The feedback was often passionate, generally constructive, and on point.

Saturday, April 11, 2015

Second Annual 911 Center Open House to the public. The approximate attendance was 200. See news article, which included signing up for Smart 911 via www.luzernecounty911.com

RECOMMENDATIONS

Charge #1: To develop and implement the process to streamline addresses across the municipalities

This ranked number 2 on the responder survey. The problems are manifold between duplicate streets in adjacent municipalities, changing street names once it crosses a municipal line, callers ignorant of their municipality, and inexperienced call takers unfamiliar with the geography. Under the commissioner form of government, Ordinance 1-June-2009 "E911 Property Addressing" was passed which allowed for such measures for public safety. Furthermore, the FCC has mandated that wireless carriers provide a "dispatchable location within 50 meters" for 80% of calls by 2021. (adopted 1/29/2015 PS Docket 07-114) So while the county has jurisdiction in this matter, many of these issues should subside in the near future. Regardless, because this is a current major issue and there are many causes, the committee recommends the following in order of rising cost and difficulty:

- 1) Set forth budget priorities that retain the most knowledgeable telecommunicators who know the differences between the streets.
- 2) Adhere to rigorous training of new telecommunicators as evidenced in the geography training manuals and high standards to gain employment.
- 3) Raise public awareness of the municipality in which they're traveling with appropriate signage.
- 4) Encourage dialogue between neighboring jurisdictions to renumber streets.
- 5) Encourage dialogue between neighboring jurisdictions to rename streets.

Charge #2: To consider shortening Luzerne County response time from the state mandated time of 9 minutes

This ranked second to last in the responder survey and those who responded said that it would have a negative impact. Volunteer organizations are especially worried that EMS of NEPA could impose sanctions or revoke their license for failing to crew within the allotted time. Professional, full-time organizations tended to say that a time change would look good to the public but have no real impact on response time because they are already at the station or unit. Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

- 1) Take no action to alter existing response time but rather consider working closely with the agencies and Municipalities found to have many instances of delayed responses or "no crews". Luzerne County 9-1-1 staff currently tracks progress and provides reports on a quarterly basis to EMS of NEPA. This monitoring should continue and Luzerne County 9-1-1 staff are in the position to promptly report any and all issues to EMS of NEPA and assist them with "educating and informing" the Municipal officials and agencies on regionalization and striving for better response times and quality patient care.

Charge #3: To identify causes of both human error and CAD system error at 911 and target resources needed for improvement

This was the top priority from every stakeholder: the responder survey, 911 management, and 911 employees. Committee members viewed the human shortages firsthand. Lastly, according to the Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act 53 ss120b.101, "maintaining adequate facilities for answering 911 calls and dispatching a proper response" is the state mandate and council's main responsibility out of all the issues discussed by this committee. Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

- 1) Adopt a resolution for HB911 that supports reform in order to fully fund 911 apart from property tax. The bill replaces the original Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act (Act 78 of 1990) before the June 30, 2015 sunset. Its main point is to increase current 911 subscriber fees to appropriately fund county operations and system upgrades. (For Luzerne County, the current subscriber fee of \$1.25 for landline and Voice-over-Internet [VoIP] fees yields approximately \$2,150,000.00 per year. The current subscriber fee of \$1.00 for wireless devices collected by the Commonwealth of PA and distributed to Luzerne County based on wireless call volume for Luzerne County (73%) and for wireless eligible expenses only yields approximately \$2,400,000.00 per year. Under current law, this can fluctuate and there is no guaranteed budgetary revenue per year. The wireless budget cycle follows the State fiscal year of July 1-June 30 annually. Wireless and wireline revenue represents approximately 68.5% of 9-1-1 annual operating and system costs. The remainder, \$2,091,658.00, comes from the property tax). Resolution is attached for council approval.
- 2) Direct the legislative committee to enlist the support of legislators from our caucus.
- 3) Support the 2015 contract regarding 911 employees as suggested by management. (already voted by council majority 9-2)

Charge #4: To maximize efficiency of 1st-2nd-3rd responder choices for local municipalities

State statute dictates that responder choice is the jurisdiction of the elected officials of each municipality and not the county. Logically, first due should be the closest geographically, but proximity does not always ensure fastest response. Although unwilling to share in financial costs, more than half of respondents said they were willing to share resources. To achieve optimal response time on this level we must overcome pride, cost, turf battles, and politics. Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

- 1) Encourage municipalities to keep open dialogue with their neighbors and work through Councils of Government.
- 2) Encourage municipalities to participate in the association of Townships and Boroughs.
- 3) Encourage municipalities to offer incentives to volunteers in exchange for their service, which saves money and lives.
- 4) Appoint a liaison(s) from the County Council to represent council at regional and local EMS events and to provide a forum to hear employee concerns.

Charge #5: To increase public awareness of 911 on county website and develop FAQs to be placed in resident homes

The committee feels this may be the most cost effective means to increase 911 response time, and it falls under the purview of Luzerne County 911. Therefore the committee commends the practices already done by our staff:

- 1) Collaborating training with LCCC.
- 2) Developing a customer satisfaction telephone survey.
- 3) Posting relevant content on website, Facebook, and Twitter.
- 4) Planning televised Public Awareness Campaign on PA Homepage and local stations.
- 5) Annual Open Houses at the 911 Center.

The committee further recommends the following actions for Luzerne County 911 this calendar year:

- I. Collaborate with the LCCC Registrar's office to educate first year students in Smart911 and offer the opportunity to sign up. Also, collaborate with at least one county school district to educate parents at Kindergarten registration or on back-to-school night. This pilot program could be eventually used with other colleges and/or schools.
- II. Implement customer satisfaction telephone survey for 1% sample and compile data.
- III. Post more frequent "Smart911 Sign-up" and "Know your Municipality" reminders on social media.
- IV. Design a template for all relevant 911 emergency information to be posted in homes and public places and submit design to council. The format will be a sticker, magnet, or placard. Once the design is developed, the committee recommends to council to seek out funding streams to print and to distribute to residents/businesses.

Respectfully Submitted,

911 Ad Hoc Inquiry Members
Jim Bobeck
Kathy Dobash
Harry Haas, chairman
Rick Morelli
Eileen Sorokas

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Director Fred Rosencrans and his leadership team for their professionalism and willingness to answer any questions we had.

Operational Services Division Head Tanis Manseau for general helpfulness.

Fellow members of the 911 committee for your thoroughness and congeniality.

The Northeast Senate Caucus and specifically Senator Lisa Baker for their advocacy to commission the state quality improvement and performance review of Luzerne County.

The directors of both EMS of Northeast PA and the PA Department of Health and their colleagues who presented before the committee.

All the staff members at Luzerne County 911 who welcomed us in person and/or provided us feedback about operations.

Local responders and elected officials who took the time to complete the survey and/or attended the public input session.

Most importantly our clerk to council, Mrs. Sharon Lawrence, who took great energy to format our 911 survey, disseminate media advisories, communicate with the many stakeholders, and made sure everyone felt welcome to the courthouse.