

Alarm over Chicago's 911 call center changes

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The operations floor at Chicago's 911 center is getting a \$31 million upgrade stalled by contract irregularities, but it's turning into a nightmare that threatens to slow response times to 911 calls, employees contend.

Dispatchers and call takers describe a host of problems, ranging from dropped 911 calls and a new answering system that demands more manpower to computers that no longer allow call takers to monitor radio communications at fire scenes.

They also complain about a new floor plan that moved fire and EMS dispatchers assigned to handle 911 calls from Chicago's North Side away from call takers who do the same, preventing the two groups from communicating in a way that could speed response times.

"We are not against change. The floor needed to be upgraded. [But] the way they are doing it is dangerous and irresponsible," said one dispatcher, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of losing his job. "Putting consoles up, then working out the glitches is more suited to an office that handles paper reports — not lives and property. You can't install something that critical, then play catchup when there are problems."

The dispatcher claimed that there were 30 dropped calls between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Nov. 7.

"The fire call taker would hear a beep in their headset. They'd start to talk. And the call would drop," the dispatcher said. "They had a fire at 5613 W. Chicago at 12:34 p.m. and couldn't get more information on it. They got the initial call and, when a bunch of people started calling, the calls dropped."

Under the old system, call takers who handle administrative calls from firehouses, alarm companies or other city departments would automatically get overflow emergency calls. That's not the case with the new system, putting an additional strain on manpower.

The dispatcher complained about the inability to monitor the “fire-ground” frequency that includes radio communications between firefighters and chiefs at fire scenes.

“The fire [that Capt.] Herbie Johnson died in, the South Side dispatch which is using the new consoles was completely caught off-guard when they asked for a ‘Mayday’ because they couldn’t listen to fire-ground,” the dispatcher said. “It didn’t cause his death or play a role in it. It’s just an example of how it hurts us as dispatchers. If we can hear what firefighters are saying on the scene, we can start to get ready to send more equipment and figure out who to send. That can save a minute or two.”

Gary Schenkel, executive director of the city’s Office of Emergency Management and Communications, countered, “Any reference to Capt. Johnson’s death and a technical problem is 100 percent false. That’s an irresponsible statement.”

Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford agreed that the inability to monitor fire-ground frequency had “absolutely no bearing whatsoever” on Johnson’s death.

Although it’s “nice to have” a system that allows call takers to monitor communications at fire scenes, it’s not necessary, Schenkel said.

“Dispatchers can still hear fire ground. Call takers can’t. The new system does not support that. They don’t need to hear it. They have nothing to do with the operation. That’s a dispatcher’s responsibility,” he said.

Schenkel acknowledged that it’s “challenging” to install a new system and still keep the 911 center functioning 24 hours a day. It requires a “sound-reducing wall” between old and new sections that’s being moved as sections are completed.

But, he said: “We have not had any dropped calls. That’s why we’re very cautious about the progress. We want to make sure it’s absolutely, 100 percent functional before we move to each sequence. We test for two weeks before we move on and incorporate the next new piece of technology. That’s why the first phase will take much longer than the subsequent six phases. My quote to AT&T is they won’t put in a system that is not 100 percent accurate before installation.”

Two years ago, Inspector General Joe Ferguson accused high-ranking officials of the office that runs Chicago’s \$217 million 911 center of more than \$23 million worth of contract irregularities that created “significant risk to the city’s emergency preparedness.”

Ferguson contended that the Office of Emergency Management and Communications improperly routed a sole-source contract to Schaumburg-based Motorola when the award should have been competitively bid.

That delayed an overhaul of the 17-year-old system that Schenkel said was desperately needed. The installation should be completed by the end of the year.