

||| 911 CENTER

# SHIFT SHAKE-UP FOR CHICAGO FIRE DISPATCHERS PROMPTS SAFETY DEBATE

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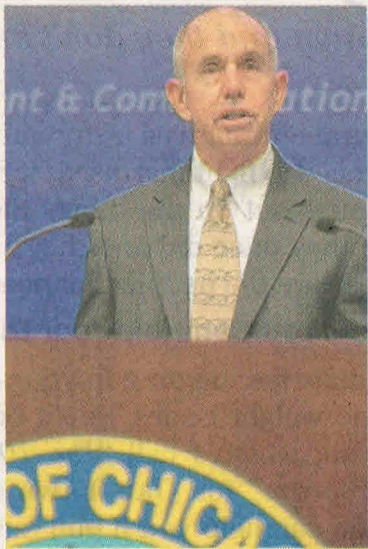
Fire communications officers at Chicago's 911 center have been shifted from rotating to fixed shifts to speed response times and reduce \$9.2 million in annual overtime, despite warnings of employee burnout that could trigger dispatch "mistakes."

For 70 years, fire call takers and dispatchers worked four straight days on the same shift, took two days off, then switched to a different watch and repeated the cycle. There are three watches — and those remain the same: 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.; 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. and 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.

The rotating schedule for 86 fire communications officers ended last week over the strenuous objections of their union, IBEW Local 9.

Starting Jan. 5, employees who field calls for fires and medical emergencies were assigned to fixed shifts, with the largest contingent assigned to the busiest, third watch.

Gary Schenkel, executive director of the Office of Emergency Management and Communications, told the City Council during budget hearings he was research-



Gary Schenkel, executive director of the Office of Emergency Management and Communications | SUN-TIMES LIBRARY

ing an electronic scheduling system and had asked the Illinois Institute of Technology to do a "predictive analysis" to help him pinpoint key volume times.

The new, fixed schedule is a product of both.

"One a regular basis, we get 30

percent or more of our calls after 3 p.m. That means we need to assign 15-to-20 percent more people to the third watch to better serve the citizens of Chicago and support the Chicago Fire Department," Schenkel said this week.

"What we have now is rotating shifts. After a week on days, those people move to a week on nights, midnights and back to days. We can't assign personnel on a consistent basis to our peak call-volume periods."

Schenkel said he's aware that 78 percent of fire alarm employees opposed the change in a recent union vote. But he maintained that the IBEW contract empowers the city to "make operational changes as necessary" without union consent.

Fire and EMS dispatcher Jeff Johnson, union steward for IBEW Local 9, argued that "no other major city in the nation has straight shifts for fire dispatch" and there's a good reason why.

"You don't get burnout caused by high stress levels all the time," he said.

"Overtime is going to go up. This is going to end up costing the city more money. People will use more

sick and vacation time to reduce stress and handle doctors appointments, family and child care emergencies."

Noting that the union contract includes seniority bidding provisions, Johnson warned that public safety may also suffer.

"The most experienced people pick first and fill up midnights and days. That leaves people with no time working some of the busiest times," Johnson said.

"What will happen at 5 p.m. on a Friday when it's 90 degrees and a battalion chief is calling for a mayday? There's a possibility for mistakes, sending the wrong companies or missing an ambulance that could have been closer."

Schenkel said there's a "ton of research" that contradicts Johnson's stress argument.

"People on rotating shifts suffer more maladies, sleep disorders and other afflictions than people who work straight shifts," he said.

"The benefits outweigh the negatives," Schenkel said. "I told the union this. We don't do anything with a blindfold on. Give this 90 days and see how it works. If we get [good] results, we'll continue it

or make whatever modifications we need to make."

Over the years, the Chicago Sun-Times has done a series of stories about burgeoning overtime at the 911 center caused by a chronic staffing shortage. It's prompted a handful of call takers to more than double their salaries in overtime.

Last fall, Schenkel told aldermen the problem had skyrocketed because of the logistical nightmare created by a \$31 million remodeling project that overhauled the operations floor while 911 center employees continued to answer 15,000 emergency calls each day.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel's first budget initially called for eliminating the jobs of 17 fire dispatchers, laying off nine others and shrinking the supervisory ranks from 13 to 8. After union negotiations, the mayor ended up eliminating 10 dispatcher vacancies, demoting three supervisors and one dispatcher and laying off one call taker.

The jobs of 45 police dispatchers were also eliminated. So were four of 22 radio repair technicians.