

Overtime pay spikes at 911 center

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Overtime at Chicago's 911 emergency center more than doubled during the first two months of this year, thanks to a 13.2 percent increase in call volume and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's decision to reduce the ranks of police and fire dispatchers, records show.

Police dispatchers wracked up 10,024 hours of overtime in January and February, at a cost of \$516,642, compared to 5,247 hours with a \$247,662 price tag during the same period a year ago, records show.

Fire dispatchers piled up 3,504 overtime hours at a cost of \$220,653 during the two-month period, versus 1,521 hours and \$96,366 a year ago.

The alarming increases — which came as the number of calls went up by 13.2 percent, or 108,000 calls — are outlined in a March 15 email to 911 center department heads from James Carroll, finance director for the city's Office of Emergency Management and Communications.

"Please respond by March 20 with the reason for the overtime, as well as a plan to reduce your section's overtime," Carroll wrote. "Hiring new employees is not an option."

The Emanuel administration blamed much of the overtime surge on an agreement with city unions that expired on June 30, 2011 and substituted cash overtime for compensatory time. "The overtime payments this year are consistent with what we paid in previous years when the [union agreement] was not in effect," OEMC spokesperson Delores Robinson wrote in an email to the Sun-Times.

During City Council budget hearings last fall, Gary Schenkel, executive director of OEMC, argued it made more sense to build in \$3.2 million in annual overtime — roughly \$8,000 per employee — than to hire more dispatchers, which would cost \$120,000 a year per employee for salary and benefits.

"We have historical data that will allow us to schedule to the peak periods and peak

times that historically we get a greater call volume,” Schenkel said then, predicting that operators would continue to be able to answer most 911 calls within three rings.

“It’s almost like a bell curve as to when it starts to escalate and when it starts to drop off. As you hit the summer months, that bell curve starts going up. Then, as we hit the cooler weather after the holidays and the festivals, we start ramping down.”

A fire dispatcher, who spoke on the condition anonymity, said the overtime surge in January and February make clear that \$3.2 million won’t be nearly enough to cover a year of overtime.

“It’s definitely gonna be a long year — not just the NATO summit but other things that are coming down the road,” the dispatcher said. “There’s been some mistakes made in the accounting for how many people we need at the 911 center.”

The fire dispatcher argued that the demotion of three supervisors has some people working around the clock.

“It’s a tough enough job,” the dispatcher said. “Now, they’re saying, ‘I need you to work your two days off.’ It’s a wear and tear on these guys. You can see it.”

Understaffing has been a chronic problem at the 911 center over the years. As a result, a handful of call-takers have been able to more than double their salaries in overtime.

Emanuel’s original plan called for eliminating the jobs of 17 fire dispatchers, laying off nine others and shrinking supervisory ranks from 13 to eight. After union negotiations, the mayor ended up eliminating 10 dispatcher vacancies, demoting three supervisors and one dispatcher and laying off one call-taker.

Also, the jobs of 45 police dispatchers were eliminated, and so were four of 22 radio repair technicians.

Earlier this month, the Chicago Police Department pointed to faster response times to 911 calls as proof that the department’s strategy of putting more officers in patrol cars is working.

But the winning streak came to a crashing halt on an unseasonably mild St. Patrick’s Day, when bars and the city’s annual downtown parade drew huge crowds downtown and to River North. Sources said 911 dispatchers were so inundated between 10 p.m. Saturday and 6 a.m. Sunday that only 18 percent of the calls received during that time were answered within two to three rings.

That’s one of the lowest percentages in the 17 years since the \$217 million 911 center opened on the West Side.