



DANE COUNTY

Joe Parisi
County Executive

June 11, 2014

To: 911 Center Board

From: Dane County Executive Joe Parisi 

Re: Dispatching Closest Emergency Units

As the 911 Center Board explores ways to ensure emergency responders are notified of critical incidents in the most timely fashion, based on new information that's come to light, I respectfully request the Board act quickly and formally adopt an operating practice that empowers our dispatchers to send the closest available units to the most critical fire emergencies and emergency medical calls.

Opportunities to significantly reduce response times don't reside alone in the 911 Center. There are system wide efficiencies long overdue to be examined and I ask the Center Board to help lead this conversation - - because of the opportunities to further simplify dispatching protocols and get help to people quicker.

Under current practice, municipal boundaries, established independently by fire and emergency medical districts, determine which emergency departments and resources are dispatched. **Put more simply, why aren't the closest emergency units sent to calls regardless of where jurisdictional lines are drawn?**

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel recently reported the City of Milwaukee and 17 suburban fire departments agreed to an unprecedented agreement that results in the closest available firefighting resources being dispatched to fires. This agreement is a clear example of the kind of cooperation that can be accomplished for the benefit of public safety.

If this important change was accomplished in our state's largest metro region, this kind of common sense collaboration can be accomplished here.

Based on agreements between fire and emergency medical services districts across Dane County, current emergency response plans that dispatchers are expected to follow are predicated on and coincide with municipal boundaries. This creates system inefficiencies such as:

-A portion of North Sherman Avenue and blocks west toward Lake Mendota are in the Town of Madison. Fire and ambulance calls there are responded to from the Town of Madison Fire Station on Fish Hatchery Road near the Beltline. Depending on traffic, this can be 15-20 minutes of travel through the City of Madison.

-The Dean Clinic on South Stoughton Road is in the City of Madison and Madison Fire Rescue responds there for calls - - even though the Blooming Grove Fire Department and its paramedic level emergency medical service are directly across the street.

-Cherokee County Club is a few blocks away from Madison Fire Station Number 10. Fire and medical emergencies that occur at the country club get a response from Waunakee Fire and EMS - - who drive right by a City of Madison fire truck and ambulance on their way to those calls.

-The beltline from Middleton to the Interstate passes through multiple different jurisdictions. Dispatchers currently take time to ask questions of 911 callers, trying to best determine the location of their emergency. This can include identifying certain landmarks, closest exits, or mile markers in order to determine which agencies to send, where. The same is true for calls originating from emergencies on the Interstate.

-A recent inquiry of 911 Center data from earlier this year found the City of Fitchburg has fire response times in excess of 10 minutes to the area around Highway 14, McCoy Road, and Syene Road. This is the same area Fitchburg is eyeing for hundreds of new housing units - - an area that is a mere couple of miles from both a City of Madison Fire Station and the Town of Madison Fire Department.

The pre-alerting pilot adopted by the 911 Board several weeks ago has seen early successes in getting help started in a more timely fashion to the most critical incidents. To date, average call to dispatch times are happening nearly a full minute faster.

Partnering with 911, the public safety community has the opportunity to further reduce response times, in some cases, by many more minutes. This is a conversation that needs to be had if there's going to be a genuine, full context dialogue about getting help to people in trouble quicker in this rapidly growing county.

Recent media accounts highlighted a tragic fire last fall in which a life was lost. The 911 Center answered the call in less than a single ring. Within 15 seconds the caller reported a fire. The pre-alerting protocol in use today would have resulted in a quicker dispatch had this policy been in place last October. The data however shows this response could have been much faster.

This fire occurred on Bridge Road - - a street in which one side of the road is in the City of Madison, the other, the City of Monona. The computer-aided dispatch recommended to our dispatchers that Monona fire responders be sent to this scene. Units from the two closest Madison fire stations were out on other calls and not available.

Monona was the closest fire department to this call but was not sent in deference to existing response plans established by the City of Madison. The direction from Madison to the 911 Center to this point has been clear - - all fire calls that currently occur in the City are responded to by City units, even if it means pulling resources from one side of town to cover calls in the other. The result in this case: from the time the 911 Center alerted the Madison Fire Department to this apartment fire, it took 10 minutes for the first fire engine to arrive on scene. The response included a ladder truck sent all the way from McKenna Boulevard on the far west side - - more than 10 miles away - - in comparison to the one mile distance between the scene of the fire and the Monona Fire Department.

This call is a clear example of a system wide failure. A 10-minute response is also not consistent with National Fire Protection Association standards and breaking down parochial past practices will help prevent these types of occurrences in the future.

The closest firefighting units should be sent to confirmed, active fires regardless of jurisdiction. They are doing it in Milwaukee and it needs to be done here.

My recommendation is this - - similar to the pre-alert notification pilot project that's underway, this change could be made immediately to critical calls that rise to the level of a pre-alert. The closest available unit, along with the unit of jurisdiction should be pre-alerted together.

The Center Board would then need to have a longer-term conversation about the best means of implementing a broader, new, permanent policy that results in the closest units being dispatched to more fire and medical emergencies- - regardless of municipal lines that constrain response and confuse the public.

Again, the 911 Center is addressing the time taken to process these calls – pre-alerting is implemented and to date these calls are being dispatched on average nearly one minute quicker than they were six weeks ago.

Thanks to the Board's good guidance a week ago, cumbersome law enforcement protocols are being replaced.

Now it's incumbent upon everyone at the table to begin a frank dialogue about how the system as a whole can save minutes and improve responses.

The 911 Center is the very important entry point to this emergency response system and I am committed to ensuring it functions as it should, but an objective conversation about reducing the minutes that pass from the time a call for help is placed, to when help arrives, involves the entire public safety community. The public expects when they call, the closest help available will come.

Let's provide the leadership necessary to help meet that reasonable expectation. This is an opportunity for regional collaboration that's truly in the best interest of public safety.

I thank you for your continued commitment to improving emergency response times.

Cc: Dane County Board Chair Sharon Corrigan
Dane County Public Protection and Judiciary Chair Paul Rusk
Madison Mayor Paul Soglin

Att: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Article



Milwaukee, suburban fire departments sign mutual aid pact

By Ashley Luthern of the Journal Sentinel
May 12, 2014

Milwaukee joined 17 other municipalities in Milwaukee County in signing a new mutual aid agreement on Monday that will enable the closest fire department to respond to fire calls regardless of municipal boundaries.

The agreement — there is no additional fee for any of the municipalities — was two years in the making while city and suburban fire and emergency officials practiced how aid would be provided and distributed equitably.

The goal is to dispatch the "closest, most appropriate apparatus," Milwaukee Fire Chief Mark Rohlfing said. "It's the first step in us becoming more efficient in Milwaukee County."

The agreement covers only structure fires and the home agency would still respond as well, North Shore Fire Chief Robert C. Whitaker said.

It's left up to each agency to work with its neighbors and determine geographical boundaries, he said.

The Milwaukee Fire Department and North Shore Fire-Rescue Department, for example, have designated the area near the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as one area where North Shore could respond. Dispatchers can check if a North Shore fire engine is closer and available, and if so, dispatchers would then send North Shore firefighters, in addition to Milwaukee firefighters.

Such collaboration once seemed far-fetched.

Milwaukee provided some level of mutual aid to the suburbs for fire and emergency medical services as far back as the late 1980s, but then began charging a fee for that assistance. Many suburban communities stopped calling Milwaukee for help because they could not afford to, and they created mutual aid deals with their neighboring suburbs, Whitaker said.

In 2006, Wisconsin adopted the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System, which generally follows county lines and provides for mutual aid agreements for a major incident, such as a six-alarm fire. Participation in the system is voluntary, and there is no charge between municipalities under the system. Soon after its creation, the city and suburbs joined the system.

In 2010, a fire destroyed Pizza Man, a well-known restaurant on Milwaukee's east side that has since reopened on N. Downer Ave., and nine suburban fire departments responded to staff some Milwaukee firehouses while the blaze was raging.

The Pizza Man fire became a flashpoint for union officials representing the city's firefighters and at least

one alderman who used the incident to criticize Fire Department budget cuts.

"I think that Milwaukee was like a lot of large municipalities where the major metropolitan area thought they were special, maybe a little better and didn't really need help, and so they tended not to work real well together with some of the smaller municipalities," said Rohlfsing, who became chief after the Pizza Man fire.

That's changed, the chief said, particularly as large metropolitan areas have had to respond to disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes and terror attacks.

"It doesn't really matter how large of an organization you are, you need help and you need to work together," Rohlfsing said.

The agreement signed Monday has the full support of the union representing Milwaukee firefighters, said David Seager, president of the Milwaukee Professional Firefighters Local 215.

"Any time we can provide better services to the constituency in which we all serve, everyone is victorious," Seager said.

Only one municipality in Milwaukee County — Franklin — did not sign the agreement on Monday. Franklin officials had concerns about liability and on-scene command structure, said Mark Lubarda, Franklin's director of administration.

"That agreement just creates an opportunity for separate agreements between two neighboring departments for automatic response," Lubarda said. "We don't have a need for such an agreement. We already participate with the mutual aid programs, like MABAS."

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/milwaukee-suburban-fire-departments-sign-mutual-aid-pact-b99268324z1-258969001.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.