



Does San Mateo County Need 13 Separate Police Dispatch Centers?

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Issue

Are multiple independent police dispatch centers in San Mateo County necessary or cost effective?

Summary

The population of the cities of San Mateo County is 720,000. This population is served by 15 fire departments and/or districts, including the County's, and 16 police departments including the Sheriff.¹ There is one dispatch center that deploys emergency information for fire and medical emergencies. Thirteen separate dispatch centers deploy emergency information for police.

Dispatch centers are those that respond to 9-1-1 calls for fire, medical and police. This Grand Jury report focuses on the redundancy of police dispatch centers in our County.

The Grand Jury advocates for continued consolidation of police dispatch services. Consolidation is good fiscal policy. All the cities that have consolidated—and the taxpayers in those cities—have benefitted fiscally from consolidation. Cities that have consolidated with other cities spend on average \$11.59 less per 9-1-1 call. Furthermore, dispatch consolidation enhances safety because it provides dispatch depth for handling large emergencies, justifies having a dedicated dispatch team not distracted by tangential responsibilities, and provides better training programs for the intense dispatcher job. Cities that have consolidated this service with other cities report no drop-off in the quality of service.

During the last 12 years, efforts to consolidate dispatch have been successful. The number of police dispatch centers has been reduced from 22 to 13. To continue and to accelerate the process, the elected leaders of the cities of San Mateo County should drive the effort to consolidate dispatch services and should not be distracted by perceived problems and pressures to resist change. Also smaller cities should contract with larger cities or the County Public Safety Communications Center to manage police dispatch during off-peak hours such that no city has less than two dispatchers on duty at any one time.

Background

Public safety dispatchers work in dispatch centers and are responsible for dispatching fire and medical crews and/or law enforcement officers to emergencies that occur within their

¹ Excludes the police district of Broadmoor.

jurisdictions. Dispatch centers receive and document incoming calls, transmit messages to appropriate personnel, and maintain logs of the daily activities with the help of computer aided dispatch systems (CADs). They operate 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.

What happens when you call 9-1-1 from a landline in San Mateo County? All 9-1-1 calls in San Mateo County are transmitted to dispatch centers. If you are calling 9-1-1 from a landline in one of the cities in Figure 1, your call will be received directly by dispatchers at the San Mateo County Public Safety Communications Center (PSC). The information you provide will be entered into a CAD that police dispatchers and dispatchers for fire and medical emergency at the PSC can instantly see. If you are calling from a landline in one of the cities in Figure 2, a dispatcher in a local police department will answer your call. If the call involves medical emergency or fire, that call will be forwarded to the PSC and entered into the CAD system there. The dispatcher answering the call will see the address from which a landline call is made.

What happens when you call 9-1-1 from a cell phone in San Mateo County?

If you are calling from a cell phone, the CAD will determine the area from which you are calling, but not your specific location, so more information will be required from you. Also, if there are no cell towers to triangulate your call, your call will be automatically routed to the California Highway Patrol, and several minutes may pass until you are connected to the nearest dispatch center. Forty to 60 percent of calls are from cell phones.

Fire and Medical dispatch

There are 15 different fire departments or districts in San Mateo County. Whether your call goes to the PSC directly as in Figure 1, or the call is forwarded from a police station per Figure 2, all 9-1-1 calls for fire and emergency medical services in the County are dispatched through a single operation, the PSC.

When you connect with the PSC for fire or emergency medical, the PSC will dispatch an Advanced Life Support provider from the closest fire station and the closest ambulance to the scene regardless of what city or district those emergency vehicles are in. If you live in an urban area, emergency personnel from your fire department should arrive within 6 minutes and an ambulance (or transport vehicle, as ambulances are sometimes called) should arrive within 13 minutes of your call—unless the ambulance call is specifically cancelled. Of non-police calls, about 4 percent are for fire and over 60 percent are for medical help. Others are for lock-outs and other non-emergency requests.

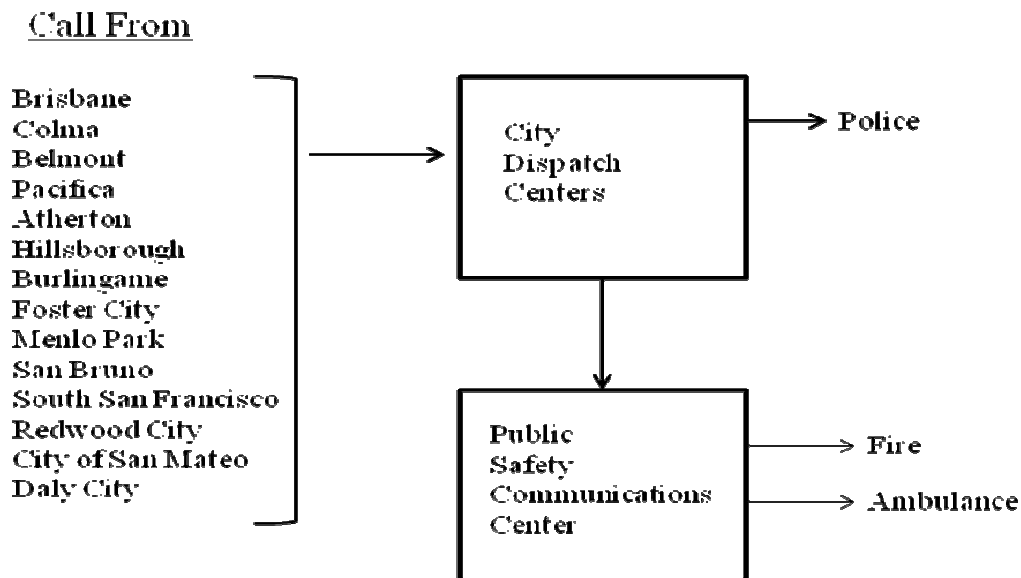
Police Dispatch

There are 16 Police Departments, including the San Mateo County Sheriff, in San Mateo County. Thirteen of those departments (including the Sheriff) maintain their own police dispatch. Two departments contract with other cities and one department contracts with the County for police dispatch. Five cities in the County do not have their own police departments; they contract with the Sheriff's Office for all police services including dispatch. This report focuses on police dispatch and the potential for consolidating police dispatch services.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Issues Pertaining to the Consolidation of Police Dispatch

Table 1 below shows how the 20 cities in San Mateo County, arranged by population, provide dispatch services. It is designed to show which cities contract out services, which cities manage their own and the comparative costs. With respect to call volume, note that some cities define call volume as the total number of calls received, while others define call volume as the number of calls to which dispatchers respond. With respect to the number of dispatchers, some cities may employ per diem dispatchers not included here and, in many cities, dispatchers have duties in addition to dispatch.

Table 1

SAN MATEO COUNTY CITIES THAT CONTRACT FOR POLICE DISPATCH

Agency	Contracts With	Population 2010	Call Volume	# Dispatchers	Annual Cost (\$)	Cost per Call (\$)
Brisbane	City of San Mateo	4,282	7,778		140,000	18
Town of Portola Valley	County*	4,353	2,454		40,820	17
Town of Woodside	County*	5,287	5,289		81,906	15
Half Moon Bay	County*	11,324	13,525		203,341	15
Millbrae	County*	21,532	21,000		233,832	11
East Palo Alto	County	28,155	32,000		799,081	25
San Carlos	County*	28,406	28,480**		461,000	17
Pacifica	SSF	37,234	28,196		600,000	21

*Also contracts for police services with County Sheriff

Average \$18.45

** 1year call volume before going to County

SAN MATEO COUNTY CITIES THAT PROVIDE OWN POLICE DISPATCH

Town of Atherton		7,500	6865	9*	\$328,392	48
Hillsborough		10,825	12,101	4	616,000	51
Belmont		25,835	27,525	5	729,936	27
Burlingame		28,806	30,864	6	891,491	29
Foster City		30,567	32,241	6	911,000	28
Menlo Park		32,026	44,161	8	1,583,192	39
San Bruno		41,114	28,959	6	831,714	29
South San Francisco		63,632	62,613	13	2,041,922	32
Redwood City		76,814	79,930	11	2,163,799	27
City of San Mateo		97,207	68,767	13	1,881,747	27
Daly City		101,823	72,632	16	2,041,305	28

Average \$30.04

* Atherton employs 9 part-time dispatchers.

Note: Some call volumes were extrapolated from less than 12 months data. Pacifica has been with SSF since 10/3/11.

Colma is not listed above because it contracts only its nighttime coverage to SSF and because its high cost per call is anomalous. Data for Colma is 1,792 population, 7,162 calls per year, 5 dispatchers, annual cost of \$897,700 and average cost per call of \$125.

1. Cost Effectiveness

The data from Table 1 demonstrate that it is less expensive to consolidate services with another agency than to run a standalone dispatch operation. The average cost per call for cities that contract out dispatch services is \$18.45 while the average cost for cities that operate their own dispatch is \$30.04. Not shown in Table 1 is that cities such as San Mateo, Redwood City, Menlo Park and South San Francisco can reduce their costs by bringing in one or more partners. As one city manager told the Grand Jury: expect a 15% to 20% in cost savings just from sharing overhead.

2. Dispatch Depth

Some small cities, per Table 1 above, have just a few dispatchers and may have only one dispatcher on duty at any given time.

For example, when the gas line in San Bruno exploded on September 9, 2010, at about 6:11 pm, there was only one dispatcher on duty in the San Bruno Police Department to handle a huge volume of 9-1-1 calls. The dispatcher was soon joined by one person from the Records Department, but they were overwhelmed by the number of calls. About 26 minutes later, personnel from the PSC and others arrived in San Bruno and set up Emergency Dispatch at the scene.

To prevent the one-dispatcher scenario, Colma has contracted with South San Francisco for night dispatch service. South San Francisco has a minimum of two dispatchers on duty at all times. The PSC has a minimum of 9 dispatchers at all times. All those interviewed believe that maintaining depth in dispatch centers is desirable.

Related to dispatch depth, some smaller cities lack critical mass to employ dispatchers or dispatch supervisors who are fully dedicated to the dispatch role. In these cases they are asked to assume additional responsibilities. Some of those interviewed by the Grand Jury expressed strong feelings that a dispatcher's job is intense and should not be combined with other-distracting responsibilities.

3. Levels of Service

Each city establishes its own level of service for police. For instance, some police departments respond to non-injury auto accidents while others do not. Concern is sometimes raised that the consolidated police dispatch center cannot handle these differences between jurisdictions effectively. In interviews the Grand Jury learned that these differences are typically accommodated without problem.

4. Technology Infrastructure

Every police dispatch center depends upon a complex assortment of hardware and software including CAD systems, records management systems and either digital or analog radio communications systems. From interviews the Grand Jury found that CAD systems used by the PSC and city police dispatch centers generally are not interoperable. Various system vendors and technologies have been utilized across the County. There are also new and emerging federal standards for public safety communications systems and, in some cases, federal grants are available for local government agencies to upgrade to newer systems.

Given the diversity of CAD, records management and communications systems used in law enforcement agencies across the County, systems migration represents an important factor to be evaluated whenever consolidation of dispatch centers is being considered. From interviews, the Grand Jury learned that technology consolidation can be and has been managed effectively in the several cases of police dispatch consolidation already completed in the County.

5. Some Police Dispatch Consolidation Experiences

Within San Mateo County three cities have contracted with other cities to provide dispatch services (not including the contracting of over-night dispatch by Colma to South San Francisco).

San Carlos – Menlo Park. In 2006, San Carlos contracted with Menlo Park for dispatch services. A 2008 report by the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury investigated the impact of the consolidation.² The report noted that the one-time cost to the San Carlos Police Department for CAD and records management system consolidation was \$186,000. But the report also said that consolidation saved San Carlos approximately \$244,000 per year in reduced staffing costs, such that even in the first year savings were achieved. The report said that call response times for both cities remained at the same three to five minutes level that they were prior to the consolidation. The report concluded that the dispatch center consolidation “...has allowed both communities to have access to a state-of-the-art communications system that greatly enhances the ability of the police dispatchers to serve a much larger geographical area and still maintain the former high level of service. In the process, the consolidation has been financially beneficial to both SCPD and MPPD.” It should be noted that San Carlos contracted with the County Sheriff’s office for all law enforcement services including dispatch in late 2010.

Pacifica – South San Francisco. In 2011, as part of overall city budget cuts of \$1.5 million, the Pacifica Police Department was asked to reduce department expenses by \$630,000 per year. The Pacifica City Council approved the Police Department’s recommendation to contract its police dispatch services to South San Francisco, saving Pacifica approximately \$300,000 per year. As was the case with San Carlos and Menlo Park, equipment modifications were required, and Pacifica received a \$300,000 federal grant to install a new and compatible records management system. Pacifica expected to save \$280,000 to \$300,000 in its first year of outsourcing dispatch services, although there were cost overruns in the transition. An official from Pacifica told that Grand Jury that the first six months with South San Francisco police dispatch has been excellent with the transition being almost seamless with no observable impact on response times.

Brisbane – San Mateo. In 2003, the City of Brisbane ended its contract for police dispatch with the PSC and contracted instead with the City of San Mateo, in order to take advantage of expanded services including a modernized records management system that the merger would provide. New software was required for the change. There was no fiscal impact cited for this change.³ The current annual cost to Brisbane is \$140,000.

² http://www.sanmateocourt.org/documents/grand_jury/2007/police_com_services.pdf

³ <http://mail.smrn.com/pipermail/brsnet/2003-August/000348.html> Staff reports. See VIII, item A.

In interviews the Grand Jury heard that South San Francisco, the City of San Mateo, Menlo Park, Redwood City, and the PSC all have the capacity to extend their dispatch services to additional cities.

6. The County Dispatch Option

As was noted above, the dispatch relationship between Menlo Park and San Carlos ended when San Carlos contracted with the San Mateo County Sheriff for police services. All cities that contract with the Sheriff for police also use the PSC for dispatch, per Table 1 above. Six cities contract with the PSC through the Sheriff, and one city, East Palo Alto, has its own police department but contracts with the PSC for dispatch.

The PSC employs 10 police dispatchers and 15 fire dispatchers. Eight of its dispatchers are cross-trained to execute all dispatch duties. There are at least nine dispatchers and one supervisor on duty at all times. While the fire / medical dispatch function in the PSC has a back-up agreement with the City of Redwood City, the police dispatch function has no back-up agreement with another facility.

The PSC with the Sheriff's Office has operated a records management system called Tiburon since 1999. While it was state-of-the-art at the time, technology has evolved to the point where it is now lacking important capabilities that other local dispatch operations have. The Sheriff's Office is now in the process of transitioning to a newer records management system called RIMS, which is also used by many police dispatch operations in the County, including Daly City, South San Francisco, Foster City, Menlo Park, Pacifica, Half Moon Bay, San Carlos, Belmont, Atherton, East Palo Alto and Redwood City. The conversion, expected to be complete by the end of 2012, will enhance interoperability with other cities using the RIMS system and make it easier for more cities to contract with the Sheriff for police and dispatch services in the future.

Most individuals from the cities interviewed by the Grand Jury said it would not be viable for the PSC to become the sole provider of police dispatch services in the County because:

- The PSC does not currently have the physical capacity at its present location to absorb all County police dispatch.
- There should be at least one other dispatch center in the County, in a geographically disparate area, to manage risk.

7. Police vs. Fire Dispatch

The PSC is the dispatch center for the County-wide "mutual aid" system. This means that in an emergency, whether it is for fire or police or both, public safety officials are directed to respond regardless of geographical boundaries. It is a seamless response system which is admired by all those interviewed by the Grand Jury.

Fire and emergency dispatch and police dispatch operate over different networks, due in part to historical factors. However, there are real differences in response requirements. Fire and emergency response situations tend to be what are called "static" or focused on one location. When a dispatcher deals with a medical emergency he or she works from a computer driven

protocol in which the problem is ascertained and advice to deal with it is given to the caller while help is on the way.

Police response situations are by contrast often “dynamic” or in motion, requiring more two-way communication between dispatchers and police officers in the field and potentially more cooperation in the field. Much of the call volume is “police initiated” rather than citizen initiated, informing the dispatcher, for example, that the police officer is involved with a traffic violation.

The Sheriff’s geographical jurisdiction is countywide, and so is the coverage for its primary and secondary channels. A County-wide Mutual Aid Channel (called the Green Channel) is common to all police agencies in the County and all dispatch centers. It allows for communications coordination for incidents requiring mutual aid or communication between agencies where the scope of communication is larger than the one provided by agency primary channel, and supports the adage that “crime knows no boundaries.” Car chases would be a common Green Channel use. The footprint for the Green Channel is San Francisco to south of Mountain View. The County also operates a Homeland Security funded service called “cop link” linking San Mateo and its cities to other counties in our geographical region.

8. Other Attempts Made To Consolidate Police Dispatch Services

The City Managers in the County have been considering and promoting the sharing of police dispatch and other services for 12 years and under the pressure of shrinking revenues have been making incremental progress. However, in interviews the Grand Jury was told that there is continual reluctance from some City Councils to institute change, in part due to reluctance to give up local autonomy.

Investigation

To research this report, the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury surveyed the Cities and police departments of the County and interviewed:

- Representatives from the County Communications Public Safety Center
- A City Manager representing the Association of City Managers
- Two Fire Chiefs
- Three Police Chiefs and other police personnel
- A Sheriff’s Office representative.

Findings

The Grand Jury finds that:

1. In San Mateo County there are 15 different fire departments or districts, all of which use the Public Safety Communications Center for dispatch. The Redwood City Fire Station on Marshall Street is the back-up facility for fire dispatch.
2. There are 16 Police Departments in the County, including the San Mateo County Sheriff.

3. The number of police dispatch centers in the County has been reduced from 22 to 13 over the last 12 years.
4. For those cities operating their own dispatch centers the average cost per call is \$30.04. For those cities contracting out dispatch the average cost per call is \$18.45. Some of the cost difference is due to the fact that dispatchers in many cities perform additional duties while cities that contract out are just paying for dispatch services.
5. Pacifica and San Carlos each realized large cost savings when they contracted with other cities for police dispatch. These savings, taken together with the low cost per call noted above for cities contracting out dispatch, demonstrate that consolidation of police dispatch represents a significant cost reduction opportunity for cities with a standalone police dispatch function.
6. Some municipal police dispatch centers have only one dispatcher on duty at certain times. Some have a minimum of two.
7. Larger police dispatch centers have dedicated dispatch teams, not distracted by tangential responsibilities, and tend to provide better training programs for the intense dispatch job.
8. The PSC has a minimum of nine dispatchers on duty at all times.
9. There is no back-up for the law enforcement dispatch portion of the PSC, even though the PSC itself is a back-up center for other police dispatch centers in the County.
10. No single dispatch site is currently available that can handle all police dispatch. Several dispatch centers, including South San Francisco, the City of San Mateo, Redwood City, Menlo Park and the PSC, have facilities with the capacity to expand to provide police dispatch services to additional jurisdictions.
11. The County Sheriff owns, and the PSC operates, the “Green Channel” (a proprietary radio communications channel) which enables interoperability across all law enforcement departments and through which mutual aid from emergency-response agencies is achieved.
12. All those interviewed believe that dispatch consolidation is beneficial, and most of those interviewed believe the County should have more than one dispatch center.
13. Factors that hinder consolidation include the perceived need for local dispatchers, the fact that some dispatchers also have other responsibilities, the incompatibility of equipment, and differences in the levels of service offered by various police departments. Grand Jury interviews revealed that cities that have completed consolidation of police dispatch have found these issues to be manageable.
14. Elected officials in some cities have been reluctant to consolidate police dispatch.

15. All cities that have outsourced police dispatch services, either to other cities or to the County, pay considerably less for dispatch services without degradation of service.

Conclusions

The Grand Jury concludes that:

1. The consolidation of dispatch departments is fiscally prudent, and fiscally beneficial to all parties involved.
2. The operation of dedicated dispatch centers in smaller jurisdictions is not cost effective and presents the challenges of providing adequate coverage during non-peak hours and sufficient coverage if a major emergency occurs.
3. Dispatchers operate under intense pressure when responding to 9-1-1 calls. They should be well-trained and free from competing responsibilities during their work shifts.
4. Dispatch consolidation enhances safety because it provides dispatch depth for handling large emergencies, justifies having a dedicated dispatch team not distracted by tangential responsibilities, and enables better training programs.
5. Several dispatch centers can easily accommodate more dispatch consoles and represent excellent alternatives for other cities considering contracting for police dispatch services.
6. A back-up arrangement with another facility for the law enforcement dispatch function in the Public Safety Communications Center should be developed.
7. Most of the objections to consolidation are not significant obstacles in practice. These include the perceived need for proximity, the different levels of service police departments provide, and differences of equipment in a quickly changing technological environment.
8. Interoperability with other regions of the state and nation can, and in the future will, improve response to natural and man-made disasters and facilitate the consolidation of public safety dispatch functions regionally.
9. The Grand Jury believes that in the long term the County would be well-served by consolidating law enforcement dispatch to two to three regional centers within the County.
10. City Councils should take a leadership role in driving consolidation of police dispatch centers.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends to the City Councils of the Cities of San Mateo County that:

1. “Off-peak hour” programs be implemented in which smaller cities contract with larger dispatch centers to take over dispatch during off-peak hours such that no city has fewer than two dispatchers on duty at any one time.
2. The City Council members take a leadership role on behalf of their constituents to drive consolidation of police dispatch across the County.

The Grand Jury recommends to the County Board of Supervisors that it:

1. Directs the County Office of Public Safety Communications to develop an arrangement with another facility for back-up of its law enforcement dispatch functions.