

Emergency dispatch system not unusual

By Molly Kavanaugh

Post staff reporter

Despite problems plaguing Cincinnati's new way of dispatching firefighters, the system the city has chosen is not unusual.

A national expert said dispatching fire and police emergencies through an intermediary operator rather than having the caller talk directly to the dispatcher is the trend in most large and medium-size cities.

"The majority of communities try to eliminate the unnecessary transfer of the citizen (to a dispatcher) and reduce the risk of losing the call," said

David Yarnell, past president of the National Emergency Number Association.

The city's merger of fire and police dispatching March 27 in preparation for the start up Aug. 17 of Dial 911, a system that allows the caller to get help by dialing three numbers, has come under fire by firefighters and residents. They complain of delays, dispatching errors and being put on hold when calling in an emergency.

One official estimates that as many as 20 percent of the center's 2,500 calls to fire, police or emergency medical personnel are put on hold under the new system. The system has no way of

putting calls in order based on the nature of the emergency.

A public hearing on the problems, which came to light when one caller complained of being left on hold while his camper burned in his driveway, was scheduled for City Hall today.

Yarnell said that during the past year and a half most cities have chosen the same type of system as Cincinnati's. Computer technology allows information to be transferred from operators to dispatchers quickly and accurately.

The Cincinnati system sends fire and medical calls to the same location as police emergencies. A caller dials

765-1212 or 241-2525 — both of which will be 911 next month — and is interviewed by an operator who forwards the information via computer to either a fire or police dispatcher.

With the previous system, police and fire calls were separated and handled by dispatchers trained to evaluate situations quickly and authorized to dispatch units as needed.

"The real emphasis should be on establishing a cadre of trained call takers," Yarnell said.

Cincinnati has hired 82 operators and dispatchers during the past two months.

They receive six weeks of training —

including two weeks in a classroom studying criminal law, psychology and computer operation — and four weeks at the dispatch center.

Although the trend in larger cities is toward this operator system of dispatching, Bill Stanton, a vice president of the National Emergency Number Association, is not in favor of it.

"I can't see the wisdom of taking all the information and passing it to a dispatcher," said Stanton, product manager for Ohio Bell in Columbus. "Any questions the dispatcher has, the caller is gone."