

Experts trace emergency call problems

Inadequate staffing, procedures cause delays

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Post staff reporters

When a bleeding Waltham Brown staggered into the Alcoholic Drop Inn Center this week, staff immediately telephoned for help.

Operators at Cincinnati's emergency communications center quickly took the information and it was sent simultaneously to police and fire dispatchers

Police were dispatched in two minutes. But firefighters, who provide medical assistance, didn't get information from their dispatchers for five minutes.

Brown died of multiple stab wounds. Horace Payne, 34, of Madisonville, has been charged with murder in his death

The case is an example of several problems fire personnel have encountered since March 27, when they merged with police emergency communications and began using computer-assisted dispatching

Emergency communications experts say problems with Cincinnati's new fire dispatching system likely stem from three factors: inadequate staffing, in-

effective procedures and unfamiliarity with the computers.

In the past four months, 10 cases of delays in fire dispatching, ranging from five minutes to 2½ hours, have been documented by the Cincinnati Fire Division. Four other complaints, regarding callers who got a recording instead of a person who could help them, have been filed.

Criticisms became public last month when a Mt. Washington couple wrote City Hall complaining about being put on hold while their camper burned in their driveway. Additional problems noted by firefighters have since come to light.

Assistant Fire Chief William Miller said the delay at the Drop Inn Center was caused by two dispatching complications. Dispatchers were trying to determine whether Brown's assailant was still on the scene, meaning the situation could be life-threatening for firefighters, and whether the nearest fire company, which the computer said was unavailable, was still on another run.

Miller said the dispatcher followed correct procedures, but acknowledged a five-minute de-

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lay is unacceptable.

A national expert on police/fire communications agreed.

"There is no reason in the world why those kind of delays should be occurring," said Ronald Vegamast, a Minneapolis, Minn., consultant on public safety communications. The 18-year veteran of the business was the consultant hired by Hamilton County to help put in place its 911 emergency system, which allows callers to dial three digits for police, fire or medical help.

The city, Hamilton County and surrounding counties are scheduled to begin a joint 911 system on Aug. 17. The city's new dispatching system is part of the transition.

Adjusting to computer dispatching takes time, experts say. Two years ago when Cincinnati Police switched from manual to computer-aided dispatching, seven people quit because they said the technology was too difficult, said Capt. Kenneth Schneider, who heads Cincinnati's dispatching center.

Miller said the transition has been difficult for fire dispatchers: "It hasn't been hard for them to learn the computer, but it has been difficult for them to learn how to become fast at it."

But in addition to this temporary unfamiliarity, the communications experts say problems in staffing — both size and training — may be contributing to problems.

Baltimore County, Md., which went to 911 in 1980, uses a dispatching system similar to Cincinnati's and Hamilton County's. National experts point to their system as one of the best of its type.

Baltimore County's population is nearly twice Cincinnati's, but the county receives about the same number of calls — about 2,000 a day — expected when Cincinnati's 911 system goes on line.

Vegamast said as a rule of thumb 90 percent of all calls should be answered in less than 10 seconds during peak times. Cincinnati dispatchers are able to answer only 83.9 percent of the calls within 20 seconds. In Baltimore County, 98 percent of the calls are answered within 3 seconds.

The Baltimore County center has a minimum of eight complaint operators and seven fire dispatchers on duty at all times. Cincinnati's minimums are four operators, two dispatchers. When the 911 system is in place, the minimum number of operators will be six and the number of dispatchers will remain the same.

Baltimore County's personnel also receive more training. The county requires three weeks' classroom training, five to six weeks of on-the-job training, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation instruction. Some operators are cross-trained as dispatchers.

Cincinnati's operators receive two weeks in the classroom and four to five weeks on the job. They do not get CPR or any cross-training.

"A little medical knowledge is dangerous," Schneider said in explaining why the city doesn't require CPR training. He added that the city was worried about liability.

Baltimore officials said their liability concerns led them to doctors who helped them write a book on medical procedures. Operators are instructed to read aloud from the book while assisting with CPR.

"The key is saying, 'Equipment is on the way. Meanwhile, here is what you can do if you are willing to,'" said Chief Theodore Weintraub, head of Baltimore County Central Communications.

Vegamast also said the city may need to improve operating and dispatching procedures by:

- Establishing a call holding system where non-emergency calls can be held when other calls are stacking up.

- Requiring immediate transfer of any address at which a fire or medical emergency is taking place. Currently, an operator takes down all the information from a caller before passing any information on to a dispatcher.

- Allowing dispatchers to listen in on operators' conversations with callers during emergencies so that extra fire equipment can be dispatched as needed.

The city system does not allow for call holding or dispatchers interloping on conversations with operators. The system does allow for addresses to be immediately transferred from operators to dispatchers. Procedures do not require operators to transfer immediately the address of a fire or medical emergency to a dispatcher although operators do expedite emergencies on a case-by-case basis.

"That is not a good way to run a dispatching center," said Vegamast. "It takes an average of a minute and 15 seconds to obtain information from a caller, providing they aren't hysterical. Why waste all that time before you send something and get things rolling?"

The Hamilton County Communications Center, which had problems similar to the city's when it went to computers 15 years ago, has successfully implemented Vegamast's three suggestions.