

911 center to change dispatch operations

By Robin Pyle

Upcoming technology upgrades at the local 911 center will make dispatch operations more efficient, which might decrease response times and save city dollars, emergency officials say.

The Lubbock Emergency Communication District is purchasing equipment that will allow the police department to transfer 911 calls to both EMS and the Lubbock Fire Department simultaneously.

Officials say the new equipment that will allow split-call transfers will cut down on delays of getting information to dispatchers and help them better communicate.

"It allows the opportunity to serve the citizens better," said Deputy Fire Chief Lynn Smith, noting the fire department will be notified sooner of major medical calls.

Both firefighters and Emergency Medical Services personnel respond to many of the same calls, but there's not been a system for them to be notified at the same time. Police dispatchers can only transfer the calls to one agency, causing potential lag times.

The fire department routinely responds to major medical calls as part of its first responder program.

"(The new equipment) will make sure all emergency vehicles are rolling at the same time," said Chris Teague, director of Lubbock EMS. "It'll make sure we have the fastest response times possible."

He said it will help put the emergency operators on the same page at the same time so they can work better with each other and the first-responders they dispatch.

Fire dispatchers generally have to rely on limited information on the city's computer aided dispatch system or wait to be contacted by EMS after the fact rather than hearing first-hand the call for service.

The system has resulted in the fire department sometimes responding to unnecessary calls.

But with the new system, both agencies will hear the call at the same time, which will help dispatchers make better informed decisions as to if EMT-trained firefighters need to respond to a medical call or car wreck.

"This will allow us to make the best use of our personnel and equipment," Smith said. "This system will cut down on (responding to) those non-emergency calls, for sure."

The agencies have been working together to find ways to strengthen the communication and relationship between the two, officials said.

Strides have been made in the past year. Previously, the fire department wouldn't even get "clone" information about medical calls on their computer-aided dispatch system and had to wait to be contacted by EMS before even knowing anything about a call.

Christy Hennsley, center manager of police communications, said the upgrade is also beneficial to police dispatchers, who take in all 911 calls and then transfer them to the appropriate agency.

"It's going to make our jobs easier," she said.

Officials said the goal is to have equipment installed by Sept. 1. The communication district board authorized the contract with NG911 during its meeting last week.

The price tag is \$270,000, which comes from 911 service fees on phone bills, said Michael Grossie, executive director for the communication district.

The technology is a long-time coming.

"This was something that was requested about 10 years ago, and we're finally at a point where technology has come up with a solution," Grossie said.

The upgrade is just one of many that will be made in coming years.

Officials locally and nationwide have been working on the "Next Generation" initiative, which is aimed to upgrade the nation's 911 system that was designed for land lines.

Eventually, centers will switch from analog to digital, which will make it possible for residents to communicate with dispatchers using any device. For example, residents will be able to send a text message or videos to a 911 center.

Grossie said he didn't have any idea how long it would be before residents could do that, saying the initiative is still in the infancy stage.

But the Lubbock district has taken its first step. It is in the process of building an IP network for its 911 system, which is the foundation for "Next Generation."