

City Ombudsman Margie Sollinger issued a report to Portland City Council detailing a problem with the City's emergency communications system. Below is a summary of the report. The full report, including the Bureau of Emergency Communication's response, is available [here](#).



Portland City Auditor
Office of the Ombudsman

Auditor Mary Hull Caballero
Ombudsman Margie Sollinger

December 21, 2016

To: Commissioner-in-charge Steve Novick
Mayor Charlie Hales
Commissioner Nick Fish
Commissioner Amanda Fritz
Commissioner Dan Saltzman

CC: Mayor-elect Ted Wheeler
Commissioner-elect Chloe Eudaly
Director Lisa Turley, Bureau of Emergency Communications

OMBUDSMAN REPORT: PROBLEM WITH CITY'S EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

This report is issued pursuant to the Ombudsman's powers and duties under City Code Chapter 3.77. The Bureau of Emergency Communications submitted a brief statement in response that is included as part of this report.

Summary

In May 2016, a house fire in Southeast Portland resulted in the death of an elderly woman. The Ombudsman's Office received a complaint alleging that the City took too long to respond to the fire. Although the allegations in the complaint were not substantiated, the Ombudsman's investigation uncovered a problem with the City's 9-1-1 system.

For more than a decade, the City's emergency communications system has unintentionally lost important information about a subset of emergency calls, preventing operators from following City policy and causing underreporting of call hold times and abandoned call rates. In 2015 alone, the number of affected calls totaled 18,482. The problem occurs when a cell phone caller hangs up or is disconnected while waiting to speak with a 9-1-1 operator. Under City policy, these calls are supposed to receive a return call to determine whether an emergency exists. However, the system does not retain the callers' phone numbers and does not apprise operators that the call occurred.

The lost information is the result of a screening system, known as the Reno Solution, that is designed to reduce the volume of accidental cell phone calls to 9-1-1. The Reno Solution has reduced cell phone call volume. But the Reno Solution's interaction with the existing emergency communications system created a new, unintended problem: the inability to call back tens of thousands of people who are presumed to have dialed 9-1-1 on purpose.

Providentially, a State-funded phone system upgrade planned for Spring 2017 has the potential to resolve the problem. The upgrade includes an integrated screening system that will replace the Reno Solution. The new system promises to preserve the call back information for all intentional phone calls so that 9-1-1 operators can return calls that are currently disappearing from the call records.

Before accepting funding from the State and implementing the planned upgrade, the Bureau of Emergency Communications should seek City Council's approval. Council did not have an opportunity to vet and approve the Reno Solution when it was first implemented more than a decade ago. Going forward, Council should have the opportunity to consider the inherent risks and trade-offs associated with using a screening system and make sure that there will not be collateral damage to other parts of the system.



City of Portland

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Established in 2001, the Office of the Ombudsman is an independent, impartial office, readily available to the public, responsible to the City Auditor, empowered to investigate the administrative acts of City agencies and to recommend appropriate changes toward the goals of safeguarding the rights of persons and promoting higher standards of competency, efficiency and justice in the provision of City services.

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