

'How many people are gonna die?': Call for change after report citing 911 system flaws

By Joe Douglass. KATU News. December 21, 2016.

PORTLAND, Ore. – "How many people are gonna die, you know, in the future if we don't fix this?" Ann Fry asked a KATU reporter Wednesday while discussing a new report from the city ombudsman for Portland.

Fry is the daughter-in-law of a woman killed in a house fire.

In the [report](#), Ombudsman Margie Sollinger describes potentially dangerous glitches in the city's 911 system.

Sollinger says 18,482 calls vanished from system records last year after they were dropped on the caller's end with no one calling back to follow up.

'Didn't need to die'

When you call 911 in Portland and other parts of Multnomah County, the first voice you hear is not from a live person.

It's a recorded message saying, "Portland 911. If this is an emergency say 9-1-1 after the beep or press any key on your phone at any time."

If you push a button and/or make enough noise you're supposed to eventually get through to speak to a live operator.

The screening system is meant to weed out accidental calls.

"These are our loved ones, you know," said Fry, standing outside the home on Southeast Salmon Street where a [fire killed her 84-year-old mother-in-law, Betty Fry, last May](#).

"This is a kind lady that died in a house fire that probably didn't need to die," Fry said. "It was 22 minutes from the time that someone started calling until the time the fire department got here. That is reported by at least four different neighbors."

And Fry said those neighbors reported getting busy signals.

Laureen Paulsen, spokeswoman for Portland's Bureau of Emergency Communications, disputes Fry's claims, telling KATU their records show firefighters responded within less than a minute after the first call.

Sollinger disputes Fry's claims as well.

"I don't think that the problem I identified with the system actually played a role in delaying the city's response to this residential house fire," Sollinger said.

But both she and Paulsen admitted it's tough to know for sure because Portland's 911 call system doesn't record information about callers who get a busy signal.

"(The system) doesn't grab the information unless the call makes it all the way to the 911 queue," Paulsen said.

A KATU reporter asked Fry to help him reach the people she said got busy signals when they called 911 so he could independently check their phone records, and she did not immediately fulfill the request, though she said she'd work on it.

"This is a crack," Sollinger said regarding the problems found in her investigation. "There's a crack in the system."

After looking into the fire on Salmon Street, Sollinger found issues that piqued her curiosity.

"There were a number of neighbors who were interviewed who indicated difficulty reaching 911," Sollinger said. "In one instance waiting on hold for over two minutes and then not receiving a call back after they eventually gave up and hung up."

Digging deeper, Sollinger found the problem was more widespread after looking into records from last year.

"Over 18,000 calls were the byproduct of a system flaw," Sollinger said. "It's a number that represents calls that made it through the screening system, someone pushed a button or made enough noise to make it through and were waiting to speak to a live operator. At that point they either gave up and hung up or their call got disconnected for some other reason but it's on the caller's side that the call is disconnected. There's no dispute about that ... Those are the calls that didn't get a call back and should have under city policy."

Paulsen admitted the city's 12-year-old call screening system isn't perfect but she said it is useful.

"We do lose data on some of the unintentional phone calls that come in," Paulsen said. "Anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of the wireless 911 calls we receive every day are unintentional calls, butt dials."

The call screening system is set to be replaced in a state-funded upgrade next spring that's expected to fix the flaws described by Sollinger.

It was scheduled to happen before her report came out.

"The call screening part is all integrated with the (new) phone system," Paulsen said, "so it will gather all of the information from all callers."