

Portland Lost Track of 18,482 Cellphone Calls to 911 in a Year

The city's Bureau of Emergency Communications has no way to return those abandoned or disconnected calls. That's a violation of policy.

By Rachel Monahan. Willamette Week. December 21, 2016.

Fifty-one calls a day.

That's the number of calls to Portland's 911 call center that were abandoned or disconnected in 2015 without the city having the means to retrieve a call-back number or location of the caller. In all, the city lost track of 18,482 calls from cellphones, calls that had already made it through an automatic screening process designed to eliminate accidental dials.

That's a violation of city policy that requires 911 operators be able to reach out to anyone who calls. The Bureau of Emergency Communications says some of those calls could still be accidental.

The number is among the findings in an ombudsman's report, "Problem With the City's Emergency Communication System," released Dec. 21. The lost calls also mean the city has potentially underreported hold times for callers who dial 911.

Ombudsman Margie Sollinger recommends the City Council decide whether to continue to screen cellphone calls when the city upgrades its system as soon as this spring. (Portland is among a small number of call centers that screen cellphone calls to 911 to reduce demand on the system.) BOEC liaison manager Laura Wolfe says it's important to screen cellphone calls so as not to overwhelm operators.