

Report: 911 center loses thousands of emergency calls

Created on Wednesday, 21 December 2016 | Written by [Jim Redden](#) | 

UPDATE: Emergency communications bureau complains the report does not fully address the problem of 'butt-dial overload' caused by unintentional cell phone calls.



PORTLAND TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO - For more than 10 years, 9-1-1 operators have been unable to return dropped cell phone calls in violation of city policies. The Ombudsman believes the City Council should review the proposed fix to make sure there are no more unexpected problems.

For more than a decade, Portland 911 operators have been unable to follow up on calls from cell phones that were cut off before they answer — in violation of city policies.

The problem has affected 18,482 calls in 2015 alone, according to a first-of-its-kind report released Wednesday by the [Office of the Ombudsman](#).

"I am drawing the report to City Council's and the public's attention because it is an ongoing problem that potentially jeopardizes the safety of every person who lives, works or visits here," says city Ombudsman Margie Sollinger.

Although a state-funded fix is scheduled for spring 2017, Sollinger recommends the City Council review and approve the state's proposed fix in a public hearing, to ensure there are no unintended consequences for the rest of the 911 system.

After the report was released, the Office of Emergency Communications issued a statement saying it did not acknowledge the problem caused by "butt-dial overload" caused by unintentional cell phone calls.

The Ombudsman Report: Problem with City's Emergency Communications System, does not fully address the issue of nationwide issue of butt-dial overload and the ultimate purpose of the screening system, called the "XMU," which is an auto attendant made by a manufacturer, Interalia utilized by many agencies in the Portland Metro area. Nationwide, 50% of wireless calls have been determined to be the result of pocket dialing according to FCC Commissioner in 2014," said the statement.

The statement also said it was up to the commissioner in charge of the bureau whether to bring the issue to the council. That is currently Commissioner Steve Novick, who is leaving the council at the end of the year.

Sollinger's position was created in the city auditor's office to resolve complaints from Portland residents about city programs. The office has never released a report focusing on a single problem before.

"City Council — not the bureau or an advisory board to the bureau — should set the policies and decide how best to provide the public with a reliable 911 system," Sollinger told the Portland Tribune. "Council did not make the decision that resulted in the current problem, but it and the public should be involved in the solution."

Hundreds of calls lost daily

The ombudsman's office first became aware of the problem after a May 2016 house fire in Southeast Portland where an elderly woman died. Some neighbors said they tried calling 911 on their cell phones to report the fire but were not called back after they were disconnected, according to the ombudsman's Dec. 21 report. The report says the lack of callbacks did not slow the response of Portland Fire & Rescue to the fire, but revealed a 10-year-old problem with the system.

According to the report, ['Problem with City's Emergency Communications System.'](#) if a cell phone caller hangs up or is disconnected before speaking to a 911 operator, the existing system does not retain the caller's number and notify operators of the call. City policy requires such calls to be returned, whether or not there is an emergency.

As a result, "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," the report says.

City technology staff were able to determine that about 51 calls a day have been adversely affected.

Remedy was flawed

The problem is caused by a screening system known as the Reno Solution designed to reduce a high number of accidental cell phone calls to 911. It was developed for the 911 center in Reno, Nevada, and implemented at Portland's center in December 2004 without a formal council hearing or vote.

The Reno Solution routes all cell phone calls to 911 through an automated attendant. Callers hear a short message prompting them to say "911" or press any number. If callers respond to the prompts, they are routed to a 911 operator. When there are no available operators, callers are placed on hold in the emergency queue. But if they are disconnected first, there is no record of their call.

The cell phone problem is well understood by emergency communications professionals. A fix to be funded by the state is scheduled for spring 2017 and will preserve callback information. It will present those calls to the operators as incomplete and provide a callback number. But Sollinger says the council should review and approve the upgrade, something it did not do when the Reno Solution was implemented.

"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," according to the report.

In the meantime, the emergency communications bureau has implemented two other changes recommended by the ombudsman office. It has revised its recorded message to tell callers not to hang up, and has conducted community outreach by putting out information on social media forums, such as NextDoor.

The report estimates the new fix will increase the workload of 911 operators a modest 2.2 percent. In a letter of response, bureau Director Lisa Turley says police bureau and fire department workloads also will increase.

"(W)e appreciate your research and ask that you assist us in our continued efforts to keep our callers informed of the limitations of our current system as well as upcoming improvements," Turley writes.