

Portland 911, at rock bottom, looks to reach the top

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OregonLive.com

By Gordon R. Friedman | The Oregonian/OregonLive | Posted August 25, 2018 at 07:05 AM | Updated August 27, 2018 at 08:44 AM

BY GORDON R. FRIEDMAN

Portland's 911 center, roiled by scandal for falsifying data to cover its failure to answer calls on time, has faltered as it works to improve under new leadership.

Since the agency began publishing accurate data in late 2017, its call times have lagged far behind national benchmarks and reached a record low in June.

That leaves those who call Portland 911 at risk of getting help from first responders too late to put out a house fire, revive someone after cardiac arrest or stop a crime in progress.

National standards say 90 percent of 911 calls should be answered in 10 seconds at peak call times. So far this year, just 14 percent of Portland's were. In June, the agency dipped to its lowest point – answering just 8 percent of peak-time calls within 10 seconds – before rebounding to 16 percent in July.

Any 911 agency so far behind the national standards ought to undertake a “wholistic, widescale assessment” to identify and correct its problems, said Christopher Carver, who oversees 911 standards at the National Emergency Numbers Association, the benchmark-setting group.

The revelation the Portland 911 center put out false data drove Mayor Ted Wheeler to seize control of the bureau from its elected commissioner-in-charge, Amanda Fritz. Lisa Turley, then director of the Bureau of Emergency Communications, was allowed to follow through with her planned retirement despite Turley knowingly reporting false data to the City Council. Even after she retired, the 911 center kept Turley on as a highly-paid consultant.

Since then, Wheeler installed a new director, Bob Cozzie. The mayor and his staff have closely overseen bureau operations for months.

Cozzie said during a recent interview that he is well underway on a months-long project to take stock of his bureau. He has conducted one-on-one interviews with more than 70 of its employees and plans to interview them all. He said his bureau is committed to accurately reporting its call times.

“We have to report the truth. You have to know where you are to improve,” said Cozzie, who previously directed the Clackamas County 911 system.

Cozzie said he believes the center’s very low response times in June were “more than likely” caused by the high number of trainees at Portland 911 and increasing call volumes heading into summer. Call volumes were higher in spring than the winter months, but dipped slightly from May to June, agency data shows.

Cozzie’s ultimate goal: Get Portland 911 call-takers to meet national standards for prompt answering times, he said.

But he admits his agency isn’t on track to get there for 5 years or more because it needs to hire another 25 or so call-takers. The bureau has 105 dispatchers, 11 trainees who are not yet certified to take calls and nine vacant operator jobs, according to July data.

Elisabeth Perez, the mayor’s liaison to the 911 center, said Wheeler supports Cozzie’s hiring plan. “Our intention is to fully meet” the national 911 standards, Perez said.

Clackamas County’s 911 operators have answered 95 percent of calls within 10 seconds this year, its data shows. Washington County data was not readily available.

One thing that has hampered Portland’s 911 center, while purporting to help it, is software that directs incoming calls from cell phones to a recorded message, rather than directly to a live call-taker. The thinking was that a high proportion of cell phone calls are accidental pocket dials, so calls from landlines should take priority.

Calls from cell phones accounted for 41 percent of the nearly 850,000 calls taken by Portland operators last year.

To get to an operator, callers from cell phones must make a noise or press a button on their phone. If a caller does not do that fast enough, the automated system hangs up the call. Even if a caller makes it through the filter, they may be routed to a waiting queue if all operators are busy.

The filter is so sensitive to noise that it would be “really unusual” for a legitimate call to be filtered out, Cozzie said. The technology has filtered out more than 62,000 calls as apparently accidental so far this year, agency data shows.

But by directing all cell phone callers to a filter – which plays an automated recording lasting about 10 seconds, according to Cozzie – the 911 center by default hurts its call response times.

Cozzie said part of his reorganization has been an experiment to set the filter so it operates only when there are too many incoming calls for humans to answer. He said the change has caused a “pretty substantial improvement” in call response times. He said that should be evident in August data, which is not yet complete.

Still, Cozzie said, the bureau is “nowhere near where I’d like it to be.” He said his ultimate goal is to hire enough call-takers that the call filter never needs to be activated.

National guidelines say 911 centers should not filter calls.

Carver, the manager at the national standard-setting organization, said filters should only be activated during “periods of exceptionally high call demand,” such as in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

He said call filters are “not widely adopted in the United States” and there are many ways to manage accidental calls without a one. Many 911 centers launch public information campaigns to help stop accidental calls, he said.

The top problem keeping 911 centers from reaching national standards is inadequate staffing, Carver said.

Cozzie recognizes this, too. He said meeting the national standards is ultimately “a matter of having enough call takers on duty.”

Oregonians underwrite the state’s 911 centers with a 75-cent per month tax on each phone line. The tax, which is distributed to local governments based on population, collected more than \$11 million last quarter. Portland is its biggest beneficiary.

Residents of Gresham and areas served by the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office also pay in part for Portland’s 911 center because its operators provide dispatching for Multnomah County and Gresham emergency services.

Though Cozzie has built a strategy for his agency's future, that could change come January, at the direction of a newly elected commissioner-in-charge. Wheeler has said he will assign the bureau to whoever wins election to the seat Commissioner Dan Saltzman is vacating.

Whether candidates Jo Ann Hardesty or Loretta Smith win, neither have experience running a bureaucracy where saving lives depends on its proper functioning.

The winner of Saltzman's seat will also be assigned to run the Fire Bureau and Bureau of Emergency Management, Wheeler announced.

At an August 15 candidate forum that was the first face-off between Hardesty and Smith ahead of the general election, neither contender was asked a question about how they would manage the public safety bureaus.

-- Gordon R. Friedman