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Evaluation of Your Communication Center

Over the last decade a great deal of debate has occurred over the concept of fire department deployment. The vast majority of the argument has been over the location, spacing and staffing of the fire stations themselves. That seems logical. After all fire stations are what actually go out, carrying fire fighters to do the best they can to reduce the loss of life and property. But increasingly fire agencies are finding out that the “invisible” service of the communities; the fire dispatch center is playing more and more of a role in determining whether or not the fire department’s performance is everything it is professed to be. As more and more fire agencies are adopting the concept of a published Standard of Cover that is consistent with the methodology that is suggested by the CFAI this factor is coming to light.

Setting Standards of Cover may have created un- intended consequences that need to be looked at much more carefully in the future. What I am referring to is the process of receiving and transmitting the alarm information to those fire companies that are so difficult to justify and sustain at times.

Back in the days of the original research of the IAFC’s Accreditation Task Force there was recognition that there were time elements that preceded the activation of a fire company. CFAI built its examination of this process by starting with Rexford Wilson’s “Nine Steps to Extinguishment.” Wilson recognized many years ago that an emergency begins a long time before it comes to the attention of the fire department. Fire Chief Charlie Rule and other members of the committee conducted a review process to determine what the baseline was for both alarm processing and turnout time. At the time there was little information in the literature. In all candor, this was not as scientific a study as it was a collection of contemporary wisdom. Many fire agencies were not even tracking that information. Others were tracking it, but using very primitive methods of collecting it. Much of the data was entered manually and subject to variation. What the committee found was a very wide range in the performance of different types of communication centers. If the communication center was under direct control of fire department and an emergency call came in directly to them there was a very high degree of emphasis on alarm processing. If it wasn’t under fire department control, the emphasis varied. Nonetheless over 100,000 alarm records were reviewed over a period of about 2 years and some time frames established in the original drafts.

According to Chief Rule after assessing the number of calls that were available they determined that a fifty second alarm processing time was about the average. Therefore the Commission on Fire Accreditations initial task force took that to be a baseline. It was obvious that by using the average that there were some calls that exceeded that and there were some calls that were faster. That 50 second figure has been picked up by many other entities, but few have taken the time to conduct their own assessment



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The Task Force adopted the baseline with the caveat that additional study needed to be conducted. That concern has turned out to be very accurate assessment of an emerging need.

In order to really determine whether or not a communication center is doing a decent job for the fire department chief fire officials have to examine these different components using the latest technology. Every effort needs to be made to eliminate guessing and replace it with hard data.

Among the most critical steps is an evaluation of how well the communication center performs in processing and transmitting alarms as part of the initiation to point of activation in the fire station. Referencing the Response time Cascade in the Self Assessment Manual, the first point of initiation is when the phone rings in the dispatch center that is under the control of the fire department. Therein lies one of the initial difficulties. More and more fire agencies have to receive their alarms after they have been processed by a 911 center or public safety answering points (PSAP). Typically PSAP are run by law enforcement agencies. The reason that this is somewhat critical is the law enforcement agencies view calls coming in for law enforcement differently than they do for processing fire calls.

Those departments that did a faster job of alarm processing generally speaking tended to have systems to where there were a minimum number of people involved in the chain of events. Simplified dispatch centers, i.e. those that served a minimum number of fire stations were able to have the same person who received the call also be the one who transmitted it to the station. As you move up in the size and complexity of communication centers call takers are not always the ones that are responsible for transmission. And while computerization of dispatch centers has been occurring with a great deal of regularity, the actual performance of the dispatch center in processing alarms has not been looked at as rigorously as it should be.

When the Task Force did its initial study it was estimated that the majority of fire departments that would likely be going for self-assessment were still in control of their communication centers. However over the last 10 years there is greater recognition that the widespread use of 911 has placed an artificial block in the way. In some areas the 911 call goes through a call screening process that can result in a person making a determination whether it was police, fire or EMS before making the decision to notify the appropriate agency. Our initial responsibility and accountability for alarm processing time began the minute the fire department or the person who was going to be dispatching the call was aware that they were dealing with a fire or EMS related issue. The reality is that very few people have ever conducted extensive research into this area. Other than the study conducted by the task force there are no well-defined studies that we can determine in the literature that pointed out what the baseline should be.

With respect to interpreting this for setting local policy a line must be drawn that identifies the expectation of the public. What is the basis of the confidence they have in the system? It is when the



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person calling hangs up the phone. The clock is ticking for them. What is the time frame to make sure their interest is best served?

When an entity publishes information to the public regarding how they should activate the call for an emergency service they incur an obligation. Regardless of whether that is under the supervision of a law enforcement agency or a fire agency both are equally liable for the performance of that center. There are a considerable number of documents on record that demonstrate that the 911 system is being abused extensively. Mostly this problem centers on areas that are highly dense, i.e. urban communities or regionalized centers.

Regardless of the speed of which 911 calls are received in the center there remains a performance requirement that the information be processed quickly and appropriate emergency calls screened out quickly. Failure to do so misleads the public with respect to response time of the fire agency that is going to be held accountable for performance on the fire ground.

It has been noted in several self-assessment processes that some in the law enforcement community do not take this problem very seriously. This is somewhat unfortunate. But, more importantly, there is a matter of public policy. It poses a hypothetical question of: Can a fire department be credible that has extensive delays in its alarm processing times?

The answer begins with the definition in the community of what consists travel time that they tell the public. And what the adopted policy is with respect to total response time. If a fire agency has established a total *travel* time of five minutes 90 percent of the time or four minutes 90 percent of the time they are creating a public expectation. That may truly be their performance. However if they do not conduct a self-assessment of the alarm processing and turn out time then they are misleading the public with respect to what happens when they call for emergency assistance.

The self-assessment process requires that a study be conducted to determine what element of time is being absorbed by these two. In the event that the period of time exceeds the baseline of 50-seconds then an adequate amount of research must go into the reason why that is exceeded. Moreover it is totally practical for a community to identify an alarm processing time of 60-seconds – 90 percent of the time. However I think it would be totally unreasonable to expect a one minute and 30 second or even a two-minute alarm processing time to be acceptable for any community.

As those who have gone through self-assessment will recall that the self-assessment process is designed to seek improvements prior to seeking accreditation. Therefore it would be anticipated that any agency that has excessively long alarm processing times should do everything in their power to re-engineer or re-design their system to bring that baseline down into something that is much more within professional



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standards. This process in and of itself is a vital part of really looking at the chain of events that go into community's response coverage performance.

The real problem begins when there is lack of cooperation of the side of an agency providing that service. Refusal to provide documentation or refusal to attempt to give us a reasonable response time for fire agencies could be grounds for failure to meet public expectations.

Those of us that have been studying the issue of alarm time and travel time for the last ten to fifteen years clearly realize that without this baseline being in place, the remainder of the fire departments resources is essentially reducing the effectiveness of the taxpayer's funds to create the station in the first place. Sending an adequately staffed engine company to the scene of an emergency that is already gone beyond the ability to limit the fire to the room of origin will result in some rather spectacular fires but doesn't do much for insuring the quality of life and the safety of property within that jurisdiction.

What needs to be done by almost all fire agencies is an audit of the two initiation steps of the response and deployment process; the alarm processing time and the turnout time. Contrary to contemporary wisdom that these things take care of themselves, they do not. They need to be evaluated every bit as much as the travel time component. Failure to establish performance requirements for these two very important steps can significantly erode the credibility of the travel time component over time.