

Chittenden County Fire Chief's Council
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Dispatching in Chittenden County

BACK GROUND:

The Fire/EMS Dispatching in Chittenden County is currently, for the most part, being done in a rather nonprofessional manner. Generally it is being done by Police Departments that do not charge and do not understand the needs of Fire/Ems Services.

Police Department when dealing with their customers are generally doing so in an adversarial manner, Enforcing laws. We on the other hand, deal with our customers, (sometimes police officers) nearly always in an emergency situation in which they require aid in potentially life threaten situations. Because of this, we require a completely different type of dispatch service, not a law enforcement (adversarial) type. Many law enforcement personnel are not able or willing to acknowledge that such a vast difference exists. The Fire/EMS Service enjoys an extremely supportive and dedicated relationship with the public which many law enforcement wished they had.

In the Fire/EMS fields, we require immediate contact with the Dispatchers because of the extreme situations that we respond to. Many times we are required by outside agencies, Police, Emergency Management, Environmental Agencies, and the general public to respond when no one else will because of the hazards involved. Because of these hazards, we require continual updates on the situation as it is evolving. We need to be sure we are anticipating all of our possible needs and are able to get the proper resources responding in a timely manner as many of our resources come from volunteer Departments. This often requires several calls to be made

which often take several minutes to properly do. Currently many times these calls are never completed. This causes severe situation to arise. Fortunately no has been named in a law suit in Chittenden County recently because of this but that could happen at anytime. There are many nation standards which have set the precedence as to the level of service that is expected, unfortunately for the Chittenden County residents, we are well below those standards.

The Goals Of Central Dispatch For Chittenden County

The following are the Goals which we have set for a Chittenden County Dispatch Center. Much money and time has been spent surveying and studying the needs for our area, more than \$75,000.00 to be exact. One of the clearest facts that came from the study was that it ***should not be done by VSP, and would best serve the public being done by a separate public system.***

By State Statutes, Title 20, Chapter 175, section 2988 the Fire Service has the authority to operate Dispatch and Communications services. This would ensure that we can control both cost and quality of service, two very key items.

Funding:

The funding for the Dispatch project has been a very large concern. Currently Regional Planning and legislators have been doing research as to a way to broad base, county wide fund the project. This is most desirable due to the fact that nearly all of the Fire Departments and EMS services currently do not pay for dispatching and would cause great financial strain to do so. There is also Federal Grant programs which will help equip the Center which would be an obvious benefit.

Other Revenues:

There are other sources of revenue that could help to offset the costs at the center. One such possibly would be to monitor Fire/EMS alarm systems. Also there is interest by Grand Isle County Fire

Mutual Aid System to be Dispatched from there also. They currently are upgrading their system with a Federal Grant and also do not have a dispatch point which is reliable.

They have been speaking to VSP/Williston but VSP is not interested because they can not charge for the service and have other problems to deal with.

Other Benefits:

Currently many municipalities contract off business hour answering of Municipal alarms, freshwater and wastewater as well as monitoring municipal telephone lines. This could also so be done by a County Center helping to lowering the cost to the municipalities.

VERMONT STATE POLICE:

Many local Police Departments are currently trying to relocate their dispatching to VSP. This could have some disastrous ramification for themselves, the communities they serve, and the Fire/EMS services that they currently Dispatch. The Vermont State Police are not equipped, staffed, or funded to undertake such a large project.

I have had several meeting with VSP's top management on this issue. They recently tried to secure funding through a '**ONE TIME APPROPRIATION**' via the Legislature for a pilot project in Williston. They used the term 'Emergency Services of Chittenden County' to infer that Fire/EMS supported this project. We were totally unaware of the request and ***did not*** support it.

VSP currently is having so many problems in the Williston Dispatch Center that the Trooper's Union has filed complaints about the service. According to a recent WCAX news item , the Trooper's Union President Bill Harkness, said the dispatching is so bad the Troopers are buying their own cell phones to use to be able to call into the barracks to reach someone.

In the last year they have gone threw a consolidation of the Williston, St.Albans and Middlebury barracks. Of the 22 dispatchers that were there when it opened only 3 currently exist on the job.

I have spoken to the Vergennes Police Department officers and they generally have to call multiple times to get an answer also.

I recently was invited to a meeting between Underhill/Jericho Fire Department and VSP/Williston which does their fire dispatching . At that meeting several items were aired. Most of them involved problems of being dispatched late, not answering when called or improper daily test tone procedures.

All of the above cited items indicate that they do not have the capabilities to handle what they are doing now and to take on the dispatching services of other Municipalities would have disastrous, perhaps fatal results.

Vermont State Police/Williston, I believe, is hoping to draw in many local services to dispatch, deliver the quality of service they currently have and at that they, due to user complaints, will then be able to go to the Legislature to receive the authority to charge thus enabling them to upgrade their center at the local municipalities expense with very little or no input or control. They speak of have a 'user group' but in the end they have control. This was exposed in the 'ONE-TIME Appropriation' request which was submitted in the last legislative session, it also contained a provision to allow setting up 'user fees'.

SYSTEM DESIGN:

The design of the system was well designed and outlined in the RAM Study. It is very simple, but has proven effective all over the county where it has been used. It is designed to utilize current radio systems that exist, lower the cost of implementation.

The Missing Pieces:

In the local law enforcements eagerness to dissolve their dispatch centers some very important items have been overlooked. They are as follows :

A) When the Dispatcher's Desk no longer exists at your station who will take walk-in calls for service 24 hours a day?

B) Where will the seven digit emergency and non-emergency telephones be answered?

C) Where will the current alarms that are wired direct to your dispatch centers go?

In the meetings that I have had in the past with V.S.P. items B & C WILL NOT be done by them.

THE BENEFITS:

The benefits would be many but the bottom line would be *SUPPLY THE PUBLIC WE SERVE WITH THE LEVEL OF SERVICE THAT DEMAND AND EXPECT.*

Al Barber, Director
Chittenden County Fire Chief's Council