

PS COMMITTEE #1
June 14, 2012
Update

MEMORANDUM

June 12, 2012

TO: Public Safety Committee

FROM: Essie McGuire, Senior Legislative Analyst *EMcG*

SUBJECT: **Update – Emergency Call Center (ECC) Operations**

Today the Public Safety Committee will receive an update on operations at the County's Emergency Call Center (ECC). Representatives from the Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service (MCFRS) and the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) will participate in this discussion.

The purpose of this discussion is to receive an update on certain structural aspects of ECC operations, primarily related to the MCFRS call-taking and dispatch functions. As Committee members know, the ECC will undergo a significant restructuring in FY13 to transition to universal call-takers within MCPD.

The ECC answers all 911 calls dialed in Montgomery County, as well as non-emergency police service calls. The current operation is a bifurcated model with separate Police Department and Fire and Rescue Service call-takers and dispatchers (Police Department staff are all civilian; MCFRS call-takers are civilian, but their dispatchers are uniformed firefighters). Initially, Police Department staff answer all incoming calls to determine if the caller needs police, fire, or medical assistance. If the caller needs police assistance, the call "stays" on the police side of the ECC operations. If the caller needs fire or medical (ambulance), the initial Police Department call-taker routes the caller to a Fire Department call-taker (opposite side of the same room), who then further assesses the situation. These additional transfers often add to a backlog of calls and increase response times.

The upcoming reorganization will combine and cross-train all call-takers so that all calls can be processed without the need for a second transfer step. The approved budget shifts 10 existing call-taker positions from MCFRS (-\$537,697 from its FY13 budget) to the Police Department, adds seven new call-taker positions, three Quality Assurance positions, and one supervisor. Six of the additional call-taker positions are new for FY13; however, they are positions that have been requested by MCFRS over the past several years.

In order to implement the new system, various renovations will need to be made both to the existing ECC as well as the back-up ECC centers. The departments are developing a timeline for these renovations, as well as for staff training and other implementation details. The Committee will receive regular updates throughout the year on this developing process.

In addition to this upcoming effort, MCFRS has taken several steps recently to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the MCFRS operations, and particularly to increase supervisory oversight and increase quality assurance. The current structure of call-taking and dispatch will stay in place for at least the next fiscal year as Council staff understands that the departments plan to have the new system in place by June 2013. Some of these recent changes related to MCFRS call-taking will then be transitioned into the new system; others related to MCFRS dispatch will be unaffected by the universal call-taking effort.

In preparation for this discussion, MCFRS provided information on circles 1-3 about the recent improvements at the ECC, a comparative overview of neighboring jurisdictions, and detailed information about scheduling. Council staff highlights the areas below for the Committee's discussion today.

Configuration

MCFRS has reconfigured the physical layout of the work space of MCFRS operations at the ECC. Previously, there were three separate areas for the functions of call-taking, dispatch, and supervision. The separation of the units made communication among the elements more difficult. MCFRS has now integrated all the units so that while there are still distinct work areas, they are connected to each other making visual and verbal communication and supervision more direct.

Supervision

Circle 2 details the additional supervision that has been added, and that some duties have been reassigned from the call-takers and dispatchers to the supervisors to better focus these primary functions.

Scheduling

Circle 1 discusses the history and structure of the shifts at ECC. Uniformed MCFRS employees at the ECC working as dispatchers and supervisors work a 24-hour on, 48-hour off schedule which mirrors the shift structure of other uniformed MCFRS operational employees. Civilian MCFRS call-takers work rotating 12-hour shifts with some 8-hour shifts to cover peak hours.

The chart on circle 3 shows that among other neighboring jurisdictions, no other jurisdiction has a 24-hour schedule. Most seem to work variations of rotating 12-hour shifts. This chart also indicates that the ECC functions are largely covered by civilian, rather than uniformed, employees.

The 24-hour shift for uniformed ECC workers includes a 6-hour rest period and a 2-hour physical training period. However, these employees are subject to be called back to the call center floor if activity peaks and requires additional staffing.

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1. Please detail the current shift schedule for FRS dispatch employees at the ECC. Please include any rest or other break periods that are part of their shift and discuss how these breaks are managed within the coverage and operational needs of the ECC.

Uniformed Fire/Rescue Service personnel working as dispatchers and supervisors are on a modified shift work schedule which averages to a 42-hour work-week (105%) over a 12-week period. The schedule is 24-hours on/48-hours off, with single, double and triple Kelly days.

Per the Collective Bargaining Agreement, Uniformed Fire/Rescue Service Personnel are allotted a 2-hour Physical Training period and a 6-hour rest period. During a 24-hour shift, these personnel are on the floor performing dispatch-related duties for 16-hours, but are subject to immediate recall to the floor during peak demand times.

2. Please provide a brief history on how long this schedule has been in place, what schedule was in place before, and how the current schedule came about.

The current shift work schedule has been in place since 2004 (8 years). An agreement was reached in 2003 between the fire administrator and labor to transition to a 24-hour work schedule. Benefits of a 24-hour schedule include stabilizing the high turnover rate (i.e., as a means to attract and retain personnel) and providing consistency aligned with the operations shifts.

The previous schedule was 2-2-4, where personnel worked 2 12-hour days, then 2 12-hour nights, and then had 4 days off. This equaled a 42-hour work week at 105%. This schedule was put in place in 1989 when the ECC moved into the Maryland Avenue location.

Prior to 1989, the schedule was a mix of 8-hour and 12-hour shifts.

3. Please provide a brief review of the current schedule/shift arrangements for the other employees and units in the ECC.

The Fire/Rescue civilian call takers work a similar shift to that of MCP ECC personnel. Most work rotating 12-hour shifts with mandatory overtime. Additionally, there are 8-hour shifts to cover peak demand hours.

Uniformed administrative staff employees work 40-hours per week, typically on a 4 10-hour day scheduled during the business week.

4. Please provide brief overview information on how ECC operations are structured in similar neighboring jurisdictions (for example, PG, Anne Arundel, Fairfax, or others). Please focus on how the units are structured (call taking, dispatch, whether universal or specific, uniformed or civilian) and work schedule.

See the attached chart comparing jurisdictional schedules.

5. I understand that several changes are under consideration or have been made recently to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of FRS dispatch operations at the ECC. Please detail any relevant improvements and what next steps remain that have been identified to date.

- *Floor reconfiguration. This past April, the floor layout for the ECC was reconfigured to provide the supervisors with more situational awareness of the operations on the call-taking and dispatch functions. Along with the floor reconfiguration, some of the duties of the call-takers and dispatchers have been redistributed to the supervisors, freeing up those personnel for their primary job functions.*
- *Call-taking supervisor. In the second quarter of FY12, a uniformed officer was added to supervise the civilian call-takers.*
- *Full staffing of civilian call-takers. Included in the FY13 budget was a request to increase the civilian call-taker positions from 10 to 16. These additional positions will cover attrition and leave slots, thus reducing overtime.*
- *Lighting. Supervisors have been instructed that the overhead lights at the ECC will remain on at all times at a level of 30-35 foot candles, per a mandate by the Montgomery County Division of Risk Management.*
- *Automatic Call Distribution. The automatic call distribution computer will be disabled. Thus, 911 telephone calls transferred from the ECC will not be automatically answered and sent to an available call-takers head set. Rather, there will be a telephone ring and the assigned call-taker will have to initiate a positive action to answer the 911 call.*
- *Powerphone. Work continues to implement Powerphone as the emergency medical call-taking software, as well as new fire and police call-taking functions.*
- *Universal Call-Takers. Work continues to implement Universal Call-Takers, where the MCP will take over all 911 call-taking functions.*
- *ECC Quality Assurance Lieutenant position - funded*
- *Unknown Emergencies Protocol - revised*
- *Refresher training for call takers and dispatchers*

| Jurisdiction | Schedule | Staffing | Universal Call Takers |
|---------------------|--|---|------------------------------|
| Anne Arundel Co. | 2 10 hr days 2 14 hr nights 4 off | 1 fire Lt, 3 FF, 2 civilian *** | No |
| Arlington Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 days off | All civ, FFs can work OT at ECC | Yes |
| Fairfax Co. | W1:MTFSS W2:WTh 12 hrs * | 1 fire officer, rest civilian | No**** |
| Frederick Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 off 6-6 | All civilian | Yes |
| Howard Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 off | All civilian | Yes |
| Loudon Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 off ** | All civilian | No |
| Prince George's Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 off 6-6 | All civilian | Yes |
| Prince William Co. | 2 days 2 nights 4 off & 12 hr days | 1 fire Lt, rest civilian | Yes |
| | | | |
| | * 12 hr shifts, some work days some nights | *** 1 FF works daywork | |
| | ** Moving to schedule similar to Fairfax | ****Some personnel are trained in multiple disciplines, some just 1;personal preference | |

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