



ORANGE CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT

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July 20, 2022

Honorable Erick L. Larsh, Presiding Judge
Orange County Grand Jury
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Subject: Response to Grand Jury Report Entitled “Where’s the Fire?” Stop Sending Fire Truck to Medical Calls

Dear Honorable Judge Larsh:

Please accept this letter as the City of Orange response to the Grand Jury’s report entitled “Where’s the Fire?” Stop Sending Fire Truck to Medical Calls.

FINDINGS:

F1. Despite fire departments throughout Orange County having evolved into emergency medical departments, most have not updated their emergency response protocols accordingly, but have simply absorbed emergency medical responses into their existing fire response models.

City’s Response: The City disagrees with the finding. The City of Orange has adapted and increased service in response to emergency medical responses since first implementing an ALS ambulance in 1971. This innovation continued with three ALS ambulances in 1995 and a fourth ALS ambulance in 2015. In 2020 due to the COVID pandemic, the City staffed an additional ALS ambulance and used it to respond as the sole EMS unit to low acuity responses per dispatch protocols. Later in 2020, OFD crossed staffed engine personnel with reserve ambulances to provide transport services when OFD ALS ambulances were already on a call and private ambulances were unavailable. All of these changes were independent from the existing fire response models. Further, the finding does not take into account emergency medical care rendered at fires, vehicle accidents, and other fire suppression/rescue/extrication responses where the patient would benefit from EMTs and firefighters responding on fire engines and trucks.

F3. ALS staffed ambulances or smaller squad vehicles are often the most appropriate response to medical calls and do not compromise the quality of medical care.

City’s Response: The City disagrees with the finding. ALS staffed ambulances, or squad vehicles for non-transporting fire departments, may appear to be the appropriate response for most medical calls. In the case of ALS staffed ambulances such as those used by the City of Orange, critically ill patients that require two rescuers require additional personnel to either provide patient care or drive the ambulance to the hospital. ALS staffed ambulances and smaller squad vehicles that need

to wait for additional personnel sacrifice patient care for the most ill in order to achieve efficiency for the least ill. As such, single unit responses should not be the default for any EMS system and only used alongside an approved tiered dispatch protocol.

F4. There has been a breakdown of communication and trust between OCEMS and Orange County Fire Chiefs.

City's Response: The City agrees with the finding.

F5. Over-deployment of firefighters for medical calls contributes to the current climate of forced hiring and firefighter fatigue.

City's Response: The City disagrees with the finding. The overall increase of medical responses may be a contributing factor to firefighter fatigue. However, other issues such as increased ambulance offload time at the hospitals decrease the amount of time in between calls that would be available for rest. Due to other proactive efforts to adapt to the increased demand for medical responses, Orange City Fire Department has not seen an increase in absenteeism leading to more forced hiring.

F9. OCEMS has the authority and responsibility to inspect all for-profit ambulances operating in Orange County; however, publicly owned ambulances are not automatically subject to OCEMS oversight.

City's Response: The City disagrees to the finding. As memorialized in OCEMS policy #720.00, the City of Orange has adopted ordinances to license and regulate ambulance services within the City. This does not absolve the publicly owned ambulances of the Orange City Fire Department of OCEMS oversight. All City of Orange vehicles, personnel, and treatment thereby rendered or omitted is subject to OCEMS inspection, review, and discipline.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

R1. As recommended in the 2012 and 2014 OCFA Standards of Coverage and Deployment Plans, as well as other studies, the Grand Jury recommend that, by 2024, all Orange County fire agencies utilize criteria-based dispatch protocols and send a single unit response to those incidents triaged as non-life-threatening (BLS). F1, F2, F5

City's Response: This recommendation has already been implemented. As mentioned in the report, Metro Net Fire Dispatch, the City of Orange 911 dispatch provider uses a tiered dispatch program. Since 2020, Orange City Fire has dispatched single units to the lowest acuity call based on the 911 tiered dispatch protocols approved by OCEMS.

R4. While OCEMS should recognize how certain policy changes may pose operational challenges to emergency responders in the field, fire leadership should recognize and respect the independent oversight authority and expertise of OCEMS. F4

City's Response: This recommendation has already been implemented. Orange City Fire leadership does recognize and respect the independent authority and expertise of OCEMS. The efforts of Orange City Fire leadership has been instrumental in the recent improvement of relations between OCEMS and Orange County Fire Chiefs noted by the Grand Jury.

R5. Departments with publicly owned ambulances should allow OCEMS to inspect their ambulances for compliance with State EMS guidelines and adopt OCEMS recommendations. F9

City's Response: Orange City Fire has never denied OCEMS from inspecting their publicly owned ambulances. Since the City follows State guidelines and OCEMS policies to staff and equip Orange City Fire ambulances, the City has no issues with OCEMS inspections. However, the City reserves all rights explicitly given within California Health and Safety Code Section 1797.201 and the Orange Municipal Code Ch. 5.35.



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