

August 17, 2022



The Honorable Erick L. Larsh  
Presiding Judge  
Orange County Superior Court  
700 Civic Center Drive West  
Santa Ana, CA 92701

**Subject:      Response to 2021-22 Orange County Grand Jury Report**  
**WHERE'S THE FIRE? Stop Sending Fire Trucks to Medical Calls**

Dear Presiding Judge Larsh,

The City of Laguna Beach City Council, the City Manager's Office, and the Fire Department have reviewed the above-referenced report. In accordance with California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the City Council has reviewed and authorized the following response to the findings and recommendations of the report.

**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 absorbed emergency medical responses into their existing fire response models.*

**The City of Laguna Beach wholly disagrees with this finding.**

The City of Laguna Beach Fire Department has methodically evolved into an efficient all-risk organization providing fire suppression, fire prevention, hazardous materials response, rescue, public education, and emergency medical services, to name a few. This multi-function capability capitalizes on assets originally placed in geographical locations in order to arrive firefighting forces to fires and rescues quickly. In response to a growing population, the geographic layout of the City, and community expectations, the City Council authorized the funding and expansion from one fire station to three fire stations in 1968. In 1987, the unincorporated county area of South Laguna was annexed per LAFCO requirements, and the City absorbed a fourth fire station. The station previously housed the county paramedic unit that provided contract paramedic service to the City of Laguna Beach. The Orange County Fire Department relocated the paramedic unit to another area in South Orange County, and it was no longer available.

In response to the 1987 annexation, the City Council authorized and funded a City-sponsored paramedic program utilizing firefighters already staffing fire units. Therefore, the additional recurring annual cost to operate an engine-based paramedic unit is nominal when using this model.

In the 34 years since the inception of the City's paramedic program, six models for service delivery have been deployed. Past models include contract paramedics from the Orange County Fire

Department, a single paramedic engine at Fire Station 2, a single paramedic van at Fire Station 2, a paramedic engine at Fire Station 2 and a Paramedic Assessment unit at Fire Station 1, two paramedic units based out of Stations 1 and 4, and the current deployment of paramedic engines at Stations 1 and 4 and Paramedic Assessment Units at Stations 2 and 3. These changes in the City of Laguna Beach's EMS service delivery models were significant. When considering EMS services, the desire to provide the highest level of fiscally responsible service to the community has always been the City Council's goal.

**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.*

**The City of Laguna Beach partially agrees with this finding.**

The City of Laguna Beach comprises unique topography not represented in other areas of the county. Rising to an elevation of 1,200 feet within a mile of the Pacific Ocean, the City is primarily built upon hilly terrain with homes designed to take advantage of expansive views. Designed in the early 1920s, the City does not have a typical gridded neighborhood system. Instead, the streets are narrow, the homes built closely together, and residential sidewalks a rarity.

The Laguna Beach Fire Department operates out of four strategically placed fire stations. Each station houses three firefighters per day. A typical medical aid response comprises a fire engine and an ambulance, or five total people. To deliver service to the entire community, the Department and the City go to great lengths to design apparatus capable of accessing the tight streets and challenging neighborhoods.

The act of taking care of a single patient that does not require immediate lifesaving interventions can safely occur with two people. However, the response to a medical aid is rarely limited to simply providing care to a patient. The tight quarters, difficult terrain, and hillside homes add a measure of difficulty to the equation that additional staff can only solve. Frequently patients need to be carried up or down flights of stairs, across a large expanse of beach, or through older homes built without easy access. Additionally, forcible entry and changes in the patient's overall status add complexity to the response beyond the capacity of two providers.

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

**The City of Laguna Beach partially agrees with this finding.**

The Laguna Beach Fire Department works closely with OCEMSA. The Agency provides overall medical direction and scope of practice to each firefighter within the Department. In addition, the Department participates in several monthly meetings attended by, or organized by, OCEMSA. As a continuing education provider, the Laguna Beach Fire Department receives on-site inspection and review of training records by OCEMS personnel. Additionally, OCEMS controls the central electronic repository for all medical records generated by 911 responses within the City.

Historically, the department's staff experience and interaction with OCEMSA have been positive and productive.

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

**The City of Laguna Beach wholly disagrees with this finding.**

The Laguna Beach Fire Department operates its four stations utilizing a constant staffing model. Under this model, there are 13 firefighters working 24-hours each day. If a firefighter takes a day off, another firefighter gets hired behind them. In addition, firefighters may sign up to voluntarily work overtime shifts before a firefighter is force-hired to fill the vacancy. The need to provide an adequate response to fires drives this policy. The number, type, and resource deployment to individual calls have no nexus to force hiring.

**Recommendations**

*R1. As recommended in the 2012 and 2014 OCFA Standards of Coverage and Deployment Plans, as well as other studies, the Grand Jury recommends 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).*

**The City of Laguna Beach will not implement this recommendation because it is not warranted, nor is it reasonable.**

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code section 1797.201, the City of Laguna Beach has full control over the administration of EMS services within the City. Under the direction of the City Council, the City Manager and the Fire Chief make policy decisions affecting the staffing, dispatching, and deployment of resources. Therefore, the City rejects this recommendation for the reasons outlined under the response to Finding #3 above.

While rejecting this recommendation and its required time frame, the City has embarked on several significant projects to address and assess this topic. First, a major overhaul of the City's computer-aided dispatching (CAD) system is underway. Built within this system is a medical call triaging program that will aid in providing pre-arrival instructions and in making appropriate unit recommendations. Additionally, over the 2022-2023 fiscal year, the Fire Department will be working with a contractor to complete a Standards of Coverage and Community Risk Assessment.

*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.*

**The recommendation has been implemented.**

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The City of Laguna Beach and the Laguna Beach Fire Department recognizes the authority of the OCEMSA and commits to collaborative relations.

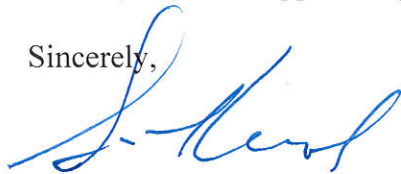
**R5.** *Department with publicly owned ambulances should allow OCEMS to inspect their ambulances for compliance with State EMS guidelines and adopt OCEMS recommendations.*

**The City of Laguna Beach will not implement this recommendation because it is not warranted.**

The City Council has committed to operating an ambulance service that provides an exemplary level of service. The Laguna Beach Fire Department operates new ambulances that meet or exceed the standards set forth on OCEMSA Policy #720.30 (*Ambulance Rules and Regulations Ground Ambulance Design/Documentation/Equipment*). The City has taken the additional steps of providing an Automatic Cardiac Compression Device on each ambulance and training all Ambulance Operators per OCEMSA's EMT expanded scope of practice. Maintaining medical inventories in the absence of formal inspection oversight is not new to the Laguna Beach Fire Department. For the past 34 years, the Department has maintained Paramedic units with mandated equipment requirements without issue or inspection. The Grand Jury reported they found it "problematic" that the OCEMSA did not inspect fire department ambulances without providing any clarifying examples. The City of Laguna Beach disagrees and will not participate in OCEMSA ambulance inspections.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the Grand Jury's report.

Sincerely,



Sue Kempf  
Mayor

cc: City Council  
City Manager  
Fire Chief