

# 9-1-1

## **DISPATCH CONCERNS AT THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS BUREAU**

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### **SUMMARY**

The successful performance of the Orange County Emergency Communications Bureau at Loma Ridge is vitally important to the citizens of Orange County, especially during a major emergency. It is imperative that the center be prepared and in a state of readiness at all times. The Emergency Communications Bureau is a part of the Orange County Operations Support Division of the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department. The division is divided into three operating units: Emergency Communications Bureau, Control One and the Emergency Management Division. (See Appendix A for details.) The focus of this report will be to review the staffing level and organization of the Emergency Communications Bureau with respect to the reduction of stress and fatigue and improvement of the readiness of the unit.

Based on several visits to Loma Ridge and interviews with personnel at various levels, it was determined that the radio dispatchers sometimes work as many as 16 hours per day at very stressful tasks. In the event of a major emergency such as an earthquake or fire, the radio dispatchers could be held over for additional hours. Acquisition and training of additional dispatchers would reduce stress caused by fatigue and provide a larger pool of trained radio dispatchers to cover for vacations, illnesses and other reasons. When trained, the cost of the new radio dispatchers would be offset by reductions in overtime hours.

Direct supervision of the radio dispatchers is provided by five sergeants. The sergeants are highly compensated. They could be replaced by civilian supervisors and transferred to assignments more in line with their training and experience.

This report will make recommendations that, when implemented, will result in reduction of dispatcher stress and fatigue and will reduce the operating cost of the Emergency Communications Bureau by approximately \$237,500 per year.

## **INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the readiness and preparedness of the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department Emergency Communications Bureau to perform its function with respect to radio dispatch. Recommendations will be made that, when implemented, will improve readiness and preparedness by lessening dispatcher stress and fatigue by increasing the number of radio dispatchers and reducing overtime. Effectiveness will be improved by some reorganization of the unit.

## **METHOD OF STUDY**

The Grand Jury visited the Emergency Communications Bureau at Loma Ridge on several occasions, both to inspect the facility and gather information. Various persons at Loma Ridge were interviewed. Operating budgets and costs of the Emergency Communications Bureau (Organization Code 415) were reviewed.

Other police and fire dispatch units in Orange County were visited and representatives of each unit were interviewed by members of the 1999–2000 Grand Jury.

Members of the Grand Jury reviewed the July–August 1999 issues of 9-1-1 Magazine and the Orange County Fire Authority *Standard Operating Procedures for Critical Incident Stress Management*.

The current agreement between the County of Orange and the Orange County Employees Association, *Memo of Understanding*, also was reviewed.

## **BACKGROUND**

It is the function of the Emergency Communications Bureau to receive 9-1-1 calls for fire-related services, sheriff and highway patrol, ambulance and paramedics, Coast Guard and search and rescue, and a large variety of other calls. The persons taking the calls are classified as radio dispatchers. The dispatchers who take the calls must analyze each one quickly and efficiently to make appropriate disposition to one or more agencies. Often, the person who takes the call must stay on the line and talk the caller through the emergency. (An emergency is defined as a situation that threatens human life or property and demands immediate attention). These calls are sometimes very stressful for the dispatchers. They may never know the outcome of the situation, or in some instances they may know that there has been a negative outcome despite their best effort. These situations are traumatizing, and there is no immediate relief other than going outside into the fresh air for a little while.

It is possible for an individual to experience strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with the ability to function now or in the future. A program, *Critical Incident Stress Management*, is being used by many public safety agencies across the

country. One of those agencies using the program successfully is the Orange County Fire Authority. In essence, the program utilizes trained peer counselors using standard operating procedures.

At present, there are 35 radio dispatchers (including one vacancy) working on five overlapping, eight-hour shifts. The dispatchers will answer approximately 880,000 calls this fiscal year. This number is expected to grow at the rate of 10 percent per year. At times the dispatchers are required to work double shifts of up to 16 hours. In event of an emergency, dispatchers could be called upon to work additional hours. The dispatchers do not have scheduled breaks. They remain at their stations, though occasionally they may get up from their chairs to take a break. They customarily eat lunch at their workplace. There are no relief dispatchers. When it is necessary for a dispatcher to take a break, other dispatchers on duty take their calls. Sworn officers (i.e., deputies and sergeants) are utilized to some extent to fill in for dispatchers who are not available due to training requirements, vacation, illness, or leave of absence.

## **MULTI-TASKING**

Dispatchers are fatigued by long hours and stressed by the complexity of their work. They must type data into the computer, talk to units in the field, and observe as many as five monitors simultaneously. This is called multi-tasking. The greatest stress is caused by the fear that they might make a mistake, which could result in loss of life or property. About half of the persons hired to be trained as radio dispatchers fail to make it through the training period because of their inability to multi-task.

## **SUPERVISION**

The Emergency Communications Bureau has an administrative lieutenant and four lieutenants assigned as watch commanders, one for each shift. Five sergeants supervise the radio dispatchers, one for each shift. In addition, there is one more sergeant otherwise assigned. Sergeants are trained to make police decisions and perhaps their presence adds to the security of the facility. However their ability to assist the dispatchers is somewhat limited. Their compensation is commensurate with their broad training and experience in law enforcement which tends to make them expensive radio dispatcher supervisors. Other fire and police dispatch centers were visited and found to have civilian supervisors who appear to function well. There would be career advancement opportunities for radio dispatcher if the classification, supervising radio dispatcher, were to be adopted. At this time, there is no such opportunity. Police decisions could be referred to the watch commander. Because of the rate differential between supervising radio dispatchers and sergeant, the use of civilian supervisors would lead to significant savings in straight time and in overtime. The savings are projected to be approximately \$237,500 per year. (See Appendix B for details.)

## RECRUITING AND TRAINING RADIO DISPATCHERS

Adding radio dispatchers is the primary key to reducing stress, fatigue and improving the preparedness of the Emergency Communications Bureau. With six additional dispatchers, it would be simpler and more straightforward to schedule the five shifts, according to representatives of the Bureau. In addition, it would be helpful in enabling the unit to schedule lunch and rest periods. Present practice with regard to lunch and rest periods appears to be inconsistent with the current *Memorandum of Understanding* between the County of Orange and the Orange County Employees.

The additional required dispatchers could be acquired from the following sources:

- Radio dispatchers who work or have worked for the Emergency Communications Bureau or other dispatch units.
- Persons in the extra-help pool who could be encouraged to become full-time employees.
- Dispatcher candidates without experience should be hired and trained.

A maximum of three to four persons can be trained at one time. It takes about six months for a trainee to become effective, and typically half of the them do not make it through the six-month period. There may be delays in hiring new trainees, and there could be some turnover. If some existing staff radio dispatchers were promoted to the proposed new position of supervisor, replacements would be needed for them. A rough estimate is that it will take one to two years of concerted effort to accomplish the recommendations of this report.

Although greater readiness and preparedness through reduction of fatigue, stress and other factors are the objectives of this report, it is also true that the cost of adding six dispatchers will be offset by reduction in overtime. (See Appendix B for details.) Hiring six additional dispatchers would facilitate shift scheduling and result in enough overtime reduction to offset their cost. The need to call deputies in from the field to relieve dispatchers would be eliminated when the recommended staffing changes have been implemented and the deputies could then be reassigned.

## FINDINGS

Under *California Penal Code*, Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 1999–2000 Grand Jury has arrived at the following major findings. A response to all findings is required from the **Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department**.

1. The radio dispatchers who take 9-1-1 calls suffer fatigue from working long hours, and from stress for reasons stated under the heading, “Multi-Tasking.”
2. There is no immediate crisis counseling available to the radio dispatchers.

3. Radio dispatchers do not have regular rest periods and customarily eat their lunch at their workspace. This may be inconsistent with the *Memorandum of Understanding* between the County of Orange and the Orange County Employees Association.
4. Direct supervision of the radio dispatchers is provided by five sergeants. The sergeants are highly compensated because of their training and experience in law enforcement. Replacing sergeant supervisors with civilian supervisors would save approximately \$237,500 per year, when implemented.
5. Having a civilian classification for supervising radio dispatcher would provide career advancement opportunities for radio dispatchers. There is no normal progression for them at this time.

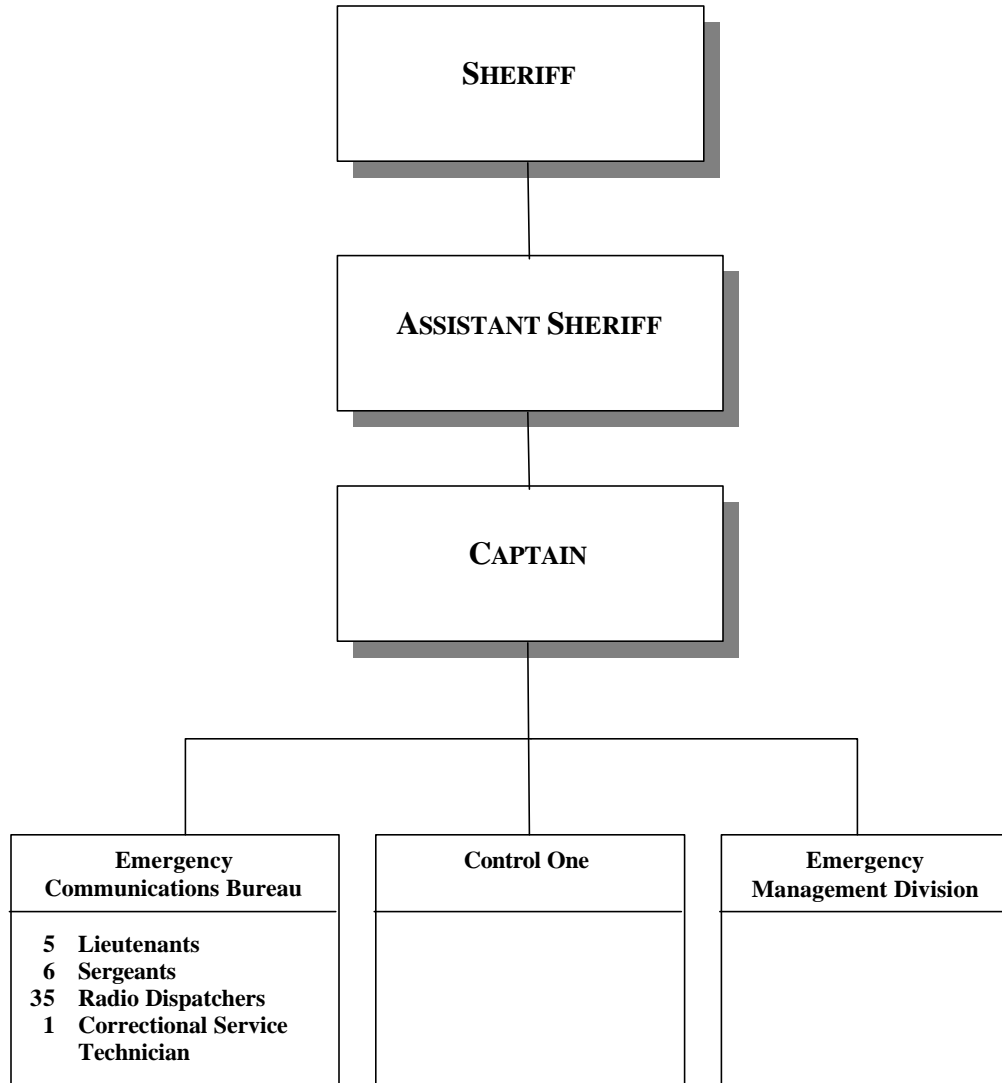
## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In accordance with *California Penal Code*, Sections 933 and 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. The Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department is required to respond to all of the recommendations below. Based on the above findings, the 1999-2000 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that the **Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department**:

1. Increase the number of radio dispatchers to 41 in order to reduce stress and fatigue, and to facilitate scheduling and reduce overtime.
2. Evaluate and adopt a Critical Incident Stress Management program to provide peer counseling to radio dispatchers following a traumatic event.
3. Establish rest period and lunch schedules for the dispatchers to reduce fatigue and stress and to ensure compliance with the current *Memorandum of Understanding* between the County of Orange and the Orange County Employees Association.
4. Promote from within and/or hire five civilian supervisors and reassign sergeants as the new supervisors become available.
5. Establish a civilian classification for radio dispatcher supervisor.

# APPENDIX A

## OPERATIONS SUPPORT DIVISION



**THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS BUREAU IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS REPORT**

## APPENDIX B

### A. COST EFFECT OF ADDING SIX RADIO DISPATCHERS

	<b>Rate</b> \$ per month	<b>Rate</b> \$ per hour	<b>Overtime Rate</b> \$ per hour	<b>Overtime Hours</b> 6 month period ending 12-31-99	<b>Total Overtime Pay</b> 6 month period ending 12-31-99
<b>Radio Dispatcher</b>	\$3,834	\$22.12	\$33.18	3,212 Hours	\$106,574
<b>Deputy Sheriff II</b>	\$5,155	\$29.74	\$44.61	1,072 Hours	\$47,822
<b>Total</b>					<b>\$154,396</b>

The total overtime dollars for radio dispatchers and Deputy Sheriffs II from the table above is \$154,396 for the six-month period ending 12-31-99. This is the equivalent of adding 6.7 radio dispatchers. The chart above does not include possible savings in benefits.

$$\mathbf{\$154,396 \div 6 \text{ months} \div \$3,834 \text{ per month} = 6.7 \text{ radio dispatchers working straight time.}}$$

### B. COST EFFECT OF REPLACING FIVE SERGEANTS WITH SUPERVISING RADIO DISPATCHERS

The fully-loaded cost of 1 sergeant = \$106,817 per year (fully-loaded cost includes benefits).  
The fully-loaded cost of 1 supervising radio dispatcher = \$59,319 per year.

Similarly the fully-loaded cost for 5 sergeants = \$534,085 per year	\$534,085
The fully-loaded cost for 5 supervising radio dispatchers = \$296,595	<u>-296,595</u>

**TOTAL SAVINGS PER YEAR = \$237,490**