

THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER.... THE COUNTY MUST DO BETTER

SUMMARY

Being a dispatcher for a public safety agency can be a high stress occupation. In the event of a catastrophic disaster affecting Orange County, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at Loma Ridge is the nerve center for communications. The EOC is responsible for cities that contract with the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department and the unincorporated areas in the County. The 9-1-1 calls received are dispatched to the appropriate emergency units. While calls for service have increased by 50%, the number of available dispatchers has decreased. Why?

Work-related injuries and the departure of several dispatchers were determined to be the cause of low morale, excessive overtime and disability leave. Because of budgetary constraints on replacing personnel on disability, the remaining employees must work many hours of overtime. This is not only a drain on the existing budget, but adds to the workload and may create an additional health hazard and lower morale.

When implemented, the intent of the recommendations is to reduce work-related injuries and boost efficiency and morale. Additionally, the ability of the EOC to hire and retain *cream-of-the-crop* dispatchers to serve the populace of the County in time of emergencies will be enhanced.

PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to address the reasons for an inordinately high number of workers' compensation claims that have led to low morale and excessive overtime at the EOC.

In the summer of 2000, the Orange County Grand Jury learned that readiness was being compromised at the EOC because of a personnel shortage.

Further studies revealed that many dispatchers have been placed on long and short-term disability.

BACKGROUND

Over two years ago, the Sheriff-Coroner Department purchased and installed new consoles that house a new computer telephone/dispatch system. Within six months following the installation, dispatchers began missing work because of illness or injuries. Several dispatchers were placed on disability leave by their physicians. Many resigned to seek employment elsewhere. The shortage of staff members required the existing staff to work many hours of overtime. Working long hours, often without meal breaks and rest periods, less than optimal lighting, and crowding have created stress and fatigue for many of the remaining dispatchers.

The Grand Jury determined that the EOC has experienced a high increase in “calls for service.” From 1994 through 1999 the Center experienced an average “calls for service” increase of 8.3% annually, or 49.8% cumulatively over six years. These increases were the result of several factors, including newly incorporated cities which contracted with the Sheriff-Coroner Department, an increase in population, the assimilation of San Clemente dispatch, and the augmentation of existing field services. Staffing only increased a total of 13 percent.

Because of higher pay levels and more attractive working environments elsewhere, the EOC lost well-trained key personnel to other agencies.

The Grand Jury determined that in the period from November 1998 through March 2000, the staff filed an inordinate number of workers’ compensation claims. It was reported that the overall County injury rate was 8.3 claims per 100 employees per year. If the formula had been applied to the EOC staff there would have been three claims (8.3% of 41 staff in dispatch). There were in fact 16 claims, which is over five times the county average.

The impetus for this study came from reports of an unusually high number of workers’ compensation claims involving computer-related repetitive strain injuries, most or all of which were of the more commonly recognized carpal tunnel syndrome type.

At the request of the EOC management, the County Executive Office's Division of Risk Management visited the Center to investigate workers' compensation claims and illness reports. Since approximately 1998, there has been the opportunity for managers to implement preventive measures. Other departments within Orange County government have seized this opportunity and have made positive changes with the goal of preventing these types of injuries. Some recognized the potential problems, but have failed or been slow to implement positive changes.

Dispatchers were reminded periodically of preventive measures when using computer consoles. Posture, distance to monitor screens, wrist angle, chair height, frequent movements, periodic breaks and stretching, including relaxation techniques, were emphasized. However, as late as March 5, 2000, most of the "Safety and Loss Prevention" recommendations made by the Safety Officers had been ignored. After several visits to the EOC, the Safety Officers from the County Executive Office's Division of Risk Management concluded that injuries and subsequent claims filed might have been prevented if these recommendations had been implemented. Lack of implementation resulted in preventable work-related injuries.

METHOD OF STUDY

Beginning August 2000, the Grand Jury visited the EOC for the purpose of evaluating the present working conditions and environment. Interviews were conducted with employees of the County directly related to the EOC, including dispatchers.

The Grand Jury conducted site visits to compare the working environments, staffing, workloads, illness reports and salary ranges at the following communications centers:

- Santa Ana Police Department
- Anaheim Police Department
- Irvine Police Department
- The City of Garden Grove's Communication Center

FINDINGS

Under *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 2000-2001 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at six findings.

A response to all findings is required by the Sheriff-Coroner.

1. Dispatchers assigned to all shifts experience illness, stress and fatigue that compromise the ability of the EOC to function at maximum performance levels. Because of dispatcher shortages, selected personnel are required to work overtime. This situation is causing morale problems for dispatchers and budgetary problems for the EOC.
2. The overall working environment, which includes computer consoles, keyboards, monitors and chairs, is not “ergonomically friendly.”
3. Cramped conditions within the dispatch area have contributed to stress and fatigue. Additionally, lighting and sound are not conducive to an ideal working environment.
4. Well-trained staff dispatchers have resigned in large numbers to accept jobs in the same field throughout the County where the pay and working environment are better.
5. Because of personnel shortages, dispatchers do not take mandated rest and meal breaks as outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding, 1998-2000, with the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department, County of Orange, and The Orange County Employees Association. This practice causes stress and fatigue and is a major factor in the problems at the EOC.
6. The County Executive Office, Division of Risk Management, was not consulted when the new computer equipment was considered for purchase in August of 1998.

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. A response is required from the **Board of Supervisors**. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. The **Sheriff-Coroner** is required to respond to all of the recommendations below. Based on the overall findings, the 2000-2001 Grand Jury recommends that the **Sheriff-Coroner**:

1. Recruit, hire and train thirteen radio dispatchers, an additional radio dispatch supervisor and four additional Centrex operators.
2. Replace existing computer console workstations with new workstations to conform to Federal OSHA standards and guidelines and consider the implementation of height adjustable tabletops.
3. Expand the existing facility to accommodate additional workstations and support personnel. Improve lighting and acoustical characteristics.
4. Adjust pay scale levels to be equivalent to comparable positions within the County of Orange.
5. Enforce rest and meal breaks as outlined in the current Memorandum of Understanding, 1998-2000, with the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department, County of Orange, and The Orange County Employees Association.
6. Consult the County Executive Office, Division of Risk Management when new equipment is being considered for purchase and seek advice from Safety Officers.

COMMENDATIONS

The 2000-2001 Orange County Grand Jury recognizes and commends:

Emergency Operations Center, Loma Ridge (EOC)

- The cooperation of staff dispatchers, supervisors, and management was instrumental in the collection of facts for this Report.

Executive Office, Division of Risk Management

- The cooperation of personnel was instrumental in providing data used in the preparation of this Report.

APPENDIX

- Repetitive Strain Injury in Computer Keyboard Users: K. Keller, MS, PT, J. Corbett, MS, OTR, CHT, D. Nichols, ACSW; J. HAND THER 11:9-26, 1998.
- Risk Factors for Musculoskeletal Disorders Among Computer Users: Pat Tittiranonda, PhD, Stephen Burasteto, MD, David Rempel, MD: OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE: State of the Art Reviews- Vol. 14, No. 1, Jan-Mar 1999.
- OSHA Rules, gov. 1999
- OSHA Final Ergonomics Program Standard (29 CFR 1910900) Part 10
- CALOSHA, 1999
- Policy and Procedures Manual, Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department, current.
- Memorandum of Understanding, 1998-2000, with the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department, the County of Orange, and the Orange County Employees Association.
- Worker's Compensation Statistics, Executive Office, Division of Risk Management 2/1/97 through 7/1/00
- Safety Reports, County Executive Office, Division of Risk Management 2/1/97 through 7/1/00