CONSOLIDATING EMERGENCY SERVICES DISPATCH CENTERS, IS IT SUCCESSFUL?

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Police dispatch centers have been utilized in one way or another since policing has begun. Over the years, these centers have continued to develop and evolve. During the last decade, the Emergency services dispatching centers have changed radically, not only with the technological advances in equipment but with consolidations as well. The question is, does consolidation of Dispatch centers work? Why are some more successful then others? Do centers really need to consolidate?

It is hoped that this paper will shed some light on this topic and answer questions about this topic. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are strictly my own and are not representative of the Inkster Police Department.
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Introduction

The cities of Inkster and Westland share a consolidated emergency dispatch center. The question I posed is this, is the consolidated dispatching system the most effective? Is the Westland/Inkster Dispatch center the best that it has the potential to be? The research method chosen for this paper was both evaluative and comparative. By reviewing the evolution of dispatching and comparing the current center with others and discussing the situation, it is hoped that the problems that are apparent can be easily discussed.
Background and significance

To better understand dispatching, a brief look into history is helpful. It was not very long ago when Police Officers sitting at the front desk took the complaints, by walk in or phone and put the information on a “job card”. They then took the card to the radio operator who then dispatched the run. Each public service, Fire, Ambulance and Police had their own dispatch centers. This system was not very efficient but it was the only game in town. Over the years, larger agencies would employ civilians who would still take the job down on a card and dispatch the closest cars available.

Dispatching began to drastically change with the emergence of the 911 system in Alabama in 1968. The introduction of the 911 system rapidly began to improve dispatching services, now with a telephone call to one number you could quickly be connected to the emergency service that you needed. Today nearly, the entire population of the United States has access to 911. These 911 calls are routed to a designated location or Public Service Answering Point (PSAP). As the technology expanded the PSAP’s were equipped with enhanced 911 (E-911), this provided the number the caller was calling from and the location. Technology advanced, costs of the radio systems increased, demand for communications were being taxed, training and hiring of personal, liability costs all began to rocket skyward. Public safety officials began to look for ways of combating these increasing costs. It made little sense to duplicate efforts and buy redundant systems.

In Michigan, Senate Bill number 492 was enacted as “an act to provide for the establishment of emergency telephone districts.” Among other things, this bill also defined consolidated dispatch.

“Consolidated dispatch means a countywide or regional emergency dispatch service that provides dispatch service for 75% or more of the law enforcement, fire fighting and emergency medical services and other emergency services within the geographical area
of 911 service district or services 75% or more of the population within a 911 service district. “

It was then that Centralized or consolidated dispatch centers were born in Michigan. This trend of central dispatching continues to grow rapidly all across the country. According to Dispatch Monthly Magazine, there are 23,683 communication centers in the United States employing approximately 217,000 full time public safety dispatchers. Many of these dispatch centers are Regional, Central or Consolidated dispatch centers serving more than one agency.
Discussion

Dispatchers are a different breed of people and good dispatchers are exceptional people. *When seconds count, the dispatcher is the very first responder in any emergency situation.* Somehow that seems to have been forgotten by many of today’s dispatchers. As the old time cops used to say, a good dispatcher is your best friend and a bad one is your worst enemy. A dispatcher is expected to take calls from hysterical, upset and injured people and make some semblance of order to the information that is relayed to them. They then will relay this information to the appropriate first responder to handle that particular emergency. Dispatchers must realize that by not doing their job properly, the first responder cannot do their jobs. Worse yet, due to the lack of concern, performance or professionalism on the dispatcher’s part, the first responder can be killed or seriously injured.

By maintaining independent dispatch centers, you continue with the human contact that is so important in this dangerous profession. The dispatchers know the Officers, many times their wife and kids too. Dispatchers are more “in tune” with the Officers and Firefighters they dispatch by sheer repetition, they know everyone’s quirks. They know the communities where they work and the regular callers as well. They can tell if an Officer is facing trouble by the “tone of his voice” and can dispatch the needed assistance. They also know the geography of the city they dispatch for. In addition, if there are conflicts or problems between the officers and dispatch they can easily be addressed before it becomes a major issue. Many of these traits seem to become lost in the cracks when dispatch centers consolidate.
My research has turned up hundreds of Consolidated or shared dispatch centers in this country. One fact has been proven; consolation of dispatch centers is becoming a common occurrence across the nation. There have been failures in this consolidation process; Gainesville Florida politicians are debating how to handle their police and EMS dispatching. They currently contract Alachua County and pay $2.5 million dollars per year for that service and are considering backing out of the deal. Three New Jersey towns that contract Northwest Bergen central dispatch are complaining of inferior service compared to the “old” local operations. However, these experiences are the minority. When discussing consolidations arguments are usually the same.

The idea of consolidating Law enforcement services has interested many Police and Sheriff’s departments for many years. Consolidation can be very appealing, particularly when dealing with smaller agencies. Jurisdictions that assume the responsibility should accept a higher call volume and increased manpower. The quality of dispatching should increase with enhanced training opportunities, improved management and supervision.

The usual arguments continue to persist about why no local units should consolidate, they include:

- No personal contact between the Officers and Dispatchers.
- Loss of control over the dispatch center by the politicians.
- No longer “in touch” with the community.
- No accountability to the agencies that are served.
- Loss of geographical knowledge.
- Lack of trust in the voice on the radio by Officers.
When discussing this issue the argument for consolidating dispatch also remains the same.

- More cost effective.
- Better information sharing.
- Elimination of duplicate services.
- Opportunities to purchase new technology can be more economically pursued when cities can pool their financial resources.
- Ability to communicate directly with the neighboring city during large-scale incidents.
- Provides a more efficient delivery system when an emergency service is requested.
Literature review

While conducting research for this term paper, I found several Communication centers that have provided exceptional services to the communities that they serve. A brief overview of those centers is contained here.

E-COMM, (Emergency communications for Southwest British Colombia). E-COMM is located in Canada and serves southwest British Columbia. The center answers an astounding three thousand five hundred 911 calls per day. E-COMM responds to more than 1.26 Million 911 calls per year. The E-COMM facility is self sustaining and designed to withstand and earthquake, ( up to a 7 on rector scale). E-COMM is run as a corporation by the communities that it serves up to the point of having a CEO who oversees the branches of the center. They even have their own Communications Officer training academy. The map indicates the vast area that is dispatched by E-COMM. E-COMM was created in 1990 when two communities merged their dispatching centers into one PSAP. Since then it has grown in leaps and bounds, the center now dispatches for Police, Fire and Ems services in a wide area as well as the primary PSAP for those areas. For those who believe that merging dispatch centers does not work, just look north to our Canadian neighbors, they are doing it and doing it right for all to see. E-COMM sells this way.

The E-COMM advantage

- Experienced call taking and dispatch staff.
- CAD system displays residential and business information to dispatch.
- Detailed maps at the dispatcher’s fingertips.
- Images of business floor plans loaded onto the system.
- Police, Fire and Ambulance dispatchers can share information.
- Improved back up systems.
All this information and more is listed on their website.
http://www.ecomm.bc.ca/

Another success story was found here in Michigan in Lapeer County. Lapeer County is the primary PSAP and dispatch center in the county.
http://lapeercounty911.org/Links.htm

Did you know that 37 separate public safety and health emergency responding agencies rely on Lapeer County Central Dispatch?
9 Police agencies
15 Fire departments
7 EMS agencies
6 Medical First Responder Teams

Nearly 800 Public Safety Personnel all communicate and manage emergencies with tremendous cost saving by having 1 consolidated dispatch agency.

Last year Central Dispatch processed over 120,000 calls for assistance from all 18 townships, villages, and cities throughout the county. That amount is an increase of over 12% from the previous year.

By having a comprehensive, consolidated dispatch system, our citizens and public safety responders have the benefits of:

• A single point of contact for all public safety response
• More efficient response time to emergencies
• Reduced confusion and proper agency response
• Enhanced safety for responding emergency personnel
• Elimination of duplication of services
• Responsible, efficient, and economical use of dispatch services
• Interagency cooperation and oversight
• Enhanced 9-1-1
• Enhanced Wireless 9-1-1
• Integrated Public Safety Radio Communications
• Computer aided dispatch
• Emergency medical dispatch
• Emergency operations center
• Central dispatch authority

www.fargopolice.com/RRRDC/RRRDC_index_.

Red River Regional Dispatch Center is unique because it dispatches for agencies in two states. The regional dispatch center also progressed in a series of steps to become successful.

Phase 1 – Formation of Authority
Phase 2 – Formation of RRRDC as business
Phase 3 – Plan “Physical” Consolidation
Phase 4 – Begin “Physical” Consolidation
Phase 5 – Consolidation Completed
Further, Red River Regional Dispatch Center had to establish itself as a center that was completed by implementing the following programs.

- Budget for in-house staffing for responsibilities that will no longer be provided by the dispatch centers
- Unifying standard policies & procedures (radio 10 codes/clear text language, etc.)
- Determine after hours desk duties & lobby monitoring
- Installing telephone message trees to eliminate Dispatch taking administrative calls
- RRRDC staff named the Center
- Creating a logo
- Selecting uniform clothing
- Initiating cross-training discussions & dispatch console designations & responsibilities
- Creating RRRDC newsletter & website

www.iowaleague.org/services/cia/2001/westcom.htm

The Westcom Dispatch Center is a consolidated public safety dispatch facility that receives public safety related calls and dispatches police, fire and EMS for the cities of Clive, Urbandale, and West Des Moines. The name Westcom was derived from the fact that all three cities are western suburbs of Des Moines and it is the communication center. Westcom is presently located in the West Des Moines Law Enforcement Center at 250 Mills Civic Parkway, West Des Moines, Iowa.

Prior to January of 2001, each of these three cities had separate and independent public safety dispatch centers staffed by respective city employees 24 hours every day. The consolidation of these separate dispatch centers into one allows for greatly improved communication between all of the public safety agencies by placing all three cities onto one trunked 800 MHz radio system. This merger allows the agencies to directly communicate with one another during large-scale incidents / accidents rather than attempting to communicate via the three separate radio systems which had previously been utilized. Other advantages of the centralized dispatch facility are:
• Financial savings through the shared use of an existing radio / mobile computer system.
• Increased savings and better information sharing by having all three cities on one police and fire computerized records management system.
• Elimination of duplicated governmental services by consolidation and centralization of this function.
• Opportunities and methods involving new technology can be pursued more economically by the cities sharing the cost rather than each paying for individual systems or applications.

Throughout the consolidation process, one constant remains the same.

*Communication is key throughout the consolidation process.*

Consolidated dispatch centers that are successful have implemented several procedures that were learned by trail and error by other centers. They identify the problems, issues and concerns at the onset of consolidation talks. They then identify the 911 issues.

• Communication – what are the responsibilities of the 911 center.
• How standards are set and how are they to be met.
• Developing a clear vision of the desired outcome for the center.
• Being proactive instead of reactive in policies and organization theory.
• Dispatcher training and certification.
• Implement a complaint resolution process.

Dispatch centers have achieved this by following these simple steps.

1. Identify purpose(s) – ‘Why’
2. Brainstorm for desired outcomes or goals.
3. Prioritize goals – focus – what are the top objectives?
4. What is the number one goal?
5. Prioritize – identify the key objectives.
Recommendation

In 2001 Inkster and Westland entered into a ‘Interlocal agency agreement’ for dispatch services. The type of consolidation with dispatch centers is at the functional level. Functional is defined as two or more agencies that combine certain functional units, such as emergency communications, dispatch or records. “Consolidating Police Services examined by New IACP study, dated August 06 2003”. This created the Westland Central Communications center (PSAP). This Center now answers all cellular and E-911 calls, dispatches the Police, Fire and EMS units in both Cities’. In effect, Inkster and Westland merged their dispatch centers in order to provide a single dispatch center for both cities for Police, Fire, Ems and 911 calls. The center went on line in 2001 and began to dispatch services in both cities as well as being the primary PSAP. The center answers approximately 18,500 911 calls per year and dispatches approximately 80,000 calls per service per year. The questions was can the Westland central communications center be better? That is a resounding yes. How can it be better? What can be done to improve it?

- First, forget the past. There still is residual but strong emotional feelings that are being held about the merging issue.

- People, are any organizations most valuable resource. Westland/Inkster has the potential of being among the best in the state due to their combined experience and geographical knowledge possessed by the staff.

- The centers staff needs to establish a mission statement, which defines who they are, what they will do, why it’s done and how they do it. It should be conspicuously posted for all to see. Every successful consolidated dispatch center has a missions or vision statement. This statement should be composed by and have the input of the employees that work the center.
• Look to the future, set long-term goals.

• Establish written policy and procedures. Granted not every situation can be resolved with a policy. But policies and procedures provide a defense against litigation. Legal suits brought against dispatch centers and dispatchers themselves are rapidly increasing. All of the previously mentioned dispatch centers have policies and procedures in place.

• Improve supervision in the communications center, appoint a ‘lead dispatcher’ for each shift, and put a line supervisor in overall supervision of the dispatch center. All discipline, complaints, etc. should go to him or her for resolution. The dispatch coordinator should review, maintain and update the policies and procedures as needed. Keep the center in compliance with state requirements, (LEIN audits, etc.), and maintain training records for each dispatcher as well as perform instructional training for new hires and render remedial training for the employees when necessary.

• Maintain the staffing in the dispatch center with the number of employees to perform the job in a manner that is acceptable to all the departments involved.

• Make the dispatcher’s part of the public safety team. The Dispatch has to thoroughly understand that they are the most important link in the public safety chain. They obtain the information first hand from the caller or callers in any emergency situation. Dispatchers must understand how important of a responsibility that they have. All of the successful dispatch centers have made this a centerpiece in their training philosophy.

• Establish a newsletter for communication among the employees of the center. This would provide helpful information and encourage cooperation among the dispatchers. They feel important enough to the organization that a newsletter is
distributed. Other centers have found this very helpful in helping to give the Dispatch center their own ‘identity’.

- Encourage face-to-face opportunities between the dispatcher and the personal that they dispatch. This would put a face with the voice and encourage relationships. It would build the trust required by Police Officers and Fire Fighters in the personal that might send them into harms way. By this simple step, public safety employees will know that the dispatcher giving them the run has obtained as much information as possible for them. More importantly, in times of physical danger the employee will know that the dispatcher is doing all he or she can to get them the help they need. Successful dispatch centers encourage ride alongs as an attempt to build a bridge between the employees, (depending upon the size of the center).

My research has made it apparent that the Westland Central Communications does have the potential to become one of the best and most respected dispatch centers in the State. All of the tools needed to complete the transformation are already there. The question is, do the people involved want it to happen? Are they willing to work towards that common goal?
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