



## 8.0 COMMUNICATION & TECHNOLOGY

### 8.1 *Emergency Communications and Dispatching*

Sarnia emergency communications are centralized and located at the 9-1-1 dispatch centre maintained by the communications division of the Sarnia Police Department. It is located in its secure headquarters on Christina Street. A backup dispatch centre is located at Chris Hadfield Airport.

Fire services dispatching was taken over by the police communications unit approximately fifteen years ago, at the time of amalgamation and the introduction of the 9-1-1 system. All fire department vehicles and officers are equipped with radios.

The communications dispatch centre is overseen by a supervisor and is staffed by teams of three full-time operators for each of the four police platoons, as well as a back up of seven part-time employees. In theory, one dedicated fire dispatcher works in collaboration with the regular police dispatchers. However, this may not be the actual practice within the dispatch centre, especially when simultaneous calls are received.

There is a 9-1-1 tracking program in place that prompts communicators for input at key time points (e.g. call acknowledgement, vehicle leaving station, vehicle arrival on scene), but, the latter is not considered adequate given the questionable reliability of data retrieved from the software. Recent examination of call tracking processes seems to indicate that different communicators use different practices when inputting call data. At a minimum, a more consistent approach is required.

Specific response assignments beyond the first due company are left to the duty platoon chief at Station 1. These procedures appear to be rather casual for emergency service lacking secure backup.

The Sarnia Police call centre handles the majority of calls which come into the police station including administrative, emergency and non-emergency calls for the Sarnia Police Service. The communication centre also handles all 9-1-1 calls originating in the City of Sarnia and the Village of Point Edward. The centre is responsible for dispatches to Sarnia Police, Sarnia Fire Rescue Services, and Point Edward Fire & Rescue. As well, the centre handles all calls for the Chemical Valley Emergency Coordinating Organization (CVECO), and monitors Environment Canada weather watch information. **Table 8.1** highlights the call volume of the communications centre.



**Table 8.1 - Call Volumes (2004) - Police Communications Centre**

<b>2004 Data - Police Communications Centre</b>		
<b>(% of total)</b>		
<b>Total calls</b>	<b>277,007</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
9-1-1	21,136	7.6%
<b>Dispatched calls</b>		
Police	20,538	7.4%
Fire	2,218	0.8%

The cost for Communication lies within Police Services and was budgeted at \$1.4 Million for 2006. The Sarnia Fire Rescue Services budgets approximately \$260,000 towards the dispatch services provided by the Police Communications Centre. As such, Fire Rescue Services pay for almost 20% of the overall communication costs through their agreement. As shown above, approximately 10% of the 9-1-1 calls received are related to Fire Rescue Services.

Alternative means for delivering fire service dispatching services are available. But these should only be explored if internal difficulties cannot be significantly improved through improved call handling procedures and training.

It is recommended that a working group be established to identify dispatching goals and objectives. The group would work through identified issues in order to develop a plan that ultimately provides all involved parties and residents with the level of service expected

## **8.2 Radio Technology**

While the dispatch center does handle calls for Sarnia Fire Rescue Services, as well as other volunteer fire departments, the Sarnia Fire Rescue Services use an 800 MHz radio system, while Sarnia Police use a VHS system. The Dispatch Centre also has access to the OFM and CVECO radio channels.

The 800 MHz radio system has the capability to provide additional technological functions that are not currently being exploited. (e.g. display station on air) There may be software and other equipment that can be identified to bring the system up to full capacity. Depending on the solution identified, additional funding and training would be required. Other communication priorities should be addressed first.

The 800 MHz system has the capability to add other “work” groups without compromising the existing fire service dispatching. It would require initial funding for equipment, but may provide a more economical service in the future. There may be an opportunity to introduce other city departments into the 800 MHz system. A radio system work group has been established city-wide to determine whether efficiencies could be gained by migrating to an 800 MHz system.



### **8.3 Information Technology**

As identified in other sections of this report there is a need to address information technology issues within the department as a whole. Most divisions would benefit from increased functionality in the records management software already in place, including Administration, Fire Prevention, Public Education and Training. This would reduce the amount of time many of the department's "day" staff spends on paper-based tracking systems, allowing focus to shift to more important duties. Other fire departments have expanded their use of FDM's record management system (RMS)

Key to implementing this initiative is the development of the additional software "modules" by FDM Software Ltd. or exploring the possibility of acquiring an equivalent software package. Given the department's familiarity with FDM's product it may be more cost-effective to focus on the maximizing use of the existing software. A champion will have to be identified within the department that is willing to spearhead this initiative.

It has also been noted that the Fire Prevention Service does not have access to other computer programs used by the city that may be able to support fire prevention activities. In fact, there is a lack of knowledge with regards to the computer programs that are actually in use in other departments and which could potentially be of assistance.

A working group should be assembled to identify both internal records management needs and availability of computer programs used by other city departments to determine if there are networking advantages which could be pursued in support of department initiatives (e.g. fire prevention and public education). Training needs and financial implications would also have to be identified by the working group.

#### **Computer Equipment**

The division has recently acquired computer laptop computers and should continue to investigate technological options that would allow documentation to take place in the field, or at remote sites (e.g. fire prevention inspection reports, Fire Code violation letters). The use of such mobile data terminals could improve staff effectiveness by minimizing the amount of clerical work to be undertaken in the office.

Initiatives are also under way to test GIS dispatching equipment which could decrease the time it takes for trucks to leave the station by as much as one minute and a half. Depending on the results of equipment trials this type of investment may become a standard feature in municipal fleets.

#### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. Establish a working group to review the goals and objectives for fire department dispatching and work to resolve any issues through improved call handling procedures and training.
2. Establish a working group including relevant City departments to examine the opportunities available to the City with an 800 MHz radio system (as well as technological improvements such as GIS tracking which may be able to positively impact response times and



dispatching procedures).

3. Appoint a champion to the area of fire department information technology and form a working group to explore software solutions for the department's records management and information technology problems. Establish any required training and financial implications to identified solutions.