



Institute for Senior Professionals
Northwest Florida State College

Independent Review of Proposal to Consolidate 911 Operations in Okaloosa County

Conducted by

The Institute for Senior Professionals (ISP)

Northwest Florida State College

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I. Background

- A. How 911 Calls Are Handled Now – Impact on Emergency Services Effectiveness and Efficiency
 - 1. Current business model for 911 call taking has this function split between the County and the Sheriff's Office (OCSO) personnel. Two different computer networks and Computer Aided Dispatch systems are utilized and do not talk to each other
 - 2. 911 calls are randomly answered by both employee groups. If the call is answered by the County and the service required is for law enforcement, the caller must be transferred to the Sheriff's side so that the call data can be entered into their CAD system and dispatched. The opposite is true if an EMS/Fire call is received by the Sheriff's side
 - 3. This transferring of calls increases the chances of losing the caller. If multiple services are required, the caller may have to repeat their information to two different dispatchers, causing frustration on their part and delays in the dispatch process.
 - 4. The decline in government revenues forces elected officials to face difficult decisions. All County and municipal agencies are facing challenging budget deficits. Separate staffs and computer network systems and supporting software of the emergency response operations represent areas for potential operational cost savings
- B. In June 2010, Sheriff Spooner delivered a unilateral 911 consolidation proposal to the Board of County Commissioners suggesting that current 911 operations in Okaloosa County could be performed more reliably and at a lower cost if:
 - 1. Everyone involved used the Sheriff's preferred dispatch software (SmartCOP)
 - 2. Call taking and dispatching were merged
 - 3. All employees were capable of handling law enforcement, Fire and EMS services
 - 4. All staff would be employees of the Sheriff's office
- C. Sheriff Spooner submitted a request to the Institute for Senior Professionals (ISP) for an independent review of the merits of their proposal
- D. The Okaloosa County Administrator sent an email to ISP which led to a meeting to refocus the initial work
 - 1. New direction was to first determine the suitability of SmartCOP software for Fire/EMS dispatch
 - 2. Other elements of the consolidation proposal would be considered separately. Organizational issues would be left to the judgment of elected officials

II Terminology

- A. 911 Center – newly opened emergency communications and dispatch center located in the Community Services Complex on Northwest Florida State College grounds in Niceville, FL
- B. APCO – Association of Public Safety Communications Officials
- C. AVL – Automatic Vehicle Location (GPS signals are generated within a vehicle and transmitted wirelessly to a display system that shows vehicle ID and location, typically on a map)
- D. CAD – Computer Aided Dispatch (a software application used to enter information and dispatch emergency equipment)
- E. CTS – a Pensacola-based company that developed SmartCOP dispatch software used by Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office for dispatch in the 911 center
- F. Dispatch – the act of ordering assets to proceed to a specific address
- G. EFD, EMD, EPD – Emergency Fire, Medical and Police Departments Protocol Question Cards (made by Priority Dispatch Corp.) used by 911 call takers or dispatchers to ask standardized questions of callers to properly understand the exact nature of the emergency
- H. EMS – All ambulance services in Okaloosa County
- I. Middleware – software that transfers data from one software application to another
- J. MTC – Mobile Tactical Computer
- K. OCSO - Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office
- L. Public Safety – in this report, refers to personnel and operations involved in answering 911 calls and in dispatching Fire/EMS assets
- M. PSAP – Public Safety Answering Point (anywhere that the general public can call for emergency help on 911)
- N. SmartCOP –software currently used by OCSO to dispatch Sheriff's assets
- O. VisionCAD – software currently used to dispatch Fire/EMS assets

III ISP Work Plan and Sources of Information

- A. Understand and analyze Sheriff's proposal
 - 1. Through multiple software demonstrations and discussions of details
- B. Understand and analyze current 911 operations in Okaloosa County
 - 1. Through multiple software demonstrations and discussions of details
- C. Become familiar with strengths and weaknesses of SmartCOP for Fire/EMS dispatch
 - 1. Facilitated Public Safety 's identification of nine key deficiencies
 - 2. Facilitated CTS's identification of potential enhancements to SmartCOP deficiencies identified by Public Safety
- D. Explore feasibility/desirability of using "middleware" that would continuously transfer required data between the two CAD systems – VisionCAD and SmartCOP when the incident requires dispatch of both law enforcement and Fire/EMS
 - 1. Sheriff's personnel would dispatch deputies using SmartCOP (as they do now)
 - 2. Middleware would be used to exchanges data between SmartCOP and VisionCAD
 - 3. Public Safety personnel would dispatch Fire/EMS using VisionCAD (as they do now)
- E. Become familiar with the arguments and political dynamics surrounding the Sheriff's proposal through multiple meetings with:
 - 1. Sheriff's office personnel
 - 2. Public Safety management personnel
 - 3. CTS
 - 4. County Purchasing
 - 5. Fire/EMS dispatch
 - 6. Sheriff dispatch
 - 7. Fire Chiefs
 - 8. Sheriff
 - 9. County Administrator
- F. Gather information (cooperatively with representatives from OCSO and Public Safety) from entities in Florida using SmartCOP to dispatch both law enforcement and Fire/EMS assets
 - 1. Pensacola PD 911
 - 2. Highlands County 911
 - 3. Walton County 911
- G. Research literature on 911 consolidations and reality of projected cost savings
 - 1. APCO International Consolidated Communications Center – documentation and survey

2. Public Safety Answering Point Consolidation – State of MN Governor’s Work Group, Dec 2009
- H. Independent research on State Statues related to the use of 911 funds returned to the County
- I. Keep all meetings open to OCSO and Public Safety key personnel so we could all hear the same information

IV. Key Findings

- A. OCSO has been a beta site for SmartCOP for many years and is extremely satisfied with its functionality and the financial terms of the contract they have with CTS
- B. ISP found that SmartCOP would be suitable for Fire/EMS dispatch in Okaloosa County if CTS made six required feature changes identified in IV.B.1 below
 1. Public Safety defined the following deficiencies in SmartCOP. CTS reviewed feature changes that could be made and informally committed to implement them within 6 months from date of commitment by the County to SmartCOP
 - a) Fire dispatcher needs to be able to see all units attached to all dispatched calls from the main screen rather than just primary and single backup that now exists. CTS indicated that they could make this feature user-selectable so a dispatcher could set it to see only information they needed. There is no downside by adding this feature, although there is an upside for Fire dispatchers
 - b) Fire and EMS dispatchers need to be able to see all units and their status in the main unit box/window that displays at least 25 characters
 - c) While SOP window is open, call-taker needs the ability to enter information to update the call while using the SOP window for reference
 - d) Fire dispatcher needs the ability to suggest fire units from the main screen
 - e) All users need a drop down menu to notate how the call was received
 - f) Fire/EMS dispatchers need the ability to continue urgent actions in SmartCOP even when a Calls Overdue or Units Overdue pop-up window appears
 2. Some workarounds for Fire/EMS issues have also been used by Highlands County which has successfully employed SmartCOP as the only CAD in its consolidated 911 operations since 2008
- C. Technology used for dispatching Sheriff’s deputies is much more sophisticated than that used to dispatch Fire/EMS in Okaloosa County
 1. Sheriff dispatch through SmartCOP

- a) Dispatch of deputies happens by computer – frequent radio contact used to update information in notes
 - b) Mobile computers (MTC) mounted in Sheriff’s patrol cars allow deputies to see the SmartCOP dispatch information and notes that are entered as emergency response unfolds
 - c) Automatic vehicle location (AVL) currently allows dispatchers and deputies to see locations and movements of Sheriff’s cars by automated GPS reporting
2. Fire/EMS dispatch – a highly manual process
- a) Fire and EMS assets are dispatched by sending pager tones and radio calls
 - b) Fire/EMS vehicles have no mobile computers (MTC) to receive CAD information – nor do they have equipment to allow AVL
 - c) The dispatcher stays in frequent radio contact to update status and continues to “work the problem” until the emergency is concluded and equipment returns to the ready
- D. Cross training 911 employees to enter all calls and be proficient at dispatching both law enforcement and Fire/EMS would be a greater multitasking challenge than the current operation
- 1. Primarily because the processes for deputy and Fire/EMS dispatch are so fundamentally different
 - 2. Highlands County has successfully cross-trained their personnel
 - 3. Highlands County experience shows that Fire/EMS dispatchers typically have more difficulty in making the transition than law enforcement dispatchers
 - 4. Training would be substantially more involved
 - 5. Job complexity may drive pay
- E. A suggested middleware approach to allow the existing CAD systems to continue to be used was evaluated and found not to be a viable alternative
- 1. A prior County Request for Proposal was issued in May of 2010 for this middleware and proposals submitted showed a 6-7 month development effort at a cost of \$66K - \$139K. Those prices are no longer valid and would have to be updated
 - 2. CTS dropped out of the middleware procurement because they could not reconcile the differences in requirements between the two parties
 - 3. The investment would be “throw away” if SmartCOP is later adopted as the single dispatch software for Okaloosa County 911
 - 4. CTS also believes that liability is a strong consideration for not linking two different CAD systems together with middleware
 - a) Systems may not handle addressing anomalies in the same way
 - b) Inability for two CADs to stay synchronized when critical information is changing

- c) Lawsuits involving botched public safety response tend to flow to the developer of the CAD or databases
- F. Potential cost savings
1. The Sheriff's proposal somewhat overstates potential savings
 - a) A significant part of the instant cost savings was credited to canceling replacement CAD system procurement. That procurement was never pursued by the County
 - b) Other savings from reusing equipment and furniture in build-out of new 911 center did not happen – build out has been completed with all new standardized furniture and equipment
 - c) Savings from reduction of “at least five supervisory personnel” brings into question how supervision will be handled in the Sheriff's proposal. With a broader span of responsibilities for dispatchers multitasking between Sheriff's deputies and Fire/EMS, there will be a minimum number of supervisors required to assure quality service
 - d) We agree that duplication and overlap could result in some downsizing in call takers and dispatch
 - e) Increases in overall salary costs due to increased job complexity were not taken into consideration
 2. Limited independent research of 911 consolidation experience indicates that:
 - a) Cost savings from 911 consolidation come primarily from reduction and/or elimination of duplicate networks, technology, and associated maintenance
 - b) Consolidation of multiple Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) has the greatest potential for total staff reduction and cost savings for taxpayers
- G. Dispatch of law enforcement assets in Okaloosa County is fragmented
1. OCSO currently dispatches deputies for the county as a whole, and is the law enforcement provider under contract to
 - a) Destin
 - b) Mary Esther
 - c) Cinco Bayou
 2. OCSO dispatches Shalimar police department by radio for 911 calls
 3. OCSO forwards 911 calls for police to the following dispatch centers operated by municipalities themselves
 - a) Niceville
 - b) Ft. Walton Beach
 - c) Valparaiso
 - d) Crestview (is an anomaly)

- a) 911 landline calls from within Crestview city limits ring only in the Crestview dispatch center operated by the Fire Department which dispatches Crestview Fire and Police
 - 4. None of the municipal police departments are AVL enabled – County 911 center is “blind” as to the whereabouts of municipal police assets
 - 5. Major cost savings for taxpayers could be achieved if:
 - a) All municipal police were dispatched to 911 calls in their jurisdiction by the Consolidated PSAP
 - b) The Crestview PSAP was merged into the larger Consolidated PSAP
 - c) All law enforcement assets were AVL equipped
- H. Highlands County, FL is probably the best example of successful consolidation and use of SmartCOP dispatch software
 - 1. They have successfully consolidated County 911 operations with two municipalities, SmartCOP is used for all dispatch, and the 911 center is under the management of the Sheriff’s office
 - 2. 3 PSAP’s became 1 (budget driven)
 - 3. Total personnel from all 3-PSAPs went from 49 down to 36. In their case, cost savings accrued only to the municipalities that closed PSAPs because the County failed to negotiate a savings sharing arrangement with them. Highlands County now bears the full cost of a larger consolidated 911 Center
 - 4. Highlands County claims significant improvement in 911 customer satisfaction and reduction in complaints. Highlands County also endorses CTS as a responsive public safety software vendor willing to make changes suggested by users
- I. Political Elements
 - 1. Board of County Commissioners ultimately has the responsibility for 911 operations and providing public safety services in Okaloosa County no matter which organization manages the operation
 - 2. Workers on the Public Safety side fear for their jobs if management of the 911 operation is shifted to the OCSO
 - 3. There seems to be contention over past use of 911 funds
 - a) OCSO contends that they have not gotten what was due to them
 - b) Public Safety contends that OCSO doesn’t understand the law and rules

V. Options: Options relating to consolidation of 911 operations. These include:

- A. Making no changes to the current operation or structure
- B. Using a single suite of software for all call taking and dispatch activities
- C. Assigning **all call-takers** to one agency, either the County or the OCSO
- D. Leaving the Dispatch function split between the County Fire/EMS functions and the OCSO law enforcement function
- E. Assigning **all dispatch functions** to one agency either the County or the OCSO
- F. Assigning all call Taking and dispatch personnel to one agency with personnel responsible for call taking or dispatch---not both
- G. Assigning **all personnel** to one agency with all personnel responsible for both call taking and dispatch

VI. Recommendations

- A. Move to SmartCOP as the single call taking and dispatch software after requested changes are incorporated [**improves service level - citizens talk to just one person & speeds dispatch response**]
 - 1. Work with CTS to obtain a firm commitment to expedite the delivery of all six requested software changes for Fire/EMS dispatch
 - 2. Assign all call takers to one agency [**Reduces costs, Improves service**]
 - 3. Create a training and operational cutover plan that includes EMD, EFD, and EPD protocol question cards [**Standardizes call taker service**]
 - 4. After go-live of SmartCOP for all 911 operations, decommission VisionCAD and its infrastructure [**Reduces costs**]
 - 5. Adopt either option V E, F, or G above. Each successive option provides the potential for reductions in redundant supervisory, quality assurance and similar personnel requirements [**Reduces costs**]
 - 6. Seriously look for opportunities for Fire/EMS to take advantage of CTS mobile software and AVL to significantly improve dispatch communications and situational awareness [**Improves service**]
- B. It must be decided whether management of the 911 operations is to remain split, as it is now, or is to be placed in one agency, the County's Department of Public Safety or the OCSO
 - 1. If management is placed in one agency

- a) A mutually respected “champion” may be required to lead the effort, break down barriers to cooperation, rebuild trust, and facilitate resolution of operational issues
 - b) An MOA among all 911 dispatch participants should be created which clearly delineates responsibilities of all parties
 - c) A coordinated implementation plan and schedule from current operations to future operations must be created
2. If current joint management is retained
 - a) An MOA among all 911 dispatch participants should be created which clearly delineates responsibilities of all parties
 - b) Establish a committee, co-chaired by the Sheriff and County Administrator, to work toward improving 911 operations and further reduce costs
 3. Whatever organizational decision is made, it is imperative that all senior leaders individually commit to its success and lead their subordinates to the same commitment
 4. Since the Board of County Commissioners of Okaloosa County is the responsible fiscal agent for the E911 funds, the county should establish specific guidelines which include the quantifiable metrics for the apportionment of these funds to accomplish the purposes set forth in Chap. 365, F. S.
- C. OCSO and the County should elevate the priority of their initiative to consolidate all independent municipal public police dispatch centers and the Crestview PSAP into the County PSAP **[major cost savings for taxpayers]**
1. Goal should be a single county PSAP (excluding Eglin and Hurlburt)
 2. Every included entity should have a voice in operation of the 911 center
 3. Plan for shared cost savings between County and municipalities
 4. Improved and standardized service
 5. Enhanced situational awareness for all first responders in Okaloosa County