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Region's 911 centers get calls to merge

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In Monroe County, a call to 911 goes to just one emergency communications center.

Onondaga County also has just one 911 center. Niagara County has four of them.

Erie County has 22. The smallest handle an average of two or three 911 calls each day, while others employ one dispatcher at a time and close overnight.

"It's not necessarily the best delivery system — it's [about protecting] local control," said Chautauqua County Sheriff Joseph Gerace, whose county has three such centers.

The decentralized 911 network employed by Erie and some other counties has come under fire. Critics note all emergency cell phone calls are answered at the county's 911 center, before they are handed off to a local center, increasing the risk of a delayed or dropped call.

And regionalism advocates have argued for years that merging the call centers could save taxpayers in Erie County millions of dollars annually.

"This should be a no-brainer," said Joel A. Giambra, the former Erie County executive.

Those efforts have failed, and the police chiefs who oversee the spread-out 911 centers defend the current system and don't support a merger. They say the centers provide locally focused service at a reasonable cost, and they note their 911 dispatchers do everything from writing reports to handling walk-in complaints.

"[A call] doesn't go to some faraway place," said Depew Police Chief Thomas Domino. "It's local people who know the local problems of the community."

However, a few recent developments, including the sour economy and the merger of 911 operations in Genesee County, have revitalized talk of mergers.

Further, emergency administrators are preparing to invest in cutting-edge communications technology while wondering who's going to pay for it.

Figuring out how best to handle emergency calls is a life-and-death issue, experts said, and 911 callers need to know they will get the proper response as swiftly as possible.

"I actually think what's going to end up driving some of the change is the cost of the technology and the public's expectation of the level of service," said John M. Merklinger, director of the Monroe County 911

center and president of the State 911 Coordinators Association.

In Erie County, a joint 911 center handles calls for the Buffalo Police Department, the county Sheriff's Office and the Medical Emergency Radio System. All wireless 911 calls go to a dispatcher at the county's Public Safety Campus downtown and then, if necessary, are transferred to a local 911 center.

All told, the Erie County facility handles 800,000 calls per year, about 80 percent of the county's one million 911 calls, according to Erie County Central Police Services.

There are 22 public safety answering points, or PSAPs, in Erie County, and 95 call-taking positions. Most of these 911 centers are operated by police departments but staffed by civilian dispatchers, who can be kept busy.

The Hamburg 911 center, for example, dispatches for three police agencies, 17 fire departments, the Southtowns HazMat team and a water-rescue unit, said Carmen Kesner, chief of the Town of Hamburg police.

In addition to taking 911 calls, dispatchers at the centers may watch prisoners, take reports, answer an administrative phone line and handle walk-ins.

In Eden and some other departments, the dispatcher is the only person in the station overnight. If that dispatcher has to use the bathroom, an officer on the road has to be called in, Eden Police Chief Michael J. Felschow said. The Eden center received 1,151 calls directly, plus 383 transferred wireless 911 calls in 2008.

A CPS analysis found that it costs 95 cents per 911 call to operate the consolidated 911 center at the Public Safety Building, while the Helmuth Fire Center costs \$25.72 per 911 call, and the Springville center costs \$22.30 per 911 call.

Those figures do not count emergency calls made to the departments' seven-digit administrative number, an amount that typically far exceeds 911 calls.

Helmuth, housed in the former Gowanda State Hospital, handled just 666 911 calls in 2008 for several communities.

"It should be run by the county. If the county charged us, we would gladly pay them. It would probably be cheaper than what we're paying now," said North Collins Supervisor Thomas O'Boyle.

Regionalism advocates have made this case before. The Buffalo Niagara Partnership's Who Does What? Commission in 2001 recommended merging the 26 911 centers in use at the time into 10 to 12 hub communications centers. The commission found that governments in Erie County spent \$12 million on 911 operations and said municipalities could save \$2 million per year after the mergers.

Even with Giambra's backing, the idea went nowhere.

"People are afraid they're going to lose two things: response time and the personal touch," said Charles Zettek Jr., director of government management services for the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester.

Onondaga and Monroe counties both have just one 911 center, and officials say the systems work efficiently.

So why does Erie County have 22 911 centers?

Previous attempts to merge 911 centers failed because local officials wanted to protect their territory, some observers said.

"It was all just politics. None of the smaller towns wanted to lose their dispatch centers," said Buffalo fire Capt. Thomas Coyne, who oversees communications for the department.

Defenders agree they want to ensure local control over the system, but they contend the public gets better

service from locally based dispatchers who know the community well.

In some parts of Concord or Sardinia — which are served by the Springville 911 center — the roads aren't even labeled, and directions from callers can amount to "three houses down from the King farm," said Tim Horner, the Springville village administrator.

"If you don't know where the King farm is, you're never going to find it," Horner said.

But mergers have won favor outside Erie County.

Genesee County, as of Thursday, has one 911 call center, after the Village of Le Roy joined the county's 911 center. Batavia merged its 911 operations with the county in 2008.

At a time when governments are confronting tight budgets, the cost of investing in new technology may prompt some communities to reconsider merging 911 operations.

Much of Erie County's 911 network is based on "1980s" technology — connected via copper phone lines — and needs to be replaced within the next year, said Amherst police Capt. Thomas J. Maier, who is in charge of information technology and technical services.

A telecommunications provider has informed officials that replacing the equipment in each 911 center will cost \$100,000 per work station, or \$1.2 million in Amherst, Maier said.

Further, Erie County and communities across the country are looking to install next generation, or Next Gen, 911 technology in their networks.

This technology would allow 911 centers to receive text messages, photos and video, and it has been tested elsewhere.

Central Police Services Commissioner Peter M. Vito said the central dispatching center could accommodate the increased flow of 911 calls that would come with consolidation, but any move toward a merger has to come from the local level.

Instead, Erie County plans to invest in a new, hybrid 911 system that advocates say combines the benefits of the decentralized and merged models.

Upgrading the system to make it ready for Next Gen 911 technology would cost millions of dollars, the county estimated.

The county would pay for and operate two, large centralized nodes where the expensive computer equipment would be housed, Vito said.

High-speed data-transmission lines would connect the county's nodes to each of the local 911 centers, preserving local control and redundancy for the network, officials said.

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Sadly, calling 911 feels like you will not get a quick reply because you hear too long of a greeting at times from the call taker might ask questions. If they used technology available they would have location details. I sometimes feel more annoyed after calling after the few recent calls I have had to make. Then the police might show 15 minutes later and just drive by the problem. Consolidate to a regional center after training the officers to actually look for the issue rather than cruise by it.

Posted by: Daninallentown on Oct 6,2009 at 07:27 am

Inappropriate

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