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OVERVIEW OF THE ERIE COUNTY EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER ASSESSMENT APRIL 1, 2010

BACKGROUND

Several years ago, Erie County decided to consolidate 9-1-1 call taking and emergency communications into a single facility and provide dispatch services to police, fire, and EMS agencies who wished to consolidate with the new Center. Subsequently, the Department of Public Safety (DPS) initiated a complex project that included the construction of a specialized facility, the procurement and implementation of complex and critical technology for the 9-1-1 Center, and addressing the administrative, training and human resource needs of existing and new employees. Each component of the project represented a significant effort, amplified by the need to integrate all the components in real time.

In 2009, the new 9-1-1 Center began providing dispatch services. It became apparent that the 9-1-1 Center was experiencing significant technological problems and a number human errors. These problems prompted the County to contract L. R. Kimball to conduct an assessment of the new Center, addressing the Center's technology, operations, staffing, and the current, existing consolidation plan.

ASSESSMENT:

L.R. Kimball has evaluated the current emergency communications environment, including, but not limited to the emergency communications systems and call delivery networks, computer aided dispatch (CAD), training, operations, staffing and supervision.

L. R. Kimball interviewed the stakeholders who are most familiar with using and managing each of the technologies, and providing emergency communications services. Our staff reviewed all major aspects of the 9-1-1 Center's technology and operations. In our report, we have identified major deficiencies of each system and functional component, and provided appropriate recommendations to address deficiencies.

This morning we have delivered our report to the County Executive in a draft form for review and verification of the information we have collected and analyzed. This afternoon we will be reviewing the document with the staff of the Emergency Communications Center. We note as recently as this week, we have learned some of the data collected during our assessment has changed as Center personnel have made efforts to correct deficiencies we pointed out to them during our visits.

L.R. Kimball company policy requires project teams to verify accuracy of information through a review process with our clients, prior to production of a Final Deliverable Document. In this way, we ensure we have not misunderstood any of the data provided to us through the course of the project. We consider our findings and recommendations in this draft report complete, and we believe all the content to be as accurate as possible, given the nature of ongoing changes in the Center.

FINDINGS:

Several key events and decisions contributed to the current issues facing the 9-1-1 Center.

Decisions regarding key technology were made without the technical and functional knowledge base required to ensure the technology was an appropriate match for the new Center.

The new Center opened before new technology was fully installed and tested, before employees were appropriately trained, and before a solid operational groundwork could be established through internal and external policy and procedure development.

Outside professional services were not utilized to ensure that the critical aspects of the overall project were managed. DPS staff members were required to perform this oversight without the knowledge or resources to do so effectively.

The findings listed here represent the major concerns identified during the assessment. This list is not all inclusive, but rather indicates the most significant issues to be addressed in the immediate future. All issues identified during the assessment and L. R. Kimball's recommendations for resolving the issues are described in the complete assessment report.

Radio System

Issues

- Repeated radio failures are causing response delays and safety concerns for field personnel. The root cause of these failures cannot be determined without an in-depth analysis of all of the connected components.
- A single radio system does not exist in Erie County. Currently, individual systems are patch worked together by various means. This patchwork network consists of public safety and non-public safety grade components, and does not meet the P25 standard for public safety radio interoperability.
- Until recently, the County employed a single staff member to provide 1st level support and maintenance for this system. The workload for this system far exceeds the capabilities of a single staff member. The staff member has resigned and must be replaced.

Recommendations

- Test all components of the Public Safety Radio System to determine which component or combination of components is responsible for the failures. Resolution of the repeated failures and long-term radio system planning is not possible until testing is completed.
- Begin long-term planning for a public safety grade, P25 compliant radio system.
- Increase technical staff to support the radio system to ensure proper maintenance and oversight can be performed.

Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) / Records Management System (RMS)

Issues

- The system was not fully setup and tested prior to the go-live date.
- Problems with the initially loaded data require removal of incorrect data and proper setup of the system.
- Some agency data is not loaded in the system at all, requiring the use of a slower, manual system.
- A variety of functional issues has developed. Each of these issues is small in scope, but collectively, they represent opportunity for significant error on the part

of call takers and dispatchers. Some of these issues may be easily resolved through corrected data or the changing of system settings, but the root causes cannot be determined until the system re-work is completed.

- The required mitigation and resolution of the CAD problems represent significant need and significant effort; however, a single DPS staff member is assigned to resolve these system issues.
- The Denali RMS system that was purchased with the CAD system has not been fully implemented. While some agencies are using the new software, others have stopped using it. Agencies that are not yet consolidated with the 9-1-1 Center have indicated that they will not do so until all of the data conversion issues have been addressed.

Recommendations

- Devote additional staff, at least on a temporary basis, to resolving and completing the data and system setup issues.
- Once the system is properly setup, engage the CAD vendor for resolution of functionality issues.
- Correct the connectivity issues for the Denali RMS and Filed Based Reporting (FBR) system and complete an overall assessment of the current project to determine the steps needed to implement a fully functional system for all users.

Training / Standard Operating Procedures

Issues

- The training period for many dispatchers who were hired when the Center first opened was inappropriately shortened. As a result, severely undertrained staff members were assigned to work dispatch positions. This situation has improved; however, the training program requires additional refinement.
- Few experienced dispatchers from other agencies joined the County Center during the consolidation process (due to large pay cuts). Subsequently, the Center does not have an experienced pool of employees to utilize as trainers. As a result, inexperienced staff members are training new hires.
- Although some County and some departmental policies are in place, policies concerning response protocols exist in draft form and are not comprehensive. The drafting of call handling policies should have been completed prior to an agency receiving service from the 9-1-1 Center, not after going live.

Recommendations

- Restructure the training program to provide a solid knowledge and support base for new hires.
- Work with the agencies to standardize process as much as possible and develop a comprehensive policy guide on which to base operations.

Shift Supervision

Issues

- Some current supervisors need to enhance their knowledge base to support and lead the staff. Although the shift commanders are dedicated to their positions, their inability to provide support has encouraged dispatch staff to go to other, more experienced dispatchers for response decisions. The experienced staff members routinely make decisions that should be made at a supervisory level, and they have become de facto shift commanders. Further, the decisions made are not always consistent and inappropriately based on the dispatcher's opinion or outside experience.
- The pay scale for the shift commander position is low, creating a disincentive to accept promotion. As a salaried position, pay cannot be supplemented with overtime therefore, a promotion effectively results in a pay cut for many experienced dispatchers. This scenario precludes the County from promoting qualified supervision from within the Center.

Recommendations

- Adjust the pay scale for the shift commander position making it is an attractive career opportunity for existing Center staff.
- Take measures to provide current shift commanders a greater knowledge base and leadership skills.
- Establish a comprehensive set of internal and external policies and procedures to support the shift commanders in decision making and managing their staff.
- Develop an in-house career progression that prepares shift commander candidates for this position.

Staffing

Issues

- Key support positions do not have trained personnel to function as back-ups. These positions include the Chief Information Office, and Communications Specialist (radio technician). The lack of redundancy creates a risk for the 9-1-1 Center and places an undue burden on staff to be available on a 24/7 basis.
- The workload for the Communications Specialist is overwhelming. The current workload prevents routine maintenance and future planning from being done, back-logs work, and creates an over-reliance on outside vendor support. The current workload is simply too much for a single person to effectively handle.
- Authorized telecommunicator staffing is currently 40 positions. Of those 40, only 31 (one is on long-term sick leave) are filled with fully trained telecommunicators. Although a group of eight new hires will be starting in mid April, they will not be fully trained for up to 6 months. In the meantime, voluntary and mandatory overtime usage will be high.

Recommendations

- Add a network administrator who, among other necessary functions, can function as a back-up for the Chief Information Officer.
- Add a second communications specialist position to balance workload between two staff members and facilitate effective completion of all job tasks.

Consolidation Planning

Issue

There is a potential for unplanned deactivation of at least one secondary Public Safety Answering Point. If such a deactivation occurs, the affected agencies will turn to the County Center for dispatch services. The current consolidation plan does not adequately address the possibility of the additional service requirements.

Recommendations

- The 9-1-1 Center should not consolidate with additional agencies or secondary PSAPs until the key issues discussed here are resolved. Additional consolidations prior to resolving the issues will exacerbate current problems.

- The 9-1-1 Center should plan for unanticipated consolidation by ensuring there are enough workstations equipped with the appropriate technology and plan for any additional staffing needed to handle the increased work load.

Conclusions

There are numerous and varied causes for concern relating to the Erie County 9-1-1 Center, impacting on the technology in use, the operational environment and response protocols, supervision and staffing. The existing deficiencies represent a threat to the safety of emergency first responders and to the citizens of Erie County.

The conditions found are not the result of any person or persons' failings. The conditions have resulted from decisions made during the planning and implementation of the new consolidated Center that negatively affected the ability to avoid the deficiencies found by L. R. Kimball. The resulting situation exceeds the capability of in-house staff to resolve while performing their daily responsibilities.