



APCO 2018

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Should I Stay or Should I Go? Decisions for the Fire Service

Charles "Chuck" Berdan
Contract Consultant
Federal Engineering



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“I’ll be here until the end of time...”

43 years involved with public safety communications, the majority of that time with fire dispatch centers

18 of those years in upper management

Seen technology advance from run cards and paper tickets on a single radio frequency to advanced CAD, mobile data, and trunked radio systems

“I’ll be here until the end of time...”

Been involved with PSAP managers from all disciplines – law, fire, EMS throughout my career

As a consultant, I have worked on or managed several projects related to consolidation/de-consolidation in recent years

“Darlin’ you got to let me know...”

How many of you are currently in, or are a part of an agency that is in a consolidated dispatch center?

How many of you were in a consolidated center that has since de-consolidated?

How many of you have had agencies leave your consolidated dispatch center?

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

The majority of public safety communications in the U.S.
is done in a combined law/fire dispatch center

A historical artifact for many communities – that’s the way
they started

The status quo sometimes is a fiscal necessity

Costs too much to leave

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

In many cases, the marriage of the two disciplines has not been a happy one

Conflicts over training, policies, discipline, etc.

It often boils down to control and power

So now you are faced with the question: “Should I stay or should I go?”

“It’s always tease, tease, tease...”

Some statistical data

What the profession looks like today

What are the issues?

Should you stay or should you go?

Conclusions

Questions

“So you got to let me know...” *

<u>Discipline</u>	<u>APCO Survey</u>	<u>California Data</u>
Law, Fire (+ EMS)	90.94%	8.57%
Law only	6.16%	78.68%
Fire only	2.54%	12.75%
Other	0.36%	<2%

*(using Survey Monkey (256 responses) via APCO PS Connect and figures from California circa 2013 (455 PSAPs))

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

Incorporated cities or towns tend to have both fire and law dispatched from the same center

Unincorporated areas in the country had independent fire districts

Each fire district usually had their own dispatcher or a party line where one of the volunteers would be at home to answer the calls

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

Early on, there were economies of scale to not have two different dispatch centers

- Small populations – low call volumes

- Simple dispatching – address, phone number, cross street, chief complaint

- Only took a note pad, a pencil, and a radio

- Fire did not respond to medical calls – just fires



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“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

But the profession evolved, and police and fire dispatchers now require different skill sets

CAD software

Basic functions the same i.e. call entry

But other functions, criminal histories, license plate checks, etc. are unique to law

Fire works more with haz mat, pre-fire plans, mutual aid, etc.

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

Layered and priority dispatching

Fire tends to be more structured

Law response is more officer-initiated

Pending fire calls are measured in seconds

Pending law calls (low priority in particular) can be measured in hours

“One day it’s fine and next it’s black...”

Detailed questioning based on event type

More agencies are going to dispatching protocols
(EMD, EFD, EPD)

Requiring more training

Becoming specialized – requiring more
memorization

**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

Law dispatching and fire dispatching take different approaches

People call the police to complain about something

People call the firefighters to get help (see the difference?)

Dispatchers can reflect the environment they are exposed to on a daily basis

Exposure to negativity can affect how you interact with citizens and field units

Fire personnel hear the negativity, even if it's not directed at them



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**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

There's not an equal division of work in combined centers

90-95% of work is law-related

Fairly constant workload over a shift

5-10% fire (and maybe EMS) related

Tends to either be very busy or very slow

If fire contributes to the budget, it's not proportional to the work effort

**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

Training hours/dollars reflect these percentages

Law dispatch centers don't have staffing or budget to allow much time for fire training

Dispatchers therefore may receive only minimal fire or EMS training

The fire department may be unable, unwilling, or unaware that the dispatchers need training



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**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

The result is that dispatchers come to dread getting a working structure fire

They aren't comfortable on seldom used procedures and are afraid they're going to make a mistake

This then creates unnecessary added stress to the dispatcher's job

**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

Emergency Medical Dispatch has become the standard of care nationally

The American Heart Association has recently recommended dispatchers should be taught how to give compression-only CPR instructions over the phone, even for non-EMD centers

States are beginning to put this into state codes (Louisiana, Minnesota)

Taking that much time on a medical call doesn't usually fit the law dispatching model or staffing



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**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

Tight training budgets

Training for dispatchers is commonly confined to new hire training

Overtime for in-service training may not be budgeted for

Priority will be given to local, state or federally required law training

Only 27 out of 50 states have minimum training requirements, and most of them are requirements to be a law dispatcher, not a fire dispatcher

**“If I go, there will be trouble...
If I stay it will be double...”**

Even tighter staffing levels

Unless there's a built-in briefing at the start of the shift, even moderately busy centers can't train on duty

On-line training is making that easier

Chronically short-staffed centers can't send people to training and then have to back-fill those vacancies

Especially training that isn't required by state or national law enforcement standards

**“This indecision’s bugging me.
If you don’t want me, set me free...”**

Telecommunicators with little or no fire training can have a lack of understanding of fire ground operations

Can’t anticipate resource requests

Can only parrot what was asked for without comprehension

**“This indecision’s bugging me.
If you don’t want me, set me free...”**

Low Frequency/High Impact events don’t go well for the
fire department

Working single and multiple alarm fires

Technical rescues

Mass Casualty Incidents

**“This indecision’s bugging me.
If you don’t want me, set me free...”**

Staff isn’t as familiar with policies and procedures so mistakes are made

Notification procedures

Resource response plans

Mutual Aid requests

**“This indecision’s bugging me.
If you don’t want me, set me free...”**

There isn’t time to refer to the manuals in an emergency

If they take time to look it up, then the response is
delayed

That’s a major frustration for the fire personnel

“If I go there will be trouble...”

What happens if fire pulls out...

Loss of interoperability between law and fire

Delays in getting 9-1-1 calls

Delays in getting law responses

New center may not have ability to have radio communications with Law

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Potential loss of local area familiarization

Regional dispatchers may be less familiar with local area

Can lose that “personal touch” of knowing the dispatchers

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Cost Implications

Law usually either doesn't charge for fire dispatch, or very little

Law and Fire fighting for \$ from the same budget/general fund

Personnel will normally stay with Law

Usually understaffed anyway, but that means no one familiar with the existing operation is in the new center

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Cost Implications

- Cost of moving technology

 - Fire Alarm circuitry

 - CAD tables and archived history

 - Radio equipment/frequencies

 - 9-1-1 trunks and alternate answer

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Cost Implications

- Cost of on-going expenses in a regional center

 - May have a “startup cost” for new agencies to help pay for existing infrastructure

 - Larger centers can cost more to operate on an annual basis

 - Especially if they haven’t hit the “economy of scale” tipping point

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Cost Implications

May not have a say in future cost increases

Depending on how the contract/agreement is set up

May be one vote out of many...

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Political

Animosity related to the “divorce”

Lack of willing cooperation

Loss of political influence within the city

Could have budget implications

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Political

Perceived loss of connection with the community

Dispatchers not in City Hall

New dispatchers may be unfamiliar with frequent callers, geography

“If I go there will be trouble...”

Political

- Loss of control over day to day operations

 - Ability to make changes on the “fly”

 - Ability to give corrective actions

- Work through Executive/Operations Committees

 - Compromises that may not have happened pre-breakup

“And if I stay it will be double...”

Staying may not be the best solution either...

Need willing cooperation from the host agency to address concerns – it needs to come from the top

Agreement for Fire Training opportunities

- Fire needs to be willing to step up and assist with training

- May need to help with budgeting

- Consider increased staffing

- Dedicated fire dispatcher assignments

“Should I cool it or should I blow?”

First question is whether or not it is feasible

What are the technical hurdles?

Are there any legal obstacles?

Existing agreements/contracts with withdrawal clauses

“Should I cool it or should I blow?”

If it's feasible, then the less tangible considerations

Politics within the organization

Will this be good for the department?

Your constituents

Will this improve service to the citizens?

Financial

Will this increase the cost to the citizens?



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“Should I cool it or should I blow?”

No easy answers and no cookie-cutter solutions

Each situation is unique and presents its own challenges

A hostile withdrawal will be harder than one where everyone is in agreement

Can take a turnover of a generation to get rid of any animosity

May have long-lasting implications for interoperability

Key to success is communications – make sure everyone is aware of what’s happening and they have some say in what’s going on

QUESTIONS?

Chuck Berdan

209-222-8740

cberdan@fedeng.com



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