



9-1-1 System Overloaded: Can It Happen Again?

Reported by: [Leila Walsh](#)

Email: LeilaWalsh@woai.com

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New Year's Eve, the communications center was overloaded, primarily because of the number of people calling to report brush fires sparked by fireworks. (News 4)

As fires raged across Bexar County on New Year's Day, many people calling 9-1-1 got a busy signal. Why? The emergency system was overwhelmed.

News 4 got answers about why peoples lives and property were endanger when Bexar County's Communication's Center couldn't handle the huge number of calls New Year's Eve and jammed.

Bexar County has a list of callers that got through to a Bexar County 9-1-1 operator New Year's Eve.

"The volume was greater than anything we have seen in Bexar County," said Public Safety Communications Manager Robert Adelman.

That night, the communications center was overloaded, primarily because of the number of people calling to report brush fires sparked by fireworks. News 4's investigation shows some of those callers got nothing but a busy signal.

News 4's Leila Walsh: "How do you keep this from happening again?"

Robert Adelman: "Well, as I indicated to the court, it is a multi-pronged approach."

Possible solutions to the problem include new technology with more phone lines going into the system and more 9-1-1 operators.

News 4's Leila Walsh: "We know there are backup systems available. When you noticed a surge in the number of calls on New Year's Eve, why didn't you start rolling calls over to those back-up systems?"

Robert Adelman: "Well, the back-up systems rely on people. We don't have the people to answer those calls."

Based on the number of calls in years past and what was expected to take place New Year's Eve, Robert Adelman said he had the right number of people working. When the county saw a record number of calls, he said it would have been impossible to catch up by calling more people in.

"Do you then take a resource away from answering calls to try to get people to come in?" said Adelman. "You have to weigh that."

Operators said some people were tying up 9-1-1 phone lines with non-emergency calls. They're now reminding people to only call 9-1-1 in an emergency and to stay on the line until someone takes your call.