

## City seeks to cut number of 911 calls put on hold

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“Do not hang up. You’ve reached the Fort Worth Police Department. If you are in need of emergency police, fire or medical attention, stay on the line. Do not hang up.”

“Do not hang up. You’ve reached the Fort Worth Police Department. If you are in need of emergency police, fire or medical attention, stay on the line. Do not hang up.”

Those are the recorded words that greeted almost 1 of 5 people who placed emergency calls to the Fort Worth Police Department’s 911 call center in the summer, according to an analysis of department data by the Star-Telegram.

Historically, the percentage of emergency and nonemergency calls placed on hold—or in queue—has been in the double digits.

Improvements were made in late 2006 after police officials established a goal of no more than 1 percent of calls placed on hold. By January 2007, 1.1 percent of calls were put on hold.

But since March, those percentages have been soaring again, which police officials say was unavoidable because of a crackdown on overtime by the city, staff shortages and high turnover, and equipment limitations.

“We would hate to think that someone had a true emergency and was placed on hold for any amount of time,” said Deputy Chief Charlie Ramirez, whose responsibilities include overseeing the Communications Division. “Unfortunately, with our system’s limitations and our resources, that’s kind of really the nature of the beast until we can get some other things in place that will help us.”

Similar problems are being seen nationwide, said Loredana Elsberry, communications center and 911 services manager for APCO International, a not-for-profit professional organization dedicated to enhancing public safety communications.

“It gets attributed to a myriad of factors. Staffing is one of the biggest,” Elsberry said. “If you don’t have enough people to answer the calls, the calls go in the queue. It comes down to having the appropriate staffing.”

## Big volume, big problem

The Communications Division receives more than a million emergency and nonemergency calls each year.

Digital boards on the communications center's walls show employees how many calls are in queue and how long the oldest call has been holding.

The Tarrant County 9-1-1 District shows that roughly 70 percent of the calls to area call centers come from mobile phones.

"You could have one accident get reported 50 to 60 times from mobile callers," Ramirez said. "At any one time, we only have 20 stations that we have available for call taking, so if we get more than 20 calls coming in at one time—even if we staffed 100 percent every day—that 21<sup>st</sup> call is going to be put on hold."

Typically, six to 17 call takers work per shift, depending on the day and hour. Staffing is beefed up on historically busy days like New Year's Day and July Fourth.

Making things worse, many callers, after hearing the recording, hang up and call again, mistakenly believing that they'll get a live call taker, said Judy Goins, assistant division manager. Instead, they go to the back of the line.

Factor in children playing on the phone or people unintentionally dialing 911 because their cellphone buttons aren't locked, and the number of held calls can swell.

On a typical day, the Fort Worth call center receives 2,800 to 3,300 calls.

"If you have a 911 hang-up or an open line, you're sitting there trying to find out what's going on, yet you can see all these numbers [in queue] climbing," said Debra Moore, a call taker and dispatcher. "You're wondering: 'Is it a grass fire going on? Is that why all the calls are going up? Or is every single one of those calls an actual emergency for someone else?' You have no way of getting to them until you can finish the one you're on."

### 'Better not drop the ball'

Perhaps the 911 system's biggest limitation is that until a call is routed to a call taker's console, there is no way to know whether it is a 911 call or one placed through the department's nonemergency number (817-335-4222) -- something the department hopes to remedy.

"With our system, we have no way of knowing if they're nonemergency or emergency calls on hold," Ramirez said

He said that when a call taker finishes with one call, the system automatically moves to the next one in line, giving no priority to 911 calls.

"You call if you have a barking dog or you call because you've got someone breaking into your house, and they just get in line," Ramirez said.

Kecia Schram, a call taker, dispatcher and trainer, said it's important to not get rushed in answering calls on hold.

“We don’t want to shortchange anybody,” Schram said. “It’s not, ‘Here’s five questions, get that caller off the phone and go to the next call in queue,’ because if you’ve got a shooting, you need to get a lot of information that’s going to help the officer, the detective, the grand jury. This is a long process starting with us at the very beginning.

“If that person is taking their last breath, trying to tell you what happened to them, you better not drop the ball. You might have the only information that officer and detective have to go on.”

### **Problematic solution**

Placing a high percentages of calls on hold is not a new problem at the Fort Worth center.

In calendar year 2004, 16.9 percent of the little more than a million calls were not answered immediately. In 2005, it was 15.6 percent of calls.

By September 2006, in an effort to decrease the percentage, police officials set a goal of no more than 1 percent of the calls on hold. Far fewer calls were placed on hold, but at a cost.

“Despite the service level improvement, if you’re losing employees faster than you can retain them and you’re spending more money than the budget office has allocated, something has got to give,” said Lt. Dean Sullivan, police spokesman.

Ramirez had just begun as the deputy chief of the Operational Support Bureau in January 2007 when he started hearing from the Police Department’s budget personnel that the Communications Division was in financial trouble. The red flags arose after a city-ordered review on overtime spending—part of an effort to fix a projected \$410 million shortfall in the city pension fund.

“When I came over, I was told that the budget for the Communications Division was almost gone,” Ramirez said. “I was told they were spending overtime like they really didn’t care.”

Communications Division Manager Noel Johnston declined to speak to the Star-Telegram, but in a March memo to Ramirez, Johnston said that because of the 1 percent goal, the division had to raise minimum staffing requirements three times and pay a lot of overtime.

“It is apparent that we are wearing our personnel out in our efforts to achieve our goal,” Johnston wrote.

The division spent more than \$123,000 in overtime in the first two quarters of fiscal 2007, almost 80 percent of the overtime budget for the entire year.

“We were making the employees do mandatory overtime,” Ramirez said. “They had just finished up with eight hours and were told, ‘You’re going to have to stay for another four.’ When I got here, most of them were beat up because they’d been doing it for the last three months.”

Ramirez has since ordered a cutback in the amount of overtime and relaxed the 1 percent goal, which he found unrealistic, to between 1 percent and 3 percent.

“We can’t use all our overtime, because it’s got to last us all year,” Ramirez said. “What we need to do is look at the staffing model, look at what we currently have as far as resources, and see where they need to go. I told him, throwing money at it isn’t going to be the answer for anything.”

Documents show that spending did decrease some but that the division still wrapped up the fiscal year spending around \$257,000 -- double what it had been budgeted.

And with overtime money no longer flowing as freely, the number of calls in queue began to rise again.

### Staffing difficulties

Schram has worked in the Communications Division for 18 years.

She doesn’t do it for the money, she says, but rather the satisfaction that she gets from helping people in need.

She’s frustrated by the high turnover rate in the division, especially among employees who have been with the department less than five years.

The average turnover rate nationally is 17 percent. In Fort Worth, it’s 33 percent, Ramirez said.

“Everyone acknowledges there’s a staffing problem when it comes to nurses and teachers,” Elsberry said. “Their turnover rate is 15 percent.”

There’s a multitude of reasons, employees and officials say, including the stress of dealing with panicked, sometimes frustrated callers, during traumatic situations; a work schedule that includes holidays, nights and weekends; and low pay: \$14.02 per hour for starting call takers and \$16.23 for dispatchers.

“I might say the pay is not important, but for 85 percent of the other people out there, it is important because they’re trying to raise families on it,” Schram said. “We need more staffing. We need to get people who are staying, people that realize they’re appreciated, we need them and we want them to stay.”

The Communications Division is authorized for 109 positions, 104 of which are filled.

For the previous two fiscal budgets, police requested additional positions for communications -- 12 in fiscal 2006 and five in fiscal 2007. Without funding for those requests, the department said, staffing would continue to be inadequate, resulting in unnecessary overtime, too many calls on hold and staff turnover because of stress.

But in both instances, the requests were unfunded and were not even included in the city manager’s proposed budget.

In the current fiscal year, 18 positions were approved for Communications in preparation for the full implementation of the new Central Division, expected to take place early this year.

Ramirez said that while the additional positions should help alleviate strain on current employees, more staffing will eventually be needed.

"I think a long time the focus was on patrol officers. Somewhere along the way, we forgot what it takes to support those patrol officers. We really need to play catch-up," Ramirez said.

"The number of officers on the street require more dispatchers and more folks to help handle that. We're annexing a lot, and that requires more call takers to answer that many more calls," Ramirez said.

"We do good. We hold our own, considering. But once these outlying areas start coming in and these neighborhoods start filling up, it's going to be real difficult for our personnel to keep up with that call load. There's really no simple solution."

Staff writer Jeff Claassen contributed to this report.

#### 911 call complaints

Complaints received in 2006 by the Fort Worth Communications Division related to callers placed on hold before their calls being answered:

##### **A woman reporting a teen's drowning**

A division investigation found that of six calls received about the drowning, four were put on hold. All four hung up, requiring call takers to attempt to call back. During that half-hour, call takers received 102 calls -- 32 of which were hang-ups. Fifty of the calls were placed on hold before being answered.

A man reporting that two boys were standing in the middle of a street arguing with a girl

The man said that he was placed on hold for four minutes and that by the time a call taker answered, the boys were gone. A division investigation revealed that the man had been on hold for 49 seconds before his call was answered.

##### **An officer placed on hold after calling 911 twice during a struggle with two men**

A division investigation found that the officer had hung up after hearing the recording. Call takers attempted to call him back both times but got only his voice mail. Residents made six calls about the fight, and the officer called for help on his radio. During the hour the incident took place, 222 calls came in. Of those, 34 were hang-ups, most requiring a callback.

##### **A woman reporting her brother had inhaled chlorine fumes and could not breathe**

A division investigation found that the woman had been placed on hold 90 seconds before her call was answered. During the half-hour in which her call was taken, call

takers received 105 calls, 35 of which went into the queue. Most of the 25 hang-ups required a callback.

**A woman reporting an unknown emergency at the Aids Outreach Center**

An investigation found that all three of the calls placed from the center that day were put on hold. Two of the callers hung up, requiring call takers to attempt to call back. During that hour, call takers received 221 calls, 24 of which were hang-ups. Twenty-five of the 221 calls were placed on hold before being answered.