

Solano County Sheriff/Coroner's Office
Office of Emergency Services
Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center
2006-2007 Solano County Grand Jury Report

Reason for Investigation

Under the authority of the California Penal Code §925, to investigate and report on the operations, accounts and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county, the Grand Jury elected to review the Solano County Office of Emergency Services and the Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center.

Grand Jury Actions

- Visited Solano County Office of Emergency Services
- Toured Office of Emergency Services' Mobile Command Vehicle
- Visited Solano County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center
- Interviewed Sheriff's Office Employees

Background and Summary

Office of Emergency Services

The Solano County Office of Emergency Services (OES) is located at 530 Clay Street in Fairfield. The OES is used by county staff to coordinate emergency activity during natural disasters, terrorism, and rescue missions among all seven cities and the special districts in the county. Mutual aid for neighboring counties is also coordinated through OES. During emergency situations, OES uses the Solano County Sheriffs Office Dispatch Center (Dispatch Center) to coordinate activities of the OES and other emergency agencies on various radio frequencies. OES is also responsible for planning and conducting emergency training exercises and tabletop emergency strategy sessions. The OES facility is well organized; however, it is located approximately 50 yards from a Fairfield watershed levee. This levee, on occasion, floods and causes damage and inconvenience within the OES facility.

The OES has purchased a state-of-the-art Mobile Command Vehicle that has become an integral part in responding to emergencies within the County. A critical feature of the vehicle is a radio communications system, thereby permitting all agencies within the County to share certain frequencies with the command vehicle. This unit is currently used during emergencies to coordinate communications.

A continuing challenge facing all emergency response agencies has been a lack of ability to communicate efficiently with all agencies during emergency situations. In the past, each agency would design its own communications system, on its own set of frequencies. OES has received funding for a communications system within the County. The first of six broadcast towers, supporting the command vehicle, is currently in place. The balance of the towers is to be installed by June 2007 permitting all agencies to share certain frequencies during emergency situations.

In the event of a local emergency, OES has the capability to automatically call all residents in a designated area within a ten-minute period. The OES is also working with radio station KUIC (95.3 FM) to develop the ability to cut into any program at any time to announce any emergency to the public.

Dispatch Center

The Dispatch Center is part of the Solano County Sheriff's Department and is housed within the Sheriff's Office building in Fairfield. Dispatchers receive, evaluate, and summarize calls for service for the Sheriff's Office, Isleton Police and Fire, Dixon Police and Fire, Cordelia Fire Protection District, Suisun Fire Protection District, Rio Vista Fire Districts, Montezuma Fire District, Solano Community College Police, and California Medical Facility on a 24-hour basis. In addition, dispatchers provide service to Suisun City Police and Fire on graveyard shift, coordinate air ambulance for scene calls to all areas of the County, and coordinate all mutual aid for county and out-of-county requests. They handle after hours problems for Solano Irrigation District, Animal Control, Coroner, County Roads, Public Works communications, Building and Grounds, SWAT, Chaplain, District Attorney, Probation, Parole, and Sheriff's Reserve.

Dispatchers assist law enforcement officers in the field by asking the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System for information on vehicles, people, and law enforcement information. Dispatchers transmit on three radio channels, seven secondary channels, and several law/fire radios for other agencies. They also access twelve business lines, four Nextel phones, six 911 lines, alarm panels, fax requests, and mobile data computer messages. The Dispatch Center is often the first point of contact for emergencies, providing the citizens of Solano County 24-hour service.

The dispatchers must perform many tasks simultaneously while maintaining a high level of accuracy. Their job is demanding and highly stressful. Each dispatcher must have a working knowledge of public safety procedures, terminology, and code systems. They must make critical decisions, using their independent judgment. The dispatchers are classified and paid at the county clerical rate. The Dispatch Center often trains new employees, only to have them leave county employment for a similar job with a city public safety agency which pays higher wages while working with less stress.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1 - The Solano County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center and Office of Emergency Services are presently housed in an area where flooding occurs. Dispatchers must be able to perform their critical duties when any state of emergency exists.

Recommendation 1 - The Solano County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center and Office of Emergency Services should be housed in an area that is physically secure and safe. This becomes critical when a disaster occurs.

Finding 2 - The dispatcher job and pay classifications are included with the clerical employee classification within the County pay system.

Recommendation 2 - The County should conduct a job function audit and evaluation of the dispatchers' positions. Their salary should be competitive with agencies elsewhere in the Public Safety environment.

Finding 3 - The County Dispatch Center is not able to communicate by radio with other public safety agencies in an emergency.

Recommendation 3 - A continued effort should be made to complete the additional five communication towers needed for the new communication interoperability system by June 2007 as scheduled.

Finding 4 - At the time of our visit, the Solano County Office of Emergency Services had been working with the owners of radio station KUIC (95.3 FM) to develop the capability to cut into regular programming at any time to make immediate emergency announcements to the public.

Recommendation 4 - Complete the ongoing negotiations with KUIC for this valuable public service.

Comments

The Office of Emergency Services also conducts emergency preparedness training for Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). This training provides citizens and organizations a better understanding of what they should do before, during, and after a disaster or major emergency. We believe this to be a valuable asset for the citizens of this County.

The Grand Jury believes that the dispatch employees should be compensated at a higher level based on their job responsibilities and the stress level associated with their duties. The residents of Solano County deserve highly competent employees working as dispatchers to deal with emergencies. To maintain a high level of competence, the County must compensate dispatchers at a level consistent with other public safety agencies in the area.

Affected Agencies

- Solano County Sheriff's Office
- Solano County Office of Emergency Services
- Solano County Department of Human Resources
- Solano County Board of Supervisors