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IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

Union Split Affects EMS Workers

Unionized emergency services employees were caught up in the recent labor union split as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents paramedics and other emergency services personnel, was among the five of the largest unions in the AFL-CIO to split from that organization to form a new labor federation.

Disenchanted with what they perceived to be a lack of worker organizing by the AFL-CIO, the new alliance, taking the name "Change to Win Coalition," said that they are "devoted to creating a large-scale, coordinated campaign to rebuild the American labor movement."

While not all locals affiliated with the organizations that left the AFL-CIO have taken a position on the new federation, Mark Keith, the communications director with SEIU Local 200United in New York, said that the creation of the new group will have a positive effect on EMS workers.

"We believe that over the long term, this is going to benefit members, as there will be a new emphasis put on organizing and building our strength in our jurisdictions, in this case emergency medical services and EMTs," Keith said. "As we have more and more EMT and EMS workers under collective bargaining agreements, the density in the industry that we're developing can only lead to more respect for the profession and a better standard of living for our members."

SEIU Local 200United represents paramedics, EMTs, critical care technicians and dispatchers at Rural Metro in Western and Central New York. For more information about the new labor federation, visit www.changetowin.org.

311 Proves a Valuable Supplement to 911 Service

By Penny Colston

Nearly a decade after 311 first was introduced for non-emergency calls in Baltimore, officials there and in other cities that have adopted 311 have said that the system has freed up call-swamped 911 centers, sharpened first response services and resulted in many other unforeseen benefits.

Most emergency professionals know that a lot of 911 calls do not reflect true, life-threatening emergencies. A 1996 report in *US News and World Report* confirmed that non-emergency calls make up between 50 and 90 percent of 911 calls.

In response to the growing public dependence on 911 for non-emergencies and at the request of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) in the Department of Justice, the Federal Communications Commission in 1997 designated 311 as a national, voluntary, non-toll phone number for non-emergencies. Since then, COPS has funded almost \$6 million in support of the implementation and/or enhancement of 311 non-emergency systems.

Fewer Unnecessary Calls

According to a 2000 COPS study of 311 in Baltimore, the time it takes Baltimore 911 operators to answer calls

has dropped 50 percent since the city adopted 311 in 1996. The percentage of calls abandoned because callers could not reach an operator also fell 50 percent, according to the department.

Between 1996 and 2000, the average time between incoming 911 calls increased from 70 seconds to 143 seconds, and the percentage of 911 callers who encountered a recorded message was reduced from 18 percent to four percent, according to the study. The "total system busy" hours, on average, fell 169 hours each month. Baltimore police credit 311 with a 12 percent reduction in the number of police calls dispatched to field units between 1996 and 2000.

Officials in Houston, Texas, watched 911 call volume drop 14 percent in the year following the city's adoption of 311 in 2001. Austin, Texas, which also adopted 311 in 2001, saw a 20 percent reduction in 911 calls in one year. As of April 2004, 911 calls had fallen 42 percent to levels not seen since 1994, said Debra Cohen, who helps communities establish 311 programs through the federal COPS office.

Ed Harris, emergency communications

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311 Proves Value

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director for the Austin Police Department, called 311 “a miracle” in a city where non-emergency calls to 911 were estimated to be in the 40 to 50 percent range. “It has been a godsend for us,” Harris said. “(The 311 system) saved us not only from having our 911 system swamped but saved citizens who had true emergencies ... from getting a busy signal.”

One-Stop Information

“Since 311 was introduced, we have definitely seen drops in terms of call volume to 911,” Cohen said. But she also noted that a reduction in unnecessary 911 calls is just “one of many benefits we’re seeing.”

In Chicago, for example, 311 provides one-stop shopping for municipal services and an outlet for citizen complaints. Chicagoans call 311 to report everything from potholes and downed trees to power outages, graffiti, noise complaints and potential gang activity. Having a simple, three-digit number provides citizens with greater access to city government, by “taking a lot of the guesswork” out of contacting city departments to report a problem, said Chicago 311 Director Ted O’Keefe.

Software installed at the call centers weeds out duplicate calls, preventing departments from overresponding to complaints. True emergencies that are called into 311 are transferred to the city’s 911 center with the touch of a “call-transfer button,” O’Keefe said, or are handled by one of roughly 25 police officers who daily staff the 64-operator call center.

In addition to being a convenience for citizens, 311 “has also served as a tremendous information-gathering tool and has enabled us to track our performance and spot trends,” O’Keefe said. Citizen tips to 311 about graffiti sites, for example, alert officials to crime patterns, and help Chicago police more closely monitor gang and drug activity. Such information has even lead authorities to redefine dispatch boundaries in some areas, O’Keefe said.

Public safety officials in Chicago also

urge citizens to use 311 to hear information about major city events and public announcements. Other cities have also successfully relied on 311 for rumor control during media frenzies following crises locally and elsewhere, including the anthrax scares that broke in many communities following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Cohen said. She pointed to the example of Orange County, Florida, which asks its residents to call 311 for non-emergencies, such as downed trees and power outages, leaving police free to respond to true emergencies during hurricane season.

Implementation Challenges

Three-one-one call centers and the software used to operate them can be pricey. Chicago spent \$15 million on a call center and operating technology. New York City spent \$21 million on a system that has an annual \$27 million operations budget.

Setting up a 311 center also involves launching an extensive public awareness campaign to teach citizens that 311 – and not 911 – is the number to call for non-emergencies. Cohen said that effort can involve everything from advertisements emblazoned on park benches and buses to press conferences, public meetings and radio and television announcements. Patience is essential: It can take between two and five years to get a 311 system up and running, she said.

Cities launching 311 systems are eligible for startup funding and support through the federal COPS office, which has helped 13 communities establish 311 centers since 1996. COPS also has published dozens of studies and manuals to help cities devise and launch the sort of 311 system best suited to it. (Go to www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=111 for downloadable resources.)

Cohen said that establishing a 311 call center is a true group effort that relies on teamwork and rigorous goal-setting, and it is important to keep communication channels open between public safety and city officials throughout the process.

“We also encourage cities (thinking of starting 311) to visit a city that is the same in terms of the size of your city,” Cohen said. “And if you’re planning to have the

police be the primary administrator of the system, you may want to visit a city where that’s the case, because many [places] have a 311 system administered by the city.”

Cohen said that 311 has proved valuable every place that it has been adopted. In Chicago, O’Keefe said that he couldn’t think of any serious drawbacks to having the system, with the possible exception that it has raised customers’ expectations about emergency service response. “People seem to want a quicker response, now that they’ve become accustomed to us responding so well,” he said. 

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