

NEW CASTLE COUNTY
TRANSITION 2017

Emergency Response Transition
Committee Report
February 1, 2017



Emergency Response Transition Committee Membership

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Executive Summary

The emergency response transition committee was charged with performing a SWOT analysis of New Castle County EMS, New Castle County Communications (911), NCC Emergency Management and the New Castle County Fire service. The committee had numerous meetings and two public hearings. In attendance at all committee meetings were members of the public. After careful consideration of documents, testimony and input from the transition website, the committee has come to the conclusion that all areas reviewed perform professionally and admirably daily. The following SWOT analysis outlines the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of all the areas reviewed.

The New Castle County Paramedics (NCCEMS) form a valuable partnership with the fire service in our community to provide sophisticated, emergency medical care to all residents and visitors. Over the past decade, expectations for service have begun to stress the capacity of the system. Although considered one of the best emergency medical service (EMS) systems in the United States, a review of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is a useful exercise.

Strengths

The New Castle County (NCC) two-tiered system is composed of advanced life support (ALS) by the paramedics and basic life support (BLS) by the fire service/St. Francis-City of Wilmington service. It allows for a tailored BLS-only ambulance or a four rescuer BLS and ALS response depending on the seriousness of the 911 complaint. If both ALS and BLS respond, then there is maximum flexibility to meet the needs of the patient after they are assessed. Some patients need only the BLS ambulance, allowing both paramedics to answer a second call. Some need the ambulance and a paramedic, allowing the other paramedic to answer a second call, and some critical patients need both paramedics. This is a tremendous strength compared to many paramedic systems where the paramedic ambulance is committed no matter how minor the actual need.

Another advantage of the NCC two-tiered system is that the twenty-one volunteer fire companies that employ over 150 full and part-time 1st responders. These responders can be deployed to respond on fire trucks if there are not enough volunteers immediately available for a particular fire call. This has become a key support for fire suppression responses throughout the county.

The NCC paramedics are focused on the sickest patients and thus can deliver high performance medical care. Their medical equipment is state of the art, their appearance is very professional, and their high level of service has been recognized by national accreditation. Very competitive salary and benefits and a career development path attract new paramedics. One facet of the career development path allows seasoned paramedic sergeants/supervisors to participate routinely in the care of critical patients in support of more junior paramedics.

Weaknesses

The paramedic work schedule involves both day and night shifts in all weather with the repetitive lifting of heavy medical equipment. Given the physical and mental stress of the work, the thirty-year pension makes NCC non-competitive with other public safety agencies offering twenty-five or even twenty year pensions. Lowering the pension to a maximum of twenty-five years is necessary to increase retention.

The utilization of paramedic units on emergency calls has been steadily increasing with no recent increase in the number of paramedic units. This should be studied and additional “power-shift” units working the busiest hours must be considered.

The current fleet appears problematic with transport ambulances recently purchased which duplicate the fire service vehicles unnecessarily and at high cost. The large paramedic units adopted over a decade ago should be studied as to whether there might now be smaller, more maneuverable options.

Administrative support for the paramedics is problematic. Human Resource support needs to be reinforced, especially when it comes to recruiting. Computer technology is outdated, inefficient, and Information Services is unable to support the needs of the EMS Division with too few technicians available. The paramedic medical reports could be streamlined.

Although many front-line paramedics have been moving up the career ladder, there is a perception that paramedic leadership is stagnant and should look for opportunities to be open to change and increase communication with the work force.

Opportunities

Reduce stress on the paramedic workforce by continuing to fine tune the Emergency Medical Dispatch protocols to reduce those calls where a paramedic presence is felt to deliver little value. Consider adding additional paramedic units to meet the demand of increasing call volume.

Continue to focus heavily on paramedic recruitment with a balance of a New Castle County Paramedic Academy and already nationally certified paramedics. Hiring pre-certified paramedics, who only require months of field evaluation versus academy training of over 18 months, will be able to relieve the stress of short-staffing in a shorter span of time. Delays in the hiring process result in excessive overtime and can contribute to employee burnout. Continue to develop paramedic-training programs with educational institutions felt to deliver timely, high quality medical education. An adequate dedicated New Castle County educational facility for ongoing training and education is sorely needed.

Consider additional staffing in the Middletown-Odessa-Townsend (MOT) area, which poses special challenges of growth and long distances.

Threats

The committee felt that a major threat to the NCC paramedics is the inability to maintain an experienced work-force due to the high call volume, a thirty year pension which has ceased to be attractive, and a perception that paramedic leadership is at times less than engaged. This threat is compounded by a Human Resources department, which is slow to process new paramedic applicants.

Of equal concern are the proposed changes to the Real Estate Transfer Tax and the 30% state funding for paramedics.

The fire service should consider restating their support for their part of the current NCC EMS partnership: dual response capability to EMS and fire emergencies with due consideration given to the needs of both. Fire service BLS must remain an effective partner for rendezvous ALS units to be effective. Without that support and a willingness to balance the needs of both types of calls, other strategies such as a total county takeover of EMS and even privatization become concerns. Any redirection of EMS billing away from the fire service would have wide implications.

The proposed relocation of Medic 5 to Boyd's Corner would jeopardize timely paramedic service to the majority of calls in southern New Castle County.

In summary, the NCC Emergency Response Transition Committee recognizes the tremendous professionalism and dedication of the New Castle County Paramedics and their associated basic life support, fire department and 911 colleagues who deliver timely, expert care to those in our county, who experience a medical emergency or traumatic injury. The EMS service in New Castle County continues to evolve into a high-performance emergency response system, which needs to be sustained and supported so that no citizen is in jeopardy of losing the high quality of living standards which attract those to our community. This report focuses on the current priorities identified by those actively involved in the delivery of our critical services. It is hoped that this assessment will benefit the decision makers, who are tasked with protecting our County.

The NCC 911 division is made up of three sections. 1st are the Public Safety Operators who are responsible for answering landline calls from all residents and businesses in New Castle County with the exception of the incorporated cities of Wilmington & Newark as well as handling all cellular calls for the entire county as well as over flow from neighboring states. 2nd are the Fire/Medical Telecommunicators that are responsible for dispatching of the 21 volunteer fire companies that provide both fire & ems service, the city of Wilmington Fire & EMS as well as the NCC Paramedics. They also handle the overflow of 911 calls for fire & ems requests and coordinate mutual responses for neighboring states. Lastly are the Police Telecommunicators that are responsible for dispatching not only NCC Police, but also 4 municipality police departments. They also handle overflow of 911 calls for police requests, call back on all 911 hang-up calls and coordinate mutual aid responses with other police agencies within New Castle County as well as out of county & state. As a result we arrived at the following Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Strengths

The NCC 911 center is considered to be the public's first line of assistance in an emergency NCC 911 has acquired state of the art communications equipment and technology. Management has also provided continuing education training so their personnel can provide the highest of quality service. They have also had an "open door" policy which has aided in fostering a strong bond with all public safety agencies they dispatch and provide mutual aid for.

The high level of service NCC 911 provides has been recognized by national accreditation. A competitive salary and benefits along with a career development path have given NCC 911 the opportunity to attract quality candidates. NCC 911 has evolved into a well-respected and professional organization.

Weaknesses

NCC 911 continues to run understaffed. One of the main reasons is the lack of dedicated support from the human resources Department. NCC EMS and Police have continuous posting postings to attract applicants, NCC 911 should follow suit

NCC 911 employees work a rigorous schedule that is unlike any outside of the public safety field and are required to work 30 years to quality for a pension. New Castle County needs to aggressively pursue pension years to attract and retain quality employees.

The design & size of the current 911 center will not allow for adequate expansion in the near future. Numerous building systems have failed or needed expensive upgrades. New Castle County needs to ensure a safe and adequate facility for such an essential service.

In March of 2014 NCC 911 went live with a new computer aided dispatch (CAD) system. There are a lot of great qualities that go along with this CAD and there is a huge cost savings to NCC 911 because it was purchased on the State of Delaware contract. However it has taken much longer than anticipated to get all that we can out of this CAD. The CAD system although recently acquired still lacks needed support. One major problem is the Geographic Information System (GIS). This CAD relies heavily on an accurate GIS for mapping of calls to 911 as well as routing of emergency responders to the calls. Unfortunately NCC 911 does not have dedicated GIS support personnel.

NCC 911 is also lacking in information systems (IS/IT) support. Without dedicated IS/IT support, the 911 center is unable to rapidly repair & maintain vital systems which rely heavily on technology.

Opportunities

The CAD has the potential to provide endless information to aid all public safety agencies that are served by the 911 center dedicated support from GIS & IS/IT.

With dedicated human resources support the 911 center can recruit & retain quality people

Threats

With the vast majority of NCC 911 budget being personnel, any reduction in funding sources could jeopardize the citizen's first line of assistance in an emergency. The nature of this specialty career is such that it cannot afford to be understaffed which in turn may lead to unnecessary risk to New Castle County.

The New Castle County Office of Emergency Management (NCC OEM) has developed solid partnerships across all disciplines and in the community. In addition, the Office's program delivery serves both the citizens and County Government on a daily basis for prevention, mitigation, response and recovery from natural, technological, and man-made hazards. Although there are numerous strengths of the Office, there are some weaknesses, and opportunities to continue to foster wide range acceptance and reliance of this valuable resource. The Threats listed could be detriment to the continuing operation, or result in non-compliance with standards and lack of readiness.

Strengths

The New Castle County Office of Emergency Management maintains a strong connection and interaction with local, state, and regional partners across a wide range of disciplines and functional areas. This allows the Office to collaborate, coordinate, and garner support for problem solving to challenges that are faced in planning, response, and recovery. In addition, the Office staff continually performs outreach to the community through civic meetings, fire company open houses, business safety and health fairs, and public assembly events. OEM's Citizen Corps program has grown into the most prominent program in the State. The program includes the public outreach; the Community Emergency Response Team training courses; partnership with the Wilmington Blue Rocks Baseball and Delaware 87'ers D-League Basketball; association with the State's Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters and their partner Non-Government, Non-Profit, and Faith based organizations; and the network and support of Amateur Radio volunteers.

A good portion of funding for the Office is from Federal Grants and the Radiological Preparedness program, which is matched in majority by New Castle County Government. Since the function of Emergency Management resides in multiple disciplines across the nation - such as Sheriff's Departments, Office of the Mayor, Fire Departments, and Police

Departments - the funding streams are strongly supported by multiple National industry groups including the IAEM, NEMA, IACP, IAFF, National Sheriffs' Association, National Association of Counties, and the National League of Cities.

Currently, the facilities, technological resources, and logistical resources that the Office maintains are valuable to its capability, and lend to an opportunity for future challenges.

Weaknesses

There are a wide range of activities and demands placed upon the Office with the level of staffing and experience within the Office. The main weakness to the Office is the ability to maintain the required Emergency Plans, Training and Exercise Programs, and Response capability with two Planners and the Coordinator. FEMA Guidelines project that each jurisdiction should have one (1) emergency planner per 100,000 residents. Provided NCC's population, the Office should have at least five (5) Planners. The level of experience and education required for the Planner position is also a challenge to acquiring and retaining qualified candidates. The recent Fiscal Year budget is allowing a small career development opportunity for increasing retention, however, this effort needs to be implemented.

In addition, the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) function for hazardous chemical planning and response plan audits is managed by two part-time consultants that report to the State Emergency Response Commission (SERC). This reporting mechanism and structure lends to a disjointed planning and coordination process, along with duplication of effort in public outreach. In the City of Wilmington LEPC, Kent and Sussex LEPC, a staff member within the OEM maintains the duties and responsibilities of the LEPC and reports to SERC. The positive to the current LEPC atmosphere is the participation at meetings by industry and the support to the Industrial Hazardous Materials Response Team.

Opportunities

When the Americorps program, Emergency Services Corps (ESC), was instituted in New Castle County in 2006, this program provided ample opportunity for OEM to increase the outreach to schools, community groups, and to utilize a full time ESC member to assist the Office with numerous program aspects. The persons selected were advanced educated and mature, and were able to grow even more through mentoring and a fostered approach of management. This program was mutually beneficial to the Fire Service, and could also benefit EMS and 911.

The Delaware Academy of Public Safety and Security (DAPSS) also provide an opportunity to foster a program of outreach and support for the Office, and the ability to educate students in EM, and utilize them to assist in teaching our Community classes.

The current Community Emergency Response Team course averages 20-25 attendees per class, while the class is targeted for a 40 persons and typically is impacted by 8-10 No-Shows. This training is valuable to citizens and there is ample opportunity to increase the appeal for this free training through the NCC TV and other media releases. OEM had been severely diminished in the promotional effort by the County's communication efforts.

Threats

Continuing threat to the Office is the loss of personnel considering the small staff of six (6) full time personnel. The Planners take at least 1-2 years to become fully familiar with County operations and plans, and therefore, the length of time for development diminishes the effectiveness of programs and services.

Organizationally, the Office is defined by County Code to report to the Director of Public Safety. Since October 2014, the Office has been reporting to the Chief of Emergency Communications. In past history, when the Office was structured under another Division or even a Section, the importance of Emergency Management and its priorities were lessened, diminishing the effectiveness and buy-in from County Departments.

The volatility of the State budget provides the potential for grant funding to be shifted within the State's Emergency Management Agency, therefore, depleting the levels of funding provided to NCC since all grant funds received by NCC are passed through the State.

