

## **Charleston County News Release**

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### **Study Results Show Feasibility of 911 Consolidated Dispatch Center**

*Study concludes consolidated dispatch is the "most efficient and effective emergency communications possible."*

The Consolidated Dispatch Feasibility Study was presented on Wednesday, April 11, at 3 p.m. in Charleston County Council Chambers. The presentation included information and recommendations from the feasibility study for consolidating County-wide 911 Emergency Public Safety Communications.

The presentation began by honoring telecommunicators through acknowledgment of National Telecommunicator's Week, April 8-14, which was established to recognize the critical role that dispatchers play as the vital link between the public and emergency responders.

The consultants' presentation focused on their findings that consolidating emergency public safety communications in Charleston County is indeed feasible and will benefit the community. The Consolidated Dispatch Feasibility Study, presented to local officials and emergency response leaders by L. Robert Kimball & Associates, was based on a scope of work developed cooperatively by a multi-jurisdictional Consolidated Dispatch Committee consisting of law enforcement, fire and EMS leaders within Charleston County. The committee is chaired by Chief Jon Zumalt, North Charleston's Public Safety Director.

Consolidation of emergency public safety communications is being considered for Charleston County for the following reasons:

- To improve service to citizens, which will save lives
- To provide the most efficient and effective emergency communications possible
- To increase safety to emergency responders
- To enhance coordination among responding agencies

Currently, there are five different Public Safety Answering Points (911 Centers) in Charleston County that can answer a 911 call and five additional emergency dispatch centers. It is likely that a caller may get transferred, one or more times, to a different answering center in the appropriate jurisdiction, and then have to repeat their information over the phone to another emergency dispatcher. If local jurisdictions convert to a Consolidated Emergency Public Safety Dispatch, there would be one answering center that would handle all 911 calls, with the ability to dispatch the necessary emergency responder (EMS, fire, police, etc.), but without the time-consuming process of transferring callers.

Chief Zumalt gave an overview of the project and played a short video that featured tape recordings from local 911 calls where the callers were transferred from one dispatch center to another in order to get to the appropriate jurisdiction.

The results of the study show that quality and efficiency of service can be realized through consolidating public safety communications. Delays in response are reduced through eliminating transferred 911 calls and through standardizing training, processes and protocols. Better technology would be available to benefit all response agencies and citizens in Charleston County. Additionally, improved interoperability and information sharing among agencies will be realized.

Although cost savings are not the primary reason for consolidating public safety communications, they can be expected through eliminating duplication of functions, the reoccurring costs associated with the maintenance of multiple systems and equipment, and the facility cost savings caused by securing one primary consolidated center and one appropriately equipped and secured back-up/alternate center.

“The Consolidated Dispatch Feasibility Study is an incredible opportunity for the Lowcountry,” said Tim Scott, Charleston County Council Chairman. “Millions of dollars can be saved, which would be a significant return to the taxpayers.”

The benefit of a Consolidated Emergency Public Safety Dispatch is improved service to citizens, such as faster emergency response times, fewer errors through standardized call handling and dispatch protocols, and improved technology available for the entire county. There are also benefits anticipated with having better training and facilities for telecommunicators, thereby improving job satisfaction and retention of these critical staff members who serve our community.

Benefits of consolidated dispatch exist for both day-to-day operations and unplanned events, for which the Charleston area is known to be vulnerable. Improvements in communications, interoperability and data sharing will impact emergency response for all types of emergency incidents that are generally broken down into three categories:

- 1) Emergencies that occur daily in the community, “typical” crimes, fires and medical emergencies
- 2) Local, small scale disasters, such as a small airplane crash
- 3) Large scale and/or national level disasters such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters

**Concerns about Consolidated Emergency Public Safety Dispatch:**

As part of the Consolidated Dispatch Study, high-level officials were interviewed, as well as management and dispatch staff at each of the 10 centers in Charleston County. Although most of those interviewed were supportive of the concept of consolidating emergency public safety communications, some concerns were expressed. These included worry over how to deal with the other duties, such as administrative call-taking or other jurisdiction-specific functions performed by many dispatchers. Concern was also expressed over job security for dispatchers, as well as concern over losing quality or familiarity in serving a specific emergency response agency in a specific geographic area.

**Summary of Recommendations:** Begin work now toward consolidating the County's emergency communications. Among the planning and transition steps ahead, a governing structure and funding mechanisms must be developed, agreements must be executed, a site must be selected and a director must be hired.

**Conclusion: Consolidation of Charleston County Emergency Communications is feasible**

The transition could follow successful examples of consolidation such as EMS, 800 MHz Radio system, 911 computerized equipment and GIS mapping database among Public Safety Answering Points.

**Study costs:**

The \$146,807 study was paid for with funds from a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Grant and seven local jurisdictions:

- Charleston County Government
- City of Folly Beach
- City of Isle of Palms
- City of North Charleston
- James Island Public Service District Fire Department
- St. Johns Fire Department
- Town of Mount Pleasant