

# The Providence Journal

## Is 911 system hurting?

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Raymond LaBelle, executive director of the E-911 center, still hopes to increase the size of his staff despite a smaller budget.

### The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

Nearly 17,000 callers seeking emergency help by dialing 911 in Rhode Island last year were put on hold, an increase of 26 percent from the previous year.

After hearing a recorded message, "You have reached 911, please stay on the line," the callers had to wait from a few seconds to more than a minute before an operator picked up. Some callers hung up before anyone answered.



The delays occurred as the volume of emergency calls went up last year, while the amount of money allocated for the 911 service went down, according to data compiled by the Rhode Island E-911 Uniform Emergency Telephone System.

In fact, the state budget to operate the 911 system has been cut each of the last two years.

### Read E-911 Center executive director Raymond LaBelle's report

Survey: Your turn: In a tight budget year, would you spend tax money on additional 911 operators?

The 911 system is supported by a surcharge paid each month by telephone customers in Rhode Island. Each year, more than enough money is collected to staff and operate the 911 service, according to its director. But for the past several years,

Governor Carcieri and the General Assembly have diverted two-thirds of the amount collected to other state spending.

Carcieri, trying to fill gaps in the state budget for the year that starts July 1, has proposed lowering the 911 budget even further — by another 4 percent — in the coming fiscal year.

A spokesman for Carcieri said the E-911 center will soon be filling some job vacancies that have been open for several months, and the replacements will improve 911 answer times.

But it won't eliminate some 911 calls from being placed on hold.

"I think it is unlikely we can ever promise that no person calling E-911 will ever be put in queue," said Jeff Neal, a spokesman for the governor. "There always will be circumstances when a flood of calls occur at any given time," he said, such as during a snowstorm when thousands may be calling at the same time about the same issue.

The E-911 center was set up in 1988 to answer all emergency calls in Rhode Island. Last year, the center, located in North Providence, handled 573,351 calls, or about 2 percent more than in 2006. The total in 2006, 562,035, was about 6 percent more than in 2005.

The vast majority of all calls are handled quickly, according to data provided by the E-911 center. About 97 percent of calls last year were answered by an operator within the first five rings.

But the number of E-911 calls that were placed on hold last year increased sharply from 2006. There were 16,683 calls placed on hold in 2007, compared with 13,271 in 2006, a 25.7-percent increase, according to figures provided by the E-911 center.

On average, the center received 1,571 calls each day last year and an average of 46 calls a day were put on hold. Callers hear a recording and are put on hold after six rings.

The average hold time was 9.5 seconds, with one 911 call made July 4 placed on hold for 87 seconds. There were 16 days last year in which a caller had to wait a minute or longer to speak to an operator.

In 2006, the average hold time was 8 seconds. The longest a caller had to wait was 84 seconds.

Along with the increased hold times, the number of callers who simply hang up before reaching an operator has gone up dramatically. There were 1,500 abandoned calls placed to 911 last year, compared to 888 in 2006, an increase of 69 percent.

Raymond LaBelle, executive director of the agency, said the increased hold times were the result of last year's clamp-down on state government overtime, as well as seven staff vacancies at the center, some of which have remained unfilled since April. The state budget authorizes a staff of 53.6 full-time employees; the seven vacancies are due to retirements or other departures.

LaBelle had warned that staff shortages were contributing to deteriorating response times in a seven-page report submitted to the state budget office in September. LaBelle wrote in response to Governor Carcieri's preliminary budget proposal for the 2008-2009 fiscal year that starts July 1.

"This reduced budget, if enacted, will not give us the ability to properly operate the agency," LaBelle wrote.

Since 1988, Rhode Islanders have paid millions of dollars each year in fees on their telephone bills to support E-911's operations. The monthly surcharge is \$1 per line for traditional phone lines and \$1.26 for each wireless line, each month. The fees are collected by the telephone companies and remitted to the state. The amounts are set by state law.

The E-911 center's funding comes entirely from an annual appropriation from the state's general fund, with the exception of \$500,000 that came from the federal government in fiscal year 2007 to pay for aerial images of the state to better help operators locate callers.

The state has been tapping the 911 fees and diverting them to other uses since at least 1999, The Providence Journal has reported.

Last year, the total amount of those surcharges exceeded the annual budget of the E-911 center by a factor of three.

Of the \$18.2 million collected in E-911 surcharges in fiscal year 2007, only \$5.8 million went to E-911. The remainder went into the state's general treasury and was allocated for other spending.

The agency last added staff in fiscal year 2005 when three operators were hired, according to LaBelle. But with the increased call volume, as well as the retirements, the agency has been short-staffed, he said, and was not allowed by budget officials to hire replacements. Instead, he used overtime shifts to fill in the gaps, sometimes exceeding the center's overtime budget, he said.

That practice was curtailed in March 2007 when state agencies, including E-911, were told by the state budget office that they had to operate within their overtime budgets, LaBelle said.

In his September report, LaBelle said the agency did cut back on overtime to follow that directive. But doing so "caused an alarming increase in the number and time [in seconds] that 911 calls are not answered within our prescribed time line [of no more than three rings] and are directed into a queue."

In the five months that followed that overtime clamp-down, the number of E-911 calls placed on hold rose over 40 percent, compared with the same period in 2006, LaBelle said.

The maximum time a call was placed on hold went from 43 seconds in April 2006 to 87 seconds in July 2007.

The number of people who abandoned their call before reaching an operator rose as well. There were 298 abandoned calls in August 2007, a nearly 200-percent increase over the 102 abandoned calls in August 2006. (The agency said it did not know how many callers placed a second call or simply gave up trying to reach 911.) Since that September report, four E-911 employees have retired or left.

LaBelle said that the governor's office responded to his report, and his agency was given authorization to spend an additional \$3,000 a month on overtime.

This month, the agency has been told by the state budget office that it may fill four positions, according to Neal, the governor's spokesman.

The governor's budget proposal for the year that starts July 1 allocates \$4.9 million for E-911 in fiscal year 2009, which is about \$300,000 less than the agency's budget for the year that ends June 30.

One reason the budgeted amount will decrease, LaBelle said, was because the state will have completed a project to correlate the addresses of all buildings in the state with latitude and longitude coordinates. That \$4 million project was begun in 2001, and is scheduled to be completed this spring, LaBelle said.

Even with a smaller budget, Neal said, "It is expected that this budget will, at minimum, stabilize the services [E-911] provides, if not also improve the queue and call-waiting times."

LaBelle said that he is still counting on filling the three additional vacancies this coming fiscal year to bring staffing back up to full strength and decrease hold times.

"We want to keep that time as little as possible," LaBelle said. "We want to answer that caller's concerns and respond as fast as humanly possible because in our business, seconds count. In public safety, every second is important."

According to the governor's spokesman, it's not clear whether the E-911 center will fill the other three vacancies.

"No decision has been made on those positions," Neal said.

"This is a process that will have to be monitored closely as we fill the [first four] positions to determine the affect of the new employees."