

OAKLAND 9-1-1 COMMUNICATIONS CENTER – A CENTER IN CRISIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

In an emergency, we expect our 9-1-1 call to be answered quickly and to speak with a person. Unfortunately, that is often not the case in the City of Oakland.

Last year, the grand jury received a complaint about the Oakland Police Emergency Communications Center’s inability to process 9-1-1 calls within the state mandated times. The complaint alleged that many emergency callers in Oakland had to wait for minutes, wading through unnecessary recordings, in hopes of reaching immediate assistance.

In 2019, nearly 40% of Oakland’s 9-1-1 callers could not get through to operators within the state standard time of 15 seconds. More concerning, over 18,000 callers had to wait over two minutes for their call to be answered. This long wait time contributed to 13,800 emergency callers abandoning the line before their calls were answered.

The communications center is the first point of contact for the public to access emergency services. The failure to answer 9-1-1 calls promptly is not acceptable. Steps to improve the center’s response time must be taken immediately.

Both the Oakland Police Department (OPD) and the Oakland City Council are aware of the issues with the communications center. In 2017, the Oakland City Auditor issued a report critical of the communications center’s failure to answer calls within state and federal standards due, in large part, to understaffing. The auditor’s 2017 report made specific recommendations for improvement. The City of Oakland committed to address the issues.

In 2018, OPD hired a consultant to assess and study the communications center’s operations. The consultant issued a report in February 2019 that determined the center is understaffed and needs to hire an additional 16 dispatchers and eight supervisors to manage the call volume, provide appropriate supervision, and meet training needs for the communications center.

This year’s grand jury sought to determine what steps Oakland has taken to address deficiencies in its 9-1-1 system and whether these steps worked. Unfortunately, the grand jury learned that Oakland’s 9-1-1 problems have only intensified.

The grand jury’s conclusions are:

- Current staffing levels simply cannot competently handle the 200,000 emergency calls the center receives each year. OPD’s consultant exposed this critical understaffing 18 months ago.
- Staff is hindered by the reliance on outdated technology installed 18 years ago. Funding for a Computer Aided Dispatch system was approved three years ago but has yet to be installed.
- The communications center does not staff enough dispatchers during peak periods from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- Oakland’s hiring process is slow, tedious, and hiring policies are antiquated.
- The communications center continues to be underfunded.

The grand jury is disappointed that these issues continue to threaten the safety of the citizens of Oakland. City leaders must take immediate actions to rectify this negligent oversight of public safety service and operations.

BACKGROUND

In 2019, nearly 40% of Oakland’s 9-1-1 callers could not get through to operators within the state standard time of 15 seconds. More concerning, over 18,000 callers had to wait over two minutes for their call to be answered.

In April 2019, an off-duty Oakland police officer was walking to his car, two blocks from the police station, when he was stabbed in the neck by an unknown assailant. After disarming his attacker, the profusely bleeding officer used his cell phone to call 9-1-1. After repeated calls failed to connect, he called another police officer working in a county building a mile away. Rather than call 9-1-1 from his cell phone, that officer chose to run to his car to radio OPD’s emergency communications center for help. At the same time, a garbage truck operator drove past the crime scene and heard the victim officer calling for help. The truck operator used his phone to call 9-1-1 but could not get through. He ultimately called his employer who in turn called and got through to 9-1-1. By the time other officers

arrived at the scene, they feared the injured officer might not survive if they waited for an ambulance. They placed the injured officer in the back of a patrol car and sped off to a trauma

center where life-saving aid was rendered. The 9-1-1 system’s multiple failures in this situation almost cost the stricken officer his life.

The ability of a city’s emergency communications center to quickly answer 9-1-1 and other emergency calls can be the difference between life and death. A person’s survivability in a cardiac arrest is the highest when emergency medical care is started within four minutes. Structure fires grow exponentially during the first few minutes after ignition. Stopping crimes in progress, especially crimes of violence, require that law enforcement be notified immediately to increase the chances of intervening and apprehending the suspect.

State Emergency Call Answering Requirements

The Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, Public Safety Communications, and California 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Branch (CA 9-1-1 Branch) have established mandatory standards for emergency communication systems to ensure fast, reliable, and cost-effective telephone access to emergency services for any 9-1-1 caller in California. The mandatory standard for emergency call answering, as stated in the 2016 State of California 9-1-1 Operations Manual (CalOES), is that all Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) answer 95% of all incoming 9-1-1 calls within fifteen seconds.¹ The CA 9-1-1 Branch has auditing authority and monitors the handling of 9-1-1 calls by emergency communications systems to ensure all systems comply with the standards.

*The California Office of
Emergency Services 9-1-1
call answering policy
states 95% of all calls
should be answered
within 15 seconds.*

National Call Answering Standard

The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) is the only professional organization solely focused on 9-1-1 dispatch policies, technology, operations, and education issues across North America. NENA promotes the implementation and awareness of 9-1-1 and international three-digit emergency communications systems. NENA publishes best practices and standards for the management, operation, and training of 9-1-1 dispatch centers and dispatchers. The NENA standard states that 90% of all 9-1-1 calls shall be answered within 10 seconds during the hour with the greatest call volume and 95% of all calls should be answered within 20 seconds.

Oakland Police Emergency Communications Center

The Oakland Police Emergency Communications Center, located in East Oakland, employs dispatchers to answer emergency, non-emergency, and some administrative calls for the Oakland Police Department. The communications center has 20 dispatch consoles for handling

¹ <https://www.caloes.ca.gov/PublicSafetyCommunicationsSite/Documents/002-CHAPTERIStandards.pdf>

calls as well as large screens scattered throughout the facility that allow the dispatchers to monitor relevant news and active calls for service.

2017 City Auditor’s Report

The Oakland City Auditor is responsible for ensuring that city government operates with transparency and is accountable to city residents by conducting performance audits of local government services. When auditing city operations, the auditor works independently to identify areas within Oakland’s operations most vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. The audit reports are filed with the city administrator, the mayor, and the city council.

In 2017, the communications center was audited to determine the efficiency and timeliness of answering emergency calls. The grand jury examined the city auditor’s findings related to call answering performance, staffing, and recruitment practices. The auditor’s findings included:

- The communications center fails to meet state and national standards.
- The communications center consistently has unfilled positions and staffing is not aligned with the call volume.
- The continual reliance on overtime exacerbates turnover.
- The city’s hiring and onboarding process is protracted.

Federal Engineering Inc. Consultant Report

In February 2019, Federal Engineering, Inc., under contract to the Oakland Police Department, completed an assessment and analysis of the communications center’s operations. The consultant performed a comprehensive analysis on the communications center’s staffing ratios, radio procedures, work processes, and call volume. It provided 15 recommendations to improve the communications center’s performance.

Of particular interest to the grand jury were the consultant’s recommendations related to staffing and call answering procedures, as follows:

- That OPD find an alternative elsewhere in the department for the time-consuming, and yet understandably important, officer complaint intake task.
- That OPD consider moving maintenance responsibility for the Pursuit Log and Use of Force Log elsewhere to a more appropriate area within OPD.

- That OPD add a communications center technology manager with specific knowledge and expertise in public safety technology and operations to effectively oversee critical PSAP systems and ensure the technology needs of the communications center are met.
- That dedicated supervision be increased to 15 communications supervisors, and that the communications center’s supervisors not be routinely tasked with any call-taking or dispatching responsibilities.
- That OPD add a dedicated training manager position to effectively and consistently manage the communications center’s training program and oversee the delivery of high-quality training for new hire and on-the-job training for communications division personnel.
- That the minimum number of required active (staffed) positions needed to handle the projected workload is 21 during peak time hours, consisting of three supervisors, and 18 dispatchers.

INVESTIGATION

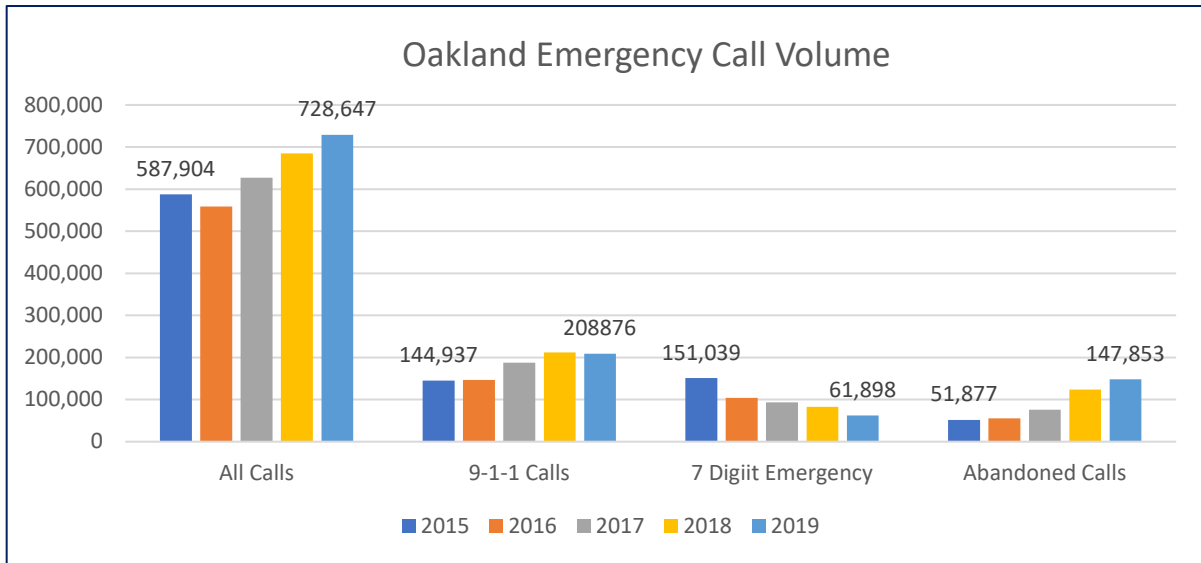
The grand jury examined the communications center’s operations in response to a public complaint it received regarding long delays with answering emergency calls. During the investigation, the grand jury examined state requirements and national standards for emergency call response, the 2017 Oakland City Auditor’s report on the 9-1-1 communications center, the 2019 Federal Engineering, Inc. Communications Center Report, 2017-2020 Oakland budget reports, city staff reports, city council agendas and minutes, and emergency and non-emergency call data. The grand jury also spoke with emergency communications experts, public officials within the region, as well as managers in Oakland’s communications center, and the city’s human resources and information technology departments. The grand jury investigation focused on call answering performance, communications center staffing, and technology issues.

The total number of calls to the emergency communication center, including emergency, non-emergency and administrative calls, increased by 24% over the past five years, from 587,904 calls in 2015 to 728,647 calls in 2019.

The grand jury examined 2019 performance data provided by Oakland and compared it to the data from the 2017 city auditor’s report and 2019 Federal Engineering, Inc. consultant’s report.

Call Volume

The total number of calls to the emergency communication center, including emergency, non-emergency and administrative calls, increased by 24% over the past five years, from 587,904 calls in 2015 to 728,647 calls in 2019 (see the following chart).



In 2019, the estimated population of Oakland was 432,879.² With 74 budgeted dispatchers, there was one dispatcher for every 5,850 residents, and for every 9,846 calls. As of January 2020, operating with only 59 of the authorized 74 dispatchers, the communications center has one dispatcher for every 12,349 calls.

In 2019 there were over 1,100 calls each month that took over two minutes to answer. The grand jury heard testimony that these occurred during peak call volume periods.

9-1-1 and 7-Digit Emergency Calls

The number of emergency calls to 9-1-1 jumped 44% over the past five years, from 144,937 calls in 2015, to 208,876 calls in 2019. This significant increase in call volume was due, in part, to Oakland receiving most of the mobile 9-1-1 calls that in the past were covered by the California Highway Patrol (CHP). As of January of 2020, the CHP was still receiving Oakland’s mobile 9-1-1 calls from Metro by T-Mobile subscribers. The number of calls to Oakland’s seven-digit emergency number decreased between 2015 (151,039) and 2019 (61,898) reflecting a higher number of calls to 9-1-1.

² According to the California Department of Finance

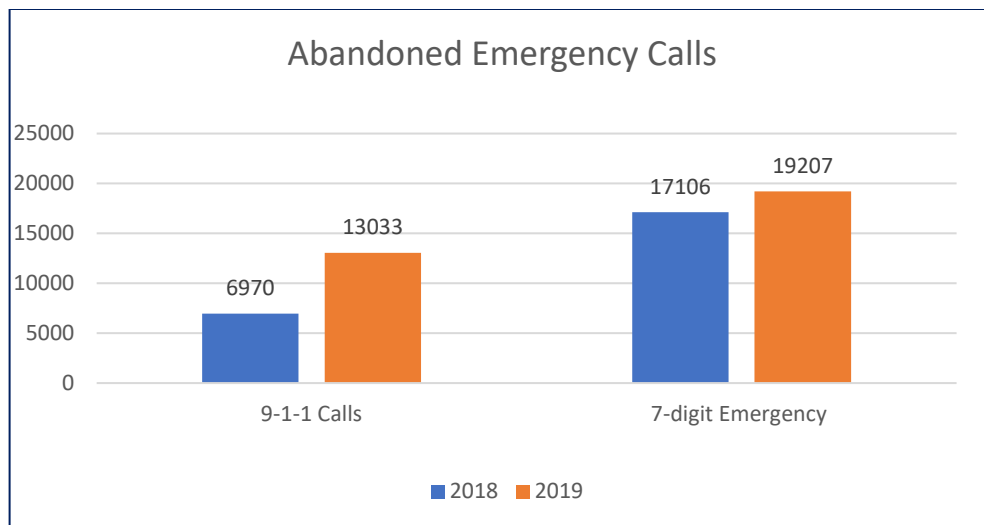
Oakland does not have an internal policy on how quickly dispatchers must answer 9-1-1 calls. In contrast, the Fremont Police Communications Center has a three-ring policy and the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office has a seven-ring policy. The average 9-1-1 call-answering time has not changed from 2015 (27.2 seconds) to 2019 (27.5 seconds) and remains longer than the state standard of 15 seconds. Performance standards data shows 37% of 9-1-1 calls were answered within 15 seconds in 2015 and 55% of 9-1-1 calls were answered within 15 seconds in 2019. While there was some improvement since 2015, the communication center’s call-answering time remains far below the federal and state standards of 95% of calls answered within 15 seconds.

In 2019, there were over 1,100 calls monthly that took over two minutes to answer. The grand jury heard testimony that these occurred during peak call volume periods.

Abandoned Emergency Calls

When no dispatcher is available to answer a 9-1-1 call, the caller hears a message saying, “all operators are busy, please stay on the line,” followed by a message in Spanish to press 9 for an operator, and finally a loud tone alerting TTD/TTY users to transmit their message. These pre-recorded messages simply cover up the fact that the center is understaffed and dispatchers are not available to answer emergency calls. The recordings related to Spanish and TTD/TTY calls are unnecessary due to technology improvements. Traditional TTD/TTY callers who previously used that system prefer to use other technology to communicate with emergency dispatchers. Other dispatch centers in the region do not use recordings to answer 9-1-1 calls.

Due to delays in answering 9-1-1 calls, callers may hang-up, abandoning the call. In 2019, the communications center had 13,033 abandoned 9-1-1 calls and 19,207 abandoned seven-digit emergency calls (see chart, below). Abandoned calls require additional work for dispatchers, who must call each number back to determine if there is an emergency.



The data on abandoned calls also show that:

- The number of abandoned emergency and non-emergency calls increased by 185% between 2015 (51,887) and 2019 (147,853).
- The number of abandoned 9-1-1 calls between 2018 and 2019 nearly doubled, from 6,970 to 13,033 calls.
- The number of abandoned seven-digit calls also increased between 2018 and 2019 from 17,106 calls to 19,207 calls.

Non-Emergency Calls

The communications center’s dispatchers also are required to answer a 24-hour complaint line about police department services. In 2019, the center fielded 24,107 complaint-line calls.

In addition, communications supervisors spend an inordinate amount of hours processing public records requests. This often prevents supervisors from providing necessary training and oversight of dispatchers. It also contributes to longer times to answer emergency calls.

The grand jury learned that understaffing issues have persisted for years. As a result, the communications center required dispatchers to work up to 80 overtime hours a month. In 2018, the communications center’s overtime costs reached \$2 million.

Budget and Staffing

The Oakland Police Department’s FY2019–20 total operating budget was \$290 million. OPD allocated approximately \$15.7 million (5.4% of its budget) to fund the communications center. The communication center’s FY2019–20 budget authorized a total of 74 dispatchers, one communications manager, and seven supervisors.

As of January 2020, there were only 59 dispatchers staffing the communication center. The city administrator authorized OPD to hire an additional 10 unbudgeted positions so the communications center, if fully staffed, would have 84 dispatchers.³ Despite the increase in call

volume and expansion of authorized positions, the communications center continues to be understaffed. As of March 2020, it had eleven vacancies, six personnel in training that could not yet function as a dispatcher or operator, and five personnel on extended leave.

The grand jury learned that understaffing issues have persisted for years. As a result, the communications center required dispatchers to work up to 80 overtime hours a month. In 2018, the communications center’s overtime costs reached \$2 million. The high dependency on

overtime leads to burnout, fatigue, and performance issues of dispatchers. The grand jury also heard testimony that these overtime mandates likely contribute to disproportionately high sick leave and disability claims.

Understaffing is the reason the communications center is forced to depend on outside support to answer some mobile 9-1-1 calls. While the communications center now answers mobile calls from AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile phone subscribers, it still must rely on CHP to answer mobile 9-1-1 calls from Metro by T-Mobile. The communications center’s managers believe the high number of Metro by T-Mobile subscribers in Oakland would further overwhelm the available dispatchers.

Recruitment Process and Hiring Barriers

The city’s cumbersome hiring policies and civil service rules are formidable to navigate and pose unnecessary roadblocks to filling open positions.

The grand jury learned that it takes a minimum of eight months to hire a 9-1-1 dispatcher in Oakland. The 32-step city hiring process requires, among other things, the police and human resource departments to complete a requisition for approval to hire, conduct a job analysis, establish an application period, review applications for minimum qualifications, set up pre-employment testing, establish an eligibility list, conduct multiple panel interviews, notify candidates of conditional job offers, conduct psychological, polygraph, and drug testing, background checks, and job offer processing.

The training of a dispatcher takes 35–38 weeks. The training includes a three-week academy, eighteen weeks of call-taking procedures, six weeks of radio procedures, and ten weeks of training on primary police channels. It was reported that the failure rate of the entry-level candidates is approximately 50%.

The City of Oakland Human Resources Department (HRD) supports OPD with the recruitment, testing, and establishment of the police dispatcher eligibility list. The city’s 32-step hiring process relies, in part, on civil service

The city’s cumbersome hiring policies and civil service rules are formidable to navigate and pose unnecessary roadblocks to filling open positions. Many candidates withdraw or find other jobs long before they are interviewed. During the most recent recruitment process in June 2018, entry level testing did not even take place until four months into the process. By then, 40% of candidates had withdrawn.

rules to establish the job specifications, application process, and scoring of applicant test results. The HRD has one senior human resources analyst assigned to the police department to support all of the police department's recruitment and promotional examination processes.

For a given hiring event, the pool of applicants who meet the minimum qualifications for police dispatcher are invited to take a written dispatcher selection test. The test measures cognitive abilities and performance of a candidate, and identifies if a candidate has the capabilities to be a dispatcher. The test does not require any special dispatcher training or knowledge. Once the testing is completed, the HRD establishes a pass point based on the distribution of test scores and those candidates who have a passing score of 70 or higher are placed on an eligibility list.

Many candidates withdraw or find other jobs long before they are interviewed. During the most recent recruitment process in June 2018, entry level testing did not even take place until four months into the process. By then, 40% of candidates had withdrawn.

Amending the city's antiquated civil service rules to meet the needs of today's technology and labor force necessitates political courage from labor, management, and elected officials. There have been many failed efforts in the past to update Oakland's civil service hiring rules.

Other policies can be changed internally. For example, Oakland has traditionally conducted in-house testing for the dispatcher position on a single date. The grand jury learned that many applicants are disqualified because they cannot appear on the test date chosen by the city. Other jurisdictions have avoided this problem by accepting test results from outside agencies or regional testing centers. These outside testing centers provide many test date options, and potential applicants that use them can provide their test scores shortly after they apply avoiding long delays waiting to take the city's version of the test. While the Oakland's human resources department indicated it is open to using tests from outside agencies or regional testing centers, they contend further research is needed before change is adopted.

The human resources department's own staffing issues provide additional obstacles for the communications center's hiring. New job classifications (newly created positions) can take two years to process through the civil service commission. Amending job descriptions can take well over six months and required going through the meet-and-confer process with labor signoff as well as civil service commission approval. As a result of the HRD workload, HRD asks city departments to prioritize recruitments and job classification changes. The police department has ranked dispatcher recruitment ninth in order of priority behind other police position recruitments. This is, in part, because labor agreements require that promotional exams take priority causing the communications center to wait in line.

Technology

Telephone System

The communications center upgraded its phone system in 2019 to better manage incoming emergency calls and track call data. The previous phone system was reported to have frequent technical issues resulting in dropped calls.

Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) System

The CAD system is a specialized software and records management system used by dispatchers to track and dispatch emergency calls as well as to send information to the responding police units. The communication center's current computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system has been in place since 2002 and is outdated and inefficient at data and report generation.

In July 2017, the city council authorized \$12.8 million dollars to install a new 9-1-1 public safety IT system including next-generation CAD and court-mandated reporting systems. A vendor contract to install the new CAD system was finalized in October 2018 but has been delayed since April 2019. The additional delays with the configuration of the CAD system are expected to push project completion well into 2021. The delays have been caused in part by the communications center not having a dedicated team to coordinate with the vendor building the CAD system and help move the project forward. The system configuration requires input from the dispatchers and first responders. The dispatchers assigned to the project team are frequently not available because they are needed to staff the communications center. Additional training will be required of the dispatchers prior to the implementation of the new CAD and technology systems, which will impact staffing levels.

The communications center plans to begin receiving text-to-9-1-1 calls in 2020. Callers will be able to send text messages requesting help when the caller needs to be discrete, for instance, in an active shooting scenario or when the caller is hearing impaired.

CONCLUSION

The City of Oakland Emergency Communication Center does not meet the national or state standards to answer emergency calls. As a result, each year thousands of 9-1-1 callers abandon their attempts to reach out for help from first responders. Even more callers wait for over two minutes before being connected to a live 9-1-1 operator. Simply put, Oakland's underfunded and understaffed 9-1-1 communications center cannot manage the volume of emergency and non-emergency calls it receives, placing the public's safety at risk.

While the grand jury acknowledges that Oakland faces an on-going financial crisis now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the city's failure to address staffing shortages within the communications center is inexcusable. The city was advised twice in recent years of these shortfalls in separate independent reports. The 2017 city auditor's report and a city-sponsored consultant's report in 2019 both concluded that the communications center was woefully understaffed. They both made comprehensive recommendations, many of which the city has ignored. The grand jury is disappointed that the city has done so little to address these persistent problems. City leaders must take immediate actions to rectify this negligent oversight of public safety service and operations.

FINDINGS

Finding 20-16:

Oakland's communications center fails to meet the CalOES Standard of answering 95% of all emergency calls within 15 seconds, jeopardizing public safety.

Finding-20-17:

The communications center continues to operate under-staffed and has not conducted a dispatcher recruitment since June 2018, placing an unacceptable burden on dispatchers working excessive overtime hours.

Finding 20-18:

The amount of overtime paid to dispatchers in 2019 reached \$2 million. This amount of money could be used to fund up to 15 permanent dispatcher positions.

Finding 20-19:

Delays in completing the new CAD project are due, in part, to lack of available staff dedicated to provide project management and comprehensive configuration input to the vendor.

Finding 20-20:

The responsibilities to manage Public Records Acts requests and staff the Oakland Police Department's complaint line creates an unacceptable burden on an understaffed communications center and diverts staff away from answering emergency calls.

Finding 20-21:

The communications center's failure to establish a call-answering policy or standard contributes to a lack of accountability to the Oakland community.

Finding 20-22:

The communications center’s recorded messages that callers are greeted with when call takers are busy unnecessarily increases the number of abandoned calls.

Finding 20-23:

Hiring of communications center staff has lagged because of an overly complicated hiring process.

Finding 20-24:

The recruitment of dispatchers is set as an unacceptably low priority by OPD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 20-14:

The City of Oakland must establish a call-answering policy for the communications center to meet the CalOES requirement to answer 95% of all incoming 9-1-1 calls within fifteen seconds.

Recommendation 20-15:

The City of Oakland must conduct dispatcher recruitments on a continuous basis until dispatcher vacancies are filled.

Recommendation 20-16:

The City of Oakland must modify human resource and department policies to accept regional or allied agency dispatch testing scores to meet pre-employment requirements.

Recommendation 20-17:

The City of Oakland must increase the authorized and budgeted number of dispatchers and supervisors to meet state call answering standards as recommended by the city’s consultant.

Recommendation 20-18:

The City of Oakland must publish on the city’s website quarterly communications center performance data relating to emergency call processing.

Recommendation 20-19:

The Oakland Police Department must assign the responsibilities of managing Public Records Act requests and staffing of the OPD complaint line to another division as recommended by the 2019 consultant’s report.

Recommendation 20-20:

The Oakland Police Department must assign a senior dispatcher or supervisor full-time to work on the CAD configuration until the CAD system is operational.

Recommendation 20-21:

The Oakland Police Department must change the outgoing recorded message to one that informs 9-1-1 callers that all available dispatchers are busy answering other 9-1-1 calls, when callers are on hold.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines, no later than 90 days from the public release date of this report.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree Wholly, with an explanation
- Disagree Partially, with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one the following:

- Has been implemented, with a brief summary of the implementation actions
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a completion date that is not more than 6 months after the issuance of this report
- Will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation

RESPONSES REQUIRED

City Council, City of Oakland

Findings 20-16 through 20-24

Recommendations 20-14 through 20-21

Mayor, City of Oakland

Findings 20-16 through 20-24

Recommendation 20-14 through 20-21