

911 Operations



Objective

Are emergency calls being dispatched in an effective and efficient way to meet community needs?

Background

The process for handling 911 calls involves answering the call, collecting relevant information, and sending necessary resources to the scene.

Austin receives about one million 911 calls and texts every year. Those calls are answered by Austin Police Department (APD) staff who determine what resources are needed. The call may then be transferred to the Austin Fire Department (AFD), Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) or other public safety department staff.

Austin’s dispatch process happens at the Combined Transportation and Emergency Communications Center (CTECC). This center is intended to improve emergency response by allowing APD, AFD, EMS, and other public safety agencies to coordinate in a centralized location.

What We Found

Austin’s public safety departments met recommended goals for answering calls but missed other dispatch performance goals.

All three departments reported meeting a recommended goal for answering calls quickly. While EMS met most of their other goals related to timely dispatch operations, APD and AFD missed most of their goals. Many of the missed goals related to the time it took for units to arrive at the scene and involve factors outside of the direct control of communications staff.

As shown in the table below, performance measures for the three departments were not aligned. This makes it difficult to compare performance.

Performance goal	Response time to process EMERGENCY calls	AFD call-taking time for calls in AFD service area	% of EMS Communication Center calls processed within 90 seconds
Measurement	Minutes	Seconds	Percentage

Lastly, timeliness measure reported by AFD and EMS did not reflect the actual experience of someone who called 911 because those departments did not include the time it took for APD to answer the call and transfer it to them.

Departments have some practices to ensure 911 operations are effective, but could improve 911 operations with better public education efforts.

All three departments trained staff and reviewed calls to ensure staff handled the call well. Each department also had efforts to educate the public about their department, but these efforts were limited regarding 911 operations. For example, some social media posts stated that people should call 911 for emergencies and 311 for non-emergencies, but did not define what qualified as an emergency. Each year almost 3,500 people called 311 in an emergency situation and had to be transferred to 911. This limits the departments’ ability to quickly respond to those emergencies.

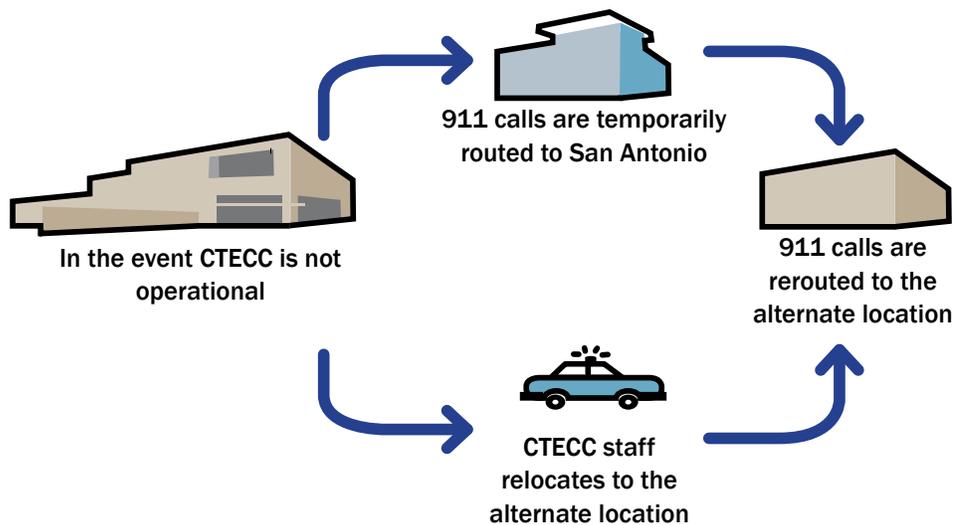
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What We Found, continued

Although there are some actions to prevent disruptions of 911 operations, several issues with plans and practices could result in serious health and safety consequences if public safety dispatch operations were disrupted.

Austin's 911 system has several efforts in place to prevent disruptions of 911 operations. This includes data backups, an alternate location for 911 operations, and an agreement with San Antonio to handle Austin's 911 calls if needed. The graphic below demonstrates the plan to maintain 911 operations in the event of a disruption. There are several issues with these protections though, which may limit the City's ability to effectively respond to a disruption. Some of the issues we noted were:

- the alternate location for 911 operations cannot support current 911 staffing levels;
- each department has separate plans for how to respond to a disruption and these plans are not aligned; and
- there is limited training for staff on how to respond to a disruption.



SOURCE: OCA Analysis, September 2019

What We Recommend

The Assistant City Manager responsible for public safety should ensure the three public safety departments work together to:

- standardize current performance measures;
- develop a new performance measure for timeliness that are consistent across departments and reflect the user experience;
- develop a public education plan working with 311, as well as other stakeholders, to better educate the public about what constitutes an emergency, especially focusing on communities with limited English proficiency and people with disabilities; and
- improve their preparedness for disruptions by enhancing training of staff for disruptions, preparing reports that document all issues that arise during training and use these reports to improve preparedness, and updating comprehensive plans for handling disruptions.