

Boulder, Colo., Plans Fire Dispatch Hardware and Software Upgrades

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(TNS) - Boulder Fire-Rescue is upgrading its dispatch system with new hardware and software that it hopes will shave off as many as 30 seconds from its response times, and an official with the department said it's a much needed change.

"Currently, we have what I would call a legacy system," Deputy Fire Chief Holger Durre said.

He said that some of the hardware the department uses dates to the 1970s. Anyone who owns a police scanner knows the sound of "tones" that fire departments use to call out specific trucks and engines — a similar sound to a dial tone on a phone — followed by a dispatcher calling out the specific resources.

"You can't get replacement parts reliably anymore," Durre said, referring to some of the hardware the department uses.

He said new software will likely be up and running in August. It costs about \$500,000 and intuitively picks up the initial information typed in by a dispatcher and calls out the necessary resources.

This, Durre said, allows the dispatcher to stay on the phone with the caller to gather additional information instead of having to put the caller — who may be frantic — on hold. He said the new software will help cut off dispatch times, which in an emergency situation such as a house fire can mean the difference between life and death.

"The dispatcher can continue taking information, and we aren't wasting time," he said.

He added that a computer-generated voice will come over the radio, and the new system does away with tones. The sounds — as well as the lights that come on at the station — will now come on more gradually, which is actually healthier for the firefighters.

"It's not pseudoscience," Durre said. "Loud sirens, over time — it can have an impact. This is an opportunity for us to help with that as well."

Ted McEldowney, Boulder's police and fire communications manager, said that dispatchers have yet to complete the training on the new system, but he is excited about it possibly reducing response time.

He added that the new system will be more efficient, which is important because dispatch struggles with staffing shortages.

"We've been gathering data for the past couple of years to see what having this new system will do for our response times," McEldowney said. "I think it will be great for citizens."

Boulder County Sheriff's Office Division Chief Heidi Prentup said that the county won't be following suit, because it dispatches a variety of professional and volunteer fire departments — 24 in total — so it would not be practical.

"Boulder is a professional department," she said. "They are in their station and that is how the software works. For us, it is a little more complicated."

Durre said that with the increase in population in Boulder County, it's necessary for the department to upgrade the system. He added that other departments along the Front Range have already adapted similar systems.

"For what it buys you, it's cheap," he said. "We have a system that's going to meet our needs into the future."

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