

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

PUBLIC SAFETY & TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE REPORT

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2009

Present: Ald. Linsky (Chair), Ciccone, Harney, Coletti, Danberg and Vance

Absent: Ald. Swiston and Fischman

Also Present: Ald. Hess-Mahan and Lennon

City Staff: Chief Joseph LaCroix (Newton Fire Department), Asst. Chief Bruce Proia (Newton Fire Department), Sandy Pooler (Chief Admin. Officer), Tom Lopez (Newton Firefighters Union President), Donald Gentile (Firefighter and EMS Coordinator Newton Fire Department)

#108-09 ALD. HESS-MAHAN, ALBRIGHT, CICCONE, DANBERG, FISCHMAN, FREEDMAN, LAPPIN AND LINSKY requesting a discussion of the possibility of using a “non-transporting ambulance” equipped with safety equipment for routine emergency calls in lieu of a fire truck in order to save costs. [04/14/09 @ 1:56 PM]

ACTION: **HELD 6-0 (Ald. Swiston and Fischman not present and voting)**

NOTE: Committee Chair Linsky indicated this item was placed on the agenda for the purpose of beginning an initial discussion on the ways to explore potential alternatives concerning emergency responses in the City.

Ald. Hess-Mahan, Chief LaCroix (Newton Fire Department), Tom Lopez (Newton Firefighters Union President) and Donald Gentile (Firefighter and EMS Coordinator Newton Fire Department) joined the Committee for discussion.

Ald. Hess-Mahan informed Committee members he docketed this item to understand why firefighters respond to each medical emergency in the City. He referred to a memo on the Enhanced Medical Dispatch System Protocol, attached to this report. This system addresses the possibility of reducing the number of calls responded to by the fire department.

Ald. Hess-Mahan stated Amesbury, MA has been able to save significant amounts of money on gasoline, maintenance and overall costs by using an SUV to attend to calls acting as a “non-transporting ambulance”. He indicated the State allows Amesbury and other communities to use SUV’s for emergency calls in lieu of a fire truck. He stated the savings alone on gasoline is significant. The cost for gasoline has dropped from \$1.44 per call to \$.18 cents per call when using an SUV. Other savings include the lower cost of maintaining an SUV rather than a fire truck. Ald. Hess-Mahan asked if Newton could re-deploy firefighters to other stations in the City in order to reduce costs on gasoline and maintenance. He would like to see this issue pursued to in order to save the City of Newton money and still be able to maintain the same quality they are known to deliver. Ald. Hess-Mahan asked Chief LaCroix has had the opportunity to speak with the Amesbury Fire Department regarding whether the “non

transporting ambulance” is working for them and would it be appropriate in Newton. He also indicated he would research the number of calls the fire department responds to for medical emergencies and will complete a break down on each run including medical calls versus a fire call. He stated the functionality of a fire crew or fire department is that all firefighters work as a team. Every firefighter has an assigned function when responding to a call and all firefighters are trained in life saving techniques. By state law, the fire department is required to be the first responder to every medical call.

Chief LaCroix stated when only one person responds to a medical emergency versus a team of Firefighters, medical procedures may not be covered. When a fire truck responds to an emergency they are also capable of leaving the scene and responding to a fire without having to return to the station for a truck which would create a longer response time.

Chief LaCroix expressed his concerns regarding the population in Amesbury versus Newton, how many calls does Amesbury complete versus Newton. Newton firefighters attend approximately 8,000 calls per year. This is like comparing apples to oranges and Chief LaCroix stated he is not in favor of Newton using SUV's to respond to emergency calls.

Ald. Hess-Mahan indicated it would be ideal for each fire station in Newton to have an SUV. Assistant Chief Proia indicated he does not believe Newton could continue to maintain the same quality of service stating that Amesbury has two fire stations, Newton has six. Newton would need nine SUV's in order to attend to medical calls.

Tom Lopez (Newton Firefighters Union President) stated he has spoken with the Amesbury Union President and learned that Amesbury attends approximately 2,000 calls per year, running two fulltime ambulances by both part and full time on call employees providing approximately 90% of their EMS calls. The SUV used is their third string and most of the time the SUV goes out when determined by the dispatcher, what is the nature of the call, or what equipment is necessary. Mr. Lopez stated Amesbury has approximately an \$800,000 income that stays within the department to help meet capital needs, not operational needs. Newton cannot meet the needs by doing this. He asked instead please support the City of Newton to take the EMS services in-house.

Donald Gentile (Firefighter and EMS Coordinator, Newton Fire Department) stated he has been involved with EMS since 1978. Newton has a high collection rate. Newton responds to approximately 4,000 calls per year, AMR responds to approximately 6,000 calls per year. In 2007 Newton billed approximately 3.2 million dollars with a collection rate of approximately 93%.

Ald. Danberg stated in the past EMS in-house has been considered by the City. In other Massachusetts communities it has worked well. She asked what towns and communities have had problems and how they were solved when using in-house EMS services. Ald. Danberg asked Mr. Lopez or Mr. Gentile to provide the data they have collected in other communities that have used EMS in-house for the Committee's review.

Ald. Ciccone made the motion to hold this item and the Committee voted in favor by a vote of 6-0.

At approximately, 11:00 pm Ald. Ciccone moved for adjournment, which was approved 6-0.

Respectfully Submitted,

Stephen M. Linsky, Chairman

Enhanced Medical Dispatch

Perhaps the most important function of municipal government is to keep the public safe. Here in Newton we are rightfully proud of our nationally recognized performance in keeping our City safe. With us this afternoon are several members of our Emergency Medical Services Committee, who have dedicated many hours to ensuring the quality of one of our most critical public safety components: the dispatch center.

The men and women who answer the 17,000 annual 911 calls in Newton shoulder a tremendous responsibility. When seconds count, and mistakes can cost lives, our dispatchers consistently rise to the occasion and do the job.

Today we are here to discuss the national protocol our 911 operators have been using for the past year. This Enhanced Medical Dispatch system has been extremely successful in our dispatchers' ability to understand the nature of each emergency, and then to send the appropriate response. One of the key aspects of this protocol is that our dispatchers now only send our Advanced Life Saving apparatus for medical calls in which seconds count. We are no longer automatically sending out fire engines, with lights and sirens on, for every 911 response – even if the medical call is minor in nature. This ensures we have the apparatus at the ready should an emergency arises in which seconds count, and it also limits the public safety exposure of speeding emergency vehicles throughout the City.

Any call to 911 is stressful, and while you just want to know that help is on the way, you must be prepared to answer a series of important questions. The first questions will not be related to the medical condition, rather they will confirm your location. If the call is somehow disconnected, informing 911 operators of your whereabouts is the first piece of critical information that we can use to help you. The next few questions will address the medical condition of the patient. These questions are designed to make sure our dispatchers make the right decision about what emergency apparatus to send to your aid. They are also designed to give the medical information to our first responders, ensuring they are prepared with the proper equipment and personnel to handle the emergency.

I want to commend Captain Paul Anastasia of the Newton Police Department, and especially to our 911 emergency dispatchers for the work they do every day that saves lives. I also want to thank the members of our Emergency Medical Services Committee, who continually review our 911 operations. With us today are Dispatch Supervisor Laura McGerigle; Dr. Chuck Pozner; John Robinson of AMR; Assistant Fire Chief Bruce Proia; and Dr. Barry Tils. On behalf of all our citizens, thank you for your service. Please come up and share your thoughts with us about the enhanced medical dispatch protocols.