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MEDICAL EMERGENCIES

County rips SJFD's late responses

Some supervisors say they might consider pulling \$2.1M in funding

By Mike Rosenberg
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SAN JOSE — About every hour in San Jose, the Fire Department arrives late to a medical emergency, new data show.

For 14 straight months, the San Jose Fire Department has failed to meet a Santa Clara County standard to respond to at least 90 percent of emergencies within eight minutes. No other fire department in the county missed that mark for even one month since the targets took effect in 2011.

County officials didn't cite instances in which delay affected a medical case, and suggested rapid responses weren't needed on many calls. But some said that's no excuse and threatened to withhold funding if the city doesn't improve.

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A look at response times for cities in Santa Clara County. **PAGE A8**

Response

"We know that those mere minutes are critical in terms of the outcome and whether or not folks live or die," said county Supervisor Joe Simitian. "We've got a problem here that is very real. And to add insult to injury, we're paying for that problem."

Simitian is leading the charge as the Board of Supervisors this month considers pulling \$2.1 million in annual county funding from the San Jose Fire Department for failing to meet the standards laid out in an Emergency Medical Services contract with the county.

But city and even some county officials say that would only make the problem worse. Mayor Chuck Reed said the cuts would amount to losing a station or about a dozen firefighters at a time

when the city already can't afford to hire more crews because of rising personnel costs.

"We'd like to be better," he said. But "I don't see how anybody would expect the service to our community to get better if we have \$2 million less to work with."

From January through June of last year, San Jose met the 911 response time standard on 88 percent of emergencies, county figures show. By comparison, all other fire departments contracting with the county — from Mountain View to Gilroy — met the goal a combined average of 97 percent of the time.

The county data show San Jose fire paramedics last year were four times more likely to arrive past the eight-minute mark than other cities, and missed that target on about 6,700 emergencies over the year. About 95 percent of San Jose emer-

gency calls are for medical service and the remainder are for fires. Figures didn't indicate how late the delayed responses were.

Deputy Fire Chief Juan Diaz blamed San Jose's response-time issues on budget cuts that have led to two dozen fewer firefighters on duty each day, heavier traffic stemming from the growing economy and a rise in low-priority emergency calls as the city's population swells. Medical 911 calls have shot up 36 percent in just five years.

Diaz said the department is now sending fewer trucks to low-priority calls and centralizing training in hopes of freeing up more firefighters, among other measures aimed at speeding responses.

Michael Petrie, the county's EMS director, said not all of the 55,500 emergencies that San Jose firefighters respond to each year require rapid responses.

"Yes, in San Jose some-

FIRE RESPONSE TIMES

Rate of emergencies responded to within 8 minutes, January 2013 to June 2013

Countywide performance standard: At least 90 percent

Gilroy: 97.8 percent

Milpitas: 97 percent

Morgan Hill: 97.4 percent

Mountain View: 98.6 percent

San Jose: 88.3 percent

Santa Clara: 95.6 percent

Santa Clara County Fire: 95.6 percent

South Santa Clara County Fire: 95.5 percent

Sunnyvale: 97.1 percent

Source: Santa Clara County EMS

times it takes longer to get there than they should but that does not necessarily translate to a dangerous system or anything like that," Petrie said.

The response time performance standards are tied

to a deal in which the county pays every fire department in the region except Palo Alto to respond to emergencies first before county ambulances arrive later. Fire departments that reach at least 90 percent of patients in less than eight minutes share a pool of \$4.6 million funded by county ambulance provider Rural/Metro, but San Jose has continued to receive its share of the funds anyway.

The San Jose firefighters, locked in an ongoing labor battle with City Hall, said they had no chance to meet their response time requirements because of cutbacks made in recent years.

"City leaders continually tell residents that public safety is their top priority, but this episode clearly shows that those words are empty," union President Robert Sapien said. The eight-minute response time is an industry standard. San Jose's internal goal is to meet that mark on

80 percent of calls, not 90 percent.

County officials cited a provision in the deal that allows cities to keep getting paid if they show they are trying to improve.

"If we do not pay those funds, we run the risk of sending the entire EMS system into an abyss," said County Executive Jeff Smith.

But when Rural/Metro missed its contract requirement that calls for ambulances to arrive in the second wave of emergency responses within 12 minutes at least 90 percent of the time, it was fined \$4.7 million last year. While it's unclear whether the county supervisors will agree to withhold funds from San Jose at their Jan. 28 meeting, Simitian says the city's problem is just as bad.

"I think it would be unconscionable," Simitian said, "to continue looking the other way."

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Editorial

S.J. medical response times matter

The San Jose Fire Department needs to stop arriving late for medical emergencies. That's the message Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian is trying to send to the city, and he's right.

This isn't AAA coming to change a tire. Timely response can be a matter of life and death. It should be a high priority for public safety, but it is not as high a priority in San Jose. And people won't be aware of that until they suddenly need help in the throes of a heart attack or stroke.

The city's response time for emergencies needs to be part of budget discussions this spring and on the debate agendas in the mayor and city council races. People need to understand what's at stake.

The county pays fire departments to be the first responders to medical emergencies, which are a county responsibility. Simitian discovered that San Jose was not meeting the terms of the five-year contract it signed in 2011 stipulating the nationally-accepted standard of reaching at least 90 percent of emergencies within eight minutes.

Every other fire department in the county meets the standard, several at a rate of 95 percent or more. But San Jose has not met it for 14 months and may never have met it, officials admit, having discovered in 2012 that past record keeping had been faulty.

On top of that, following a round of budget cuts, the department reset its goal

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at just 80 percent of arrivals within eight minutes.

Late arrivals by county standards average one per hour. There is no documentation that they have cost lives, but it's a roll of the dice.

The county contracts separately with Rural Metro to provide ambulance service when it's needed in addition to firefighter-paramedics. It holds the ambulance company to the same national standard, and failure to meet it several times last year put the entire contract in jeopardy.

San Jose's contract pays \$2.1 million a year to cover costs and provide an incentive to meet the 90 percent standard. Simitian wants the county to withhold paying San Jose until the city takes action to consistently meet the standard, but he acknowledges that could result in worse ser-

vice. The city and county need to hash this out.

San Jose's budget struggles are well known. In July 2010, the fire department lost seven engine companies, or roughly two dozen firefighters, which has hurt its response times. But it signed the county contract after that.

The fire department argues the 90 percent standard is arbitrary. In fact, it is complex, figuring in, for example, the numbers of calls that are not life threatening and won't require as quick a response. Did we mention all other fire departments in the county meet it?

The city council needs to rethink the 80 percent standard that may short-change people who live or work in San Jose. And if residents think they deserve better, they need to speak up. In an election year, officials will listen.

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Outdated maps, tech slow down fire crews

County audit lays out reasons department misses response goals

By Eric Kurhi

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SAN JOSE — Outdated maps, a stale station coverage plan and lack of signal overrides are among the reasons that San Jose fire crews have been slow to respond to emergencies, missing crucial time goals nearly every month in the past two years, according to an audit that was called for by frustrated county officials in March.

The audit went before the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, which granted the San Jose Fire Department a one-year renewal on its emergency response contract. Under county contracts, local fire departments are required to arrive on scene within eight minutes in at least 90 percent of emergency calls. They must arrive within 13 minutes for less serious calls. But unlike other cities, San Jose

has failed to do so for 22 out of the past 25 months, said Supervisor Joe Simitian.

The county has withheld making payments to the city since February, citing the breach of contract due to slow responses. In the new contract, payments resume if response times are met three months in a row, and back-payments would be made if San Jose fire can stretch that to half a year. Those payments amount to about \$2.1 million a year, roughly 1 percent of the department's budget.

"We have seen improvements in recent months," Simitian said, pointing to figures that show successful responses are up 2 to 4 percent from a year ago.

"That doesn't seem like a worldbeater, but 4 percent is 200 people in any given month who are getting an on-time arrival who were not getting one previously," he said. "That's no small accomplishment."

In the past five years, San Jose fire has trimmed its staff to deal with budget cuts even as the population — and number of medical emergencies — has gone up 36 percent, to 55,000 a year. City officials blamed the cuts on soaring costs for employee benefits, particularly pensions.

While firefighters have blamed slow responses on staffing cuts, the audit indicated outdated technology also is a factor.

“When crews roll, they may be rolling with inaccurate maps and they may be stuck at stop lights because the equipment they have no longer works,” Simitian said.

The audit also found that when the station nearest an emergency is contacted, more than 13 percent of the time that company is already occupied and it must be handled by the next-closest crews. That causes major delays, said Roger Mialocq, county auditor with Harvey M. Rose Associates. Crews from the nearest stations actually made the time goals 91 percent of the time, but if they had to come from farther away, that dropped drastically to 77 percent.

Mialocq said that when “firefighters are coming from a much farther distance and are less familiar with the area,” then “chances increase significantly that they will not get there in eight minutes.”

The audit reviewed more than 140,000 emergency responses between July 2012 and April 2014, approximately 119,000 — or 84 percent — of which were medical calls. Firefighters were interviewed at each of the city’s 33 stations along with command staff and dispatchers, and auditors rode along with on-call crews.

Key findings included that there hasn’t been a review of what station handles what territory in a decade, and at least eight years have passed since crews were provided with updated and detailed street maps.

“Firefighters told us that as construction goes on and there’s new development and road changes, the maps become increasingly problematic,” Mialocq said.

He said some fire firefighters have resorted to using map apps on smart phones, or even hand-drawn “run cards” to help them get to scenes as fast as possible. Another issue was signals that either had no “pre-emptive” device to switch the light to allow emergency vehicles fast passage, or the device wasn’t working.

Other concerns involved patients at Valley Medical Center being transported between facilities or the county jail using fire crews instead of ambulance service, which can take a crucial response unit for the duration of the move.

Fire officials at Tuesday’s supervisors’ meeting — it was also being taken up by the San Jose City Council later in the afternoon — said that many of the goals are already incorporated in the department’s plan to hasten responses. The department’s plan shows that a review of first-response areas is

in progress and slated for completion in February or March. Map updates and navigation technology are expected to be done later next year. Signal pre-emption remains unfunded.

The matter is due to return for more detailed discussion at a county finance committee next month.

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