

# EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION CONSOLIDATION IS IMPERATIVE

## A REPORT ON COUNTY EMERGENCY DISPATCH

JUNE 3, 2010

### **Summary**

The 2009-2010 Grand Jury, (GJ), has determined that the general public needs to be informed of Mendocino County's, (County), law enforcement efforts to improve emergency communications. In June, 2007, the County received a proposal from an independent communication firm for E911 Dispatch Center Consolidation, in response to Homeland Security's attempt to improve law enforcement communications nationwide. Local law enforcement supports the concept. A dispatch center consolidation is being spearheaded by the County's Law Enforcement Administrators Association, (LEAA). The National Emergency Communication Plan, (NECP), published in 2008, recommended the creation of a multi-faceted approach to strengthen emergency communications by focusing on technology, coordination, governance, planning, and training at all levels of government.

Costs, funding, location, construction, and governance have yet to be determined for this project. Consideration has also been given to our state-of-the-art main microwave tower, located in the Ukiah area, regarding its current and potential use.

### **Method**

The GJ interviewed staff at the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office, (MCSO), Ukiah Police Department, (UPD), and Willits Police Department, (WPD). The GJ visited the Ukiah Emergency Services Call Center, which also performs emergency dispatch for the Ft. Bragg Police Department, (FBPD). The GJ also reviewed the *Mendocino County Feasibility Study for E911 Dispatch Center Consolidation*, (6/28/2007), and reviewed prior GJ reports on the County microwave tower utilization.

### **Background**

The LEAA Board has been looking into consolidating emergency communication systems/911. The GJ was concerned that discussions and preliminary reports regarding a proposed consolidated emergency communication system was at a standstill. The GJ purpose was to investigate and bring to the public the current status of the proposed 911 consolidated communication system for the County. One concern is whether the consolidated emergency system could be implemented within the previously proposed 3-year timeframe.

The National Emergency Communication Plan, (NECP), published in July, 2008, recommended the creation of a multi-faceted approach to strengthening emergency communications nationwide. Focus will be placed on technology, coordination, governance, planning, and training at all levels of government. Global emergencies brought to the forefront by the media, including terrorist activities, as well as local County emergencies, have reinforced the need for consolidated emergency services communications for public safety.

It should be noted that agencies other than County, i.e., CAL FIRE and California Highway Patrol, (CHP), and State agencies could be involved in this project.

### ***Findings***

1. A grant of \$2.5 million from Homeland Security for communication software has been obtained by MCSO. The MCSO is sharing the software with other County law enforcement agencies.
2. Additional proposals are being reviewed by the LEAA and UPD to determine a plan that would best serve the County in going forward with this project.
3. These issues need to be addressed:
  - sources of funds, i.e. grants/homeland security, Federal and State funds,
  - donation of County property in lieu of matching funds for Federal and/or State funding,
  - location of facility,
  - construction of new facility or renovation of an existing facility,
  - comparison of costs between the existing emergency communication systems and a new consolidated system,
  - governance of the new system, i.e., Joint Powers Authority, (JPA),
  - comparison of present and future costs of each community's participation,
  - involvement of City and/or County personnel and their union/employment contracts.
4. CAL FIRE and CHP are State funded agencies that may choose to be involved in the consolidated system now or in the future.
5. Elected officials of the State and Federal government have shown interest in this project.
6. The proposed consolidation will include reverse 911 capabilities, allowing the communication center to automatically notify areas of the County of impending or existing emergencies.
7. A contract exists between UPD and FBPD for emergency calls and dispatching. Costs are based on the volume of calls.
8. The County's present state-of-the-art microwave tower is not being fully utilized. Leasing space to cell phone companies, or others, would provide revenue for the new consolidated 911 system.
9. The potential use of the Global Positioning System, (GPS), to identify exact location of calls, officers, and emergency vehicles will be an integral part of this consolidation effort.

### ***Recommendations***

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the FBPD, UPD, WPD, and the MCSO determine the cost of the project and their share of the cost. (Findings 2-3, 5, 7, 9)
2. the FBPD, UPD, WPD, and the MCSO set a timeframe within the previously suggested three-year parameter for implementation of this consolidated emergency system plan. (Finding 2)
3. the GJ continue monitoring the consolidated 911 system project and usage of the microwave tower. (All Findings)

### ***Discussion***

The goal for our County should be seamless communication between agencies. Homeland Security launched an outreach initiative to ensure that state and local agencies work toward emergency management communication goals. Our legislators may become involved in their effort to position Mendocino County as a “showpiece” for consolidated emergency communications.

As suggested in a *Sierra Sun* article, 10/27/09, “agencies should identify overlapping requirements, responsibilities, and expenses that could be shared with other local jurisdictions”. The following need to be addressed concerning expanded usage of the microwave tower:

- County needs for expansion in the near future;
- impact of other access sold on the tower to generate additional revenue;
- if access is sold to cell phone companies, will they require their own back-up-system?

### ***Required Responses***

Mendocino County Sheriff (All Findings, All Recommendations)

Fort Bragg Police Chief (All Findings, All Recommendations)

Ukiah Police Chief (All Findings, All Recommendations)

Willits Police Chief (All Findings, All Recommendations)

***Requested Responses***

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (All Findings, All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer (All Findings, All Recommendations)

California Highway Patrol Ukiah District Commander (All Findings, All Recommendations)