

New operators to speed calls for 911 service

By Sarah Sturmon

Post staff reporter

Cincinnati officials — responding to callers for emergency police and fire assistance being put on hold — have found the money to hire more emergency operators but won't be able to have them on the job until the end of the year.

The 13 operators will be used to reduce the number of callers being put on hold when they require emergency police or fire assistance.

Cincinnati safety officials say the hiring of the operators will reduce the number of callers put on hold to 1 percent or less. Currently, about 11 percent, or 4,221, of the 36,811 monthly calls to report police and fire emergencies in Cincinnati are put on hold. The average caller in June spent 6.9 seconds on hold; the longest delay was 2 minutes and 44 seconds.

The move by safety officials to hire more personnel is their first public acknowledgement that the problems with the dispatching system may be more

than just temporary during the transition to the combined system and 911.

Cincinnati has experienced problems with its emergency dispatching system since the city combined its police and fire dispatching last March in preparation for the 911 system.

Problems with the system became public in May when a Mt. Washington couple wrote City Hall complaining about being put on hold while their camper burned in their driveway.

Additional problems have been noted by firefighters — including lengthy delays in dispatching. Council has not yet addressed those problems.

The problem of callers being put on hold is expected to increase when a new 911 emergency number goes into service Aug. 17. City officials estimate that police and fire emergency calls will increase by about 22 percent when the new system begins operating.

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Assistant Safety Director Dave Rager said money to hire the 13 new operators will come from surplus funds in the city budget, but the new operators probably won't be hired until October. It will be the end of the year before they can be on the job, he said.

The 13 operators will be in addition to 12 new operators hired expressly for the 911 service. But even with the 12 new operators, at least 15 percent of calls to the emergency dispatching center will get a recording telling them to hold, officials said.

The problems affect only Cincinnati, not callers from outside the city, officials said.

Council's law committee

Tuesday told Rager that the number of people being put on hold is too great but didn't appropriate the \$348,000 needed to hire enough operators to reduce the number of callers put on hold to 1 percent.

The city currently spends \$3.35 million for personnel at the dispatching center, including salaries and fringes. That cost includes the 12 new 911 operators that were hired for 911,

53 operator/dispatchers who worked under the previous dispatching system and supervisors.

Law committee chairman David Mann said Tuesday he believes there is support in council to give the safety department the money it needs. The committee Tuesday asked Rager to report back in September on how the city is handling the influx of calls from 911.