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## Urbanite

### Criticism of 911 system on eve of hearings

Tuesday December 8, 2009 6:31 PM By Jason Fink

Is a lack of communication among 911 emergency workers risking people's lives? That's what a City Council committee will be asking Thursday as it looks at the city's new Unified Call Taking system, which its own users say isn't unified at all.

The new system – in which 911 operators using the NYPD computer system send electronic messages to fire dispatchers – has caused confusion, finger-pointing and a bitter culture clash between the two groups of workers.

A fatal fire in Woodside last month, in which three men died after firefighters were sent to the wrong address, showed the tragic consequences that can result from the communications problems, union officials say.

Fire unions complain bitterly that the 911 operators are not getting correct information from callers, leading them to send out rigs that are not prepared.

"We're getting wrong addresses and we're not getting the information we're supposed to get," said David Rosenzweig, president of the Uniformed Fire Alarm Dispatchers Benevolent Association. "They don't train them like emergency professionals, they train them like clerks."

The union for the 911 operators, in turn, blames the dual systems, saying they're not on the same page as fire dispatchers and are often unsure of how their messages are sorted and handled.

"If the mayor is putting together a unified call system, they should be the exact same system," said Alma Roper, an executive at local 1549 of District Council 37, which represents the 911 operators.

Under the UCT, which began in May, fire calls are answered by 911 operators, who send a 40-character message from their computer system to a fire dispatcher. The dispatcher then sends out trucks based on that initial message, passing along updates from 911 call takers. Reps for the 911 operators say when they send over additional information – including corrections – they sometimes show up as new jobs, causing delays.

Fire dispatchers say that shows how unfamiliar the call takers are with the FDNY system: They come over as new emergencies only if the corrections make a substantial enough difference to merit a new truck going out, a fact 911 union officials seem unaware of.

Fire dispatchers, who are used to responding to emergencies that are escalating in real time, ask different questions than police call takers, who are usually responding to an incident that has already taken place, said Glenn Corbett, professor of fire science at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

“The people who are doing the 911 calls have no concept of how the Fire Department operates,” he said.

He suggested the city should have moved 911 call takers into fire dispatch centers several years before making the switch so could have learned the FDNY system.

Jason Post, a spokesman for Mayor Michael Bloomberg, said UCT “improves the system by cutting out the middle man and it has lowered response times to fires.”

A spokesman for the Department, Jim Long, said the system “works well for us.”

The firefighter’s union argues the mayor’s office is measuring response times differently.

City Councilman Peter Vallone (D-Astoria), the chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said one of the reasons for tomorrow’s hearing is to figure out where the mistakes are being made and how to get them fixed quickly.

“This is not something where we can just iron out the kinks as we go,” he said.

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