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Urbanite

City, unions spar over new 911 system

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Top city officials acknowledged Thursday that more training is needed for 911 call operators, as reps for the emergency system's workers denounced the new set-up as plagued by miscommunication, leading to fatal results.

"How many bodies will it take for this system to be rectified?" Capt. Alexander Hagan, president of the fire officers association, shouted Thursday.

But 911 operators blame technology.

Henry Garrido, an executive with District Council 37, which represents 911 operators, said there are some 20,000 addresses in their computer system that are not recognized by the FDNY system, leading to confusion and delays.

The 911 operators were given eight hours of training in FDNY codes before being handed their new responsibility, and the rest of their training has been on the job, union officials say.

"I understand the questions about training," Deputy Mayor Ed Skyler told a City Council committee, which was formed to investigate the Unified Call Taking system in the wake of several deaths that occurred after firefighters were sent to wrong addresses. "It is something we are working hard to improve."

The fire dispatchers union said there have been about 4,000 cases of firefighters going out with inadequate information since the UCT system began in May, a figure Skyler disputed, saying it's closer to 500. The city did not track such errors under the old system, so comparison is impossible.

The city's goal is to merge a system now comprised of 911 operators, fire dispatchers and EMS dispatchers, into one, even training 911 call takers to become EMTs so they can provide medical assistance over the phone, Skyler said.

Under UCT, 911 operators transmit information about a fire electronically to an FDNY dispatcher; fire unions argue they are not trained for those calls, citing errors made during recent fatal fires in Queens and Brooklyn.

During the Nov. 18 Brooklyn fire, a caller did not give an address but union officials say an experienced FDNY dispatcher might have figured it out based on other information.

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