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Westport Volunteer Fire Department

September 15, 2017

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
501 Low Gap Road
Ukiah, CA 95482

Re: Dispatch RFP
September 19, 2017 Agenda Item

Dear Members of the Board of Supervisors:

The Westport Volunteer Fire Department provides year-round emergency response service on the northern Mendocino coast for medical emergencies, traumatic injuries and fires. Our Department's response area encompasses roughly 108 square miles. We are fairly representative of other volunteer Fire Departments in Mendocino County, particularly on the coast, that serve sparsely populated areas with rugged terrain.

A volunteer Fire Department's mission is to save lives and protect property. The ability to accomplish that mission depends initially on knowledgeable and reliable emergency dispatch service.

In order to provide effective dispatch service in Mendocino County, particularly for emergencies that occur in sparsely populated areas with rugged terrain, the emergency dispatch provider needs to meet all three of these criteria:

1. Be sufficiently knowledgeable about the geography of Mendocino County so that emergency calls are dispatched to the right place;
2. Have professional experience with the responses that are required for various emergencies so that all of the necessary responding agencies are dispatched in the initial phase-out; and
3. Have professional experience coordinating the activities of different agencies responding to a particular emergency in order to be able to assume a command and coordination role when units are at a scene without radio reception.

Based on our experience CalFire, which has been providing emergency dispatch service for Mendocino County since 1985, is the only potential bidder in response to the Dispatch RFP that meets all three of these criteria. We will briefly discuss each of the criteria.

Dispatch to the right place. CalFire responds to emergency calls for medical emergencies, traumatic injuries and fires throughout Mendocino County. CalFire personnel are familiar, from first-hand experience, with our geography and terrain. Computer-Aided Dispatch ("CAD") is a poor substitute for that knowledge and experience. The accuracy of CAD depends on the accuracy of the data on which the computer program relies. Commercially available geographic data are not always accurate and up to

date. During the past several months our Department experienced two significant dispatch errors caused by CAD:

- On November 21, 2016 we were dispatched to the highway address for Wages Creek Campground to respond to a call for someone who had fallen on the beach. We arrived at the scene and spent at least 15 minutes searching for the victim without success. A follow up phone call to the reporting party indicated that the correct location of the incident was the beach at DeHaven Creek, which is located about a mile to the north and does not have a highway address. We then drove from the Wages Creek Campground to DeHaven Creek where we found the victim, a middle-aged woman, lying on the beach. She had fallen off a cliff and broke her pelvis. Due to the amount of time spent on cold wet sand she was experiencing hypothermia. By the time we arrived, her body temperature had fallen below 90 degrees.
- On March 15, 2017 we were dispatched on a medical call with an Echo response, signifying an unresponsive patient. The CAD system gave all the responding agencies the coordinates to a non-existent address on the Seaview Drive that is about 2 miles north of the Village of Westport. After responding to that location, we then drove back to the Seaview Drive that is within the Village of Westport where we found the patient. Though we were able to resuscitate the patient she had already suffered significant neurological damage due to the lack of oxygen to her brain. A few days after being transported to the hospital she was taken off life support and expired.

According to newspaper articles, dispatch errors and delays attributable to CAD malfunctions have affected Fire Departments in a number of jurisdictions including Los Angeles, Indianapolis and Broward County, Florida to name a few.

CalFire has implemented a process to address and correct database errors in its CAD system. It is hard to imagine that an organization with fewer resources, or a for-profit ambulance company, would devote the time and money necessary to correct the database errors that are inherent in any CAD system.

Initial Dispatch of All Necessary Resources. Time is critical in the response to any emergency call. Lost time reduces the chance for a successful outcome. Most emergency calls require several agencies for an effective response: the local Fire Department, CalFire as a back-up, a ground ambulance, an air ambulance helicopter on calls involving serious injuries, and law enforcement on some calls.

All the necessary resources need to be dispatched in the initial page-out, for two reasons. First, a Fire Department typically covers a large service area and it might take 20 minutes or more to arrive at a scene. If it is left to the Fire Department to call for additional resources after arriving at and assessing a

scene, half an hour of critical time can easily be lost. Second, radio reception and cell phone coverage are not available in many of the more remote areas of Mendocino County. It is therefore essential for the dispatch center to have the experience necessary to know what resources are likely to be needed at a particular scene so they can all be dispatched initially. CalFire has that experience throughout Mendocino County. An ambulance company, which has the mission of transporting patients to a hospital or other treatment facility, will not have that breadth of experience.

These are three examples of calls to which our Department responded in which CalFire's initial dispatch of all necessary resources was critical to a successful outcome:

- A man fell off a cliff and landed on a rocky beach in a secluded cove. The tide was coming in. He was severely injured and partially paralyzed. We were able to put him on a backboard for transport to a trauma center. However, with the tide coming in there was no way he could be carried out of the cove safely. Because CalFire had dispatched an air ambulance helicopter the same time we were dispatched, the helicopter arrived in time to evacuate the patient and fly him to a trauma center.
- A six-month old infant sustained a crushed skull injury as the result of a head-on collision on Highway 1 near Rockport. Since Rockport is near the far north end of our Department's response area it took us about 20 minutes to arrive at the scene. Fortunately, as the result of CalFire's simultaneous dispatch, an air ambulance helicopter arrived a few minutes later and transported the infant to a pediatric trauma center without delay.
- A motorcyclist slammed into the guardrail on Highway 1 just south of Chadbourne Gulch. He had several broken ribs and serious internal injuries, including a hemothorax which is a collapsed lung caused by internal bleeding. He needed to be flown to a trauma center as quickly as possible. When our Fire Department was dispatched on that call, CalFire also dispatched a ground ambulance and an air ambulance helicopter at the same time. Fog prevented the helicopter from landing near the scene. We loaded the patient onto the ground ambulance which then transferred the patient to the helicopter at Coast Hospital in Fort Bragg where it could land. CalFire's simultaneous dispatch of all three agencies enabled the patient to be flown to a trauma center without delay.

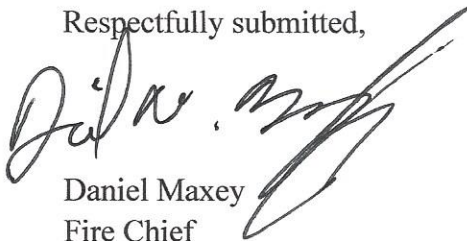
Ability to assume a command role. From CalFire's hands-on experience conducting rescue operations, its dispatch center is able to assume a command and coordination role when radio reception is not available among the agencies responding to a scene. These are two examples:

- An 8 year old boy riding his dune buggy on Blues Beach was t-boned by a motorcycle. He suffered a severe concussion and a fractured sternum (breastbone) as a result. Our Department was the first to arrive at the scene. We assessed and stabilized the patient. It was apparent that he needed to be flown by helicopter to a pediatric trauma center. There is no radio reception or cell phone service on Blues Beach. CalFire's dispatch center coordinated the landing of the helicopter at the scene and the patient was quickly flown to the trauma center.
- We were dispatched to a house in the woods on a medical call for a middle-aged man who was having difficulty breathing. This was a Delta response (life-threatening event) and we knew from the page-out that CalFire had also dispatched a ground ambulance and an air ambulance helicopter. Some of our crew went to the house to treat the patient, and the rest of the crew went to DeHaven Beach, about 2 miles away, to set up a landing zone for the helicopter. There is no radio reception or cell phone service at the house in the woods, so our crews could not communicate with each other. We transferred the patient to the ground ambulance which then drove him to the helicopter. CalFire's dispatch center directed all of these activities. Though the patient went into cardiac arrest in the helicopter, he was resuscitated and underwent successful open heart surgery at the hospital. He fully recovered from the surgery and is now doing well.


Conclusion. Mendocino County is our home. We are sensitive to the County's financial situation. At the same time, we believe that knowledgeable and reliable emergency dispatch service is essential to the health, safety and quality of life for residents and visitors in our County. If the Dispatch RFP is being driven by financial considerations, we believe a better financial solution would be a modest increase in the transient occupancy tax to pay for emergency dispatch services. That would be a fair result because many emergency calls in the County involve tourists and other visitors.

CalFire is the only fully qualified potential bidder for the dispatch contract in Mendocino County. We urge the Board of Supervisors to reject the Dispatch RFP and to direct County staff to negotiate a new three-year dispatch contract with CalFire to become effective when the current dispatch contract expires.

Respectfully submitted,



Daniel Maxey
Fire Chief



John Allison
Board Secretary, EMT and Firefighter