



EMS Stakeholder Engagement Process

Stakeholder Proposal and LEMSA response

CVEMSA is offering the following response to a stakeholder-submitted proposal for ordinance content:

Stakeholder Proposal:

“Ordinance language should provide the ability for agencies to secure agreements with neighboring county agencies to ensure that the closest EMS resource is dispatched regardless of county line.”

LEMSA Comment:

California Health and Safety Code (HSC) addresses EMS system planning in the following way:

HSC 1797.204. “The local EMS agency shall plan, implement, and evaluate an emergency medical services system, in accordance with the provisions of this part, consisting of an organized pattern of readiness and response services based on public and private agreements and operational procedures.”

CVEMSA has the authority and responsibility to work with provider agencies in coordinating the most appropriate resource to serve the medical need of the residents and visitors of Sonoma County, including working with neighboring Counties’ EMS Agencies and service providers. No specific additional ordinance language is required to allow the LEMSA to do so. However, when discharging this responsibility, it is incumbent on the LEMSA to understand the availability of the outside service providers as well as any factors that would affect an out-of-county service provider’s response to 911 calls within Sonoma County.

A current example of a community with a closer ambulance available from outside Sonoma County would be the Sonoma County community of Knights’ Valley. The nature of geography and county lines has put the Sonoma County community very close to the Napa County community of Calistoga. In fact, at times, a faster response is possible from an ambulance based in Calistoga, than the currently first-in Bells ambulance from Healdsburg, all other variables being equal.

Although distance is the primary factor affecting service to the community, there are a number of other factors that the LEMSA and community must be consider.

Communications and technical issues are key concerns when working across different EMS systems. Napa and Sonoma Counties utilize independent systems for maintaining awareness of resources within the Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems the respective communications centers employ. The Sonoma County REDCOM CAD system is programed with static station locations and the current locations of mobile units via Automatic Vehicle Locator (AVL) GPS systems. Once a caller location is known to the system, the CAD computer makes a recommendation for the closest ambulance based on known unit location and availability status. Because outside County ambulances are not visible in the CAD system,

procedures must be built to allow the dispatcher to know if the outside unit is available to respond; usually a phone call to the outside agency communications center. Once availability is determined, actual call assignment and dispatching has to occur. That dispatching must be done by the outside provider's dispatch center, as different systems operate on different radio frequencies.

The impact of the technical challenges needs to be understood by all to avoid unintended consequences. Modern EMS high performance dispatching is highly dependent on electronic systems, and training to those systems is key to maintaining desired performance. Competency in non-standard process is difficult to train and retain. Process that requires additional steps, particularly if not frequently practiced, can result in less than optimum performance or even failure.

In a scenario involving a medical or traumatic emergency at Hwy. 128 and Franz Valley Road, the drive time from Calistoga may be ten minutes; from Healdsburg perhaps 25 minutes. The clearly closer ambulance is the Calistoga unit. The response time difference from patient call to on-scene would not be 15 minutes however. Based on the factors above, it will take longer to start the Calistoga ambulance, as unit availability needs confirmation and the call information must be provided to the Napa County 911 communications center. If the Calistoga unit is not available, the time it took to contact Napa County will be added to the response time from Healdsburg. Even if the ambulance in Calistoga is available, the additional call processing time required by REDCOM to start the unit must be subtracted from the difference in drive time to arrive at the actual time savings. There is also the possibility, albeit small, that the closest Sonoma County resource is assigned to another response while REDCOM is still determining if Calistoga is available.

Another factor to consider is en-route communication. Although most information is obtained from a 911 caller at time of dispatch, follow-up communication from the incident scene does occur and must be relayed to the responding units. This is another place non-standard procedures are required to get information from first responders or bystanders on scene to the responding ambulance. Because 911 calls will continue to route to REDCOM, and first responders communicate with their own communications center, additional information from the scene to the ambulance crew will require relay through an additional dispatch center. Although EMS responders and communications center staff are highly skilled, additional relay increases the opportunity for error or misunderstanding in the transfer of information.

Finally there is the possibility of a critical failure should both communications centers believe the other is handling the call. Unlikely to be sure, but possible, as no single center can track both the 911 call in CAD and all responding units directly.

None of these factors is reason to not work to achieve a faster response, but the community under consideration for the change should understand the complexity of reaching outside of the local EMS system for a closer ambulance.

Given the risks are understood and can be mitigated to an acceptable level, the LEMSA is the appropriate entity to engage with the outside county LEMSA. Any out-of-county response must occur under the medical control of the sending agencies LEMSA, as that entity will provide patient care policy and treatment guidelines. Another factor to consider is the patient care policy and treatment guidelines will differ in at least small ways and in some cases can diverge a great deal. Currently, Sonoma County and Napa County share much in common, but Napa can change protocols without reference to Sonoma County residents.

CVEMSA feels the stakeholder proposal for language changing response to a closer out-of-county provider will be supported in the ordinance by our proposed response zone change process. Although HSC places the responsibility for EMS system planning with the LEMSA, the Ordinance can help with the addition of a clear process for changing EMS service providers.

Under the LEMSA-proposed process, a request to change to the provider agency serving Knights Valley would be handled as follows:

The community is unincorporated and therefore requests for a change in ambulance service provider would initiate with the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors as the Qualifying Governing Entity for that area. Should the Board advise the EMS Agency the change is supported, and the LEMSA confirms support from Napa County as the requested provider of services, the LEMSA should deliberate on the most medically appropriate action to take. The deliberation should include the complex issues already mentioned and result in a determination that the risk vs. benefit is (or is not) favorable for patients. If the change makes sense, the LEMSA should conclude an MOU with Napa EMS and REDCOM to accommodate the response from Napa. Changes involving REDCOM as a partner entity will need to run through the REDCOM Dispatch operations Advisory Group (DOAG) to allow operational partner input and to ensure the changes are coordinated with all public safety agencies involved.

The addition of the new process in the ordinance gives the community a voice while ensure all appropriate government entities' and public safety partner agencies' concerns can be addressed.