

# 'Lights and siren' responses reduced with new system

BY JONI HUBBARD  
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The Farmington Hills 911 dispatcher leans forward slightly in her chair and adjusts her headphones as she speaks into the microphone.

After determining through a series of questions that the caller's life isn't in danger, she dispatches Hills paramedics on "Priority 3," without lights and sirens. Rather than navigating the city's busy streets at emergency speeds, responders will drive at posted speeds and observe traffic signals.

"Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?" the dispatcher asks the 11-year-old boy, who has injured his arm.

When he says no, she tells him to make sure he opens the door for the paramedics when they arrive. "And I'll try to get hold of somebody to get your dad."

The child is home alone, something Hills police will investigate later. For now, all that matters is finding out whether his arm is broken and getting it treated.

Bridging the gap between the first call to 911 and the paramedics' response is only one benefit of the Hills Fire Department's Emergency Medical Dispatching system, implemented Dec. 1.

Emergency Medical Services

Coordinator Kevin Bersche said that by prioritizing calls EMD has dramatically reduced the number of times firefighters and paramedics respond to an emergency with lights and sirens — and the attendant dangers.

Earlier this week, a Grosse Ile Fire Department vehicle struck and killed a pedestrian while speeding to an accident scene. A Canton firefighter still carries the memory of how two people lost their lives in an accident that happened while he was behind the wheel of an emergency van.

Also, next to on-scene heart attacks, vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among firefighters, Bersche said. EMD has drastically reduced exposure to high-speed, emergency travel.

"We are only responding 40 percent of the time now with lights and sirens," he estimated.

The system puts a little more responsibility on dispatchers, but they receive 24 hours of EMD training, as well as continuing education. As calls come in, they ask a standard set of eight questions and the answers lead to alphabetized cards that contain first aid information.

"Imagine teaching someone CPR over the phone," said Hills Lt. Mike Garr. "This allows them to give people very simple instructions before we get there."

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**Kevin Bersche**  
—Emergency Medical Services coordinator

It also allows dispatchers to give paramedics and firefighters more specific information about the ailment or injury and its root cause while rescue vehicles are en route. Bersche said it's important to determine, for instance, if "chest pain" has been caused by a blow to the chest or whether the patient has a history of heart problems, suggesting a possible heart attack.

"We've had about half a dozen cases where they've had to provide some of the more detailed instructions," Bersche said.

While dispatchers haven't really complained about the additional responsibility, they have been a little apprehensive about it.

"They're pleased with the end result and the level of satisfaction they get after helping someone," said Communications Sgt. Joe Rebh. "Most of them feel a little uncomfortable with it."

"Any change will be viewed

with trepidation," Garr said. "After a call, the dispatcher will talk it over and coach each other a little."

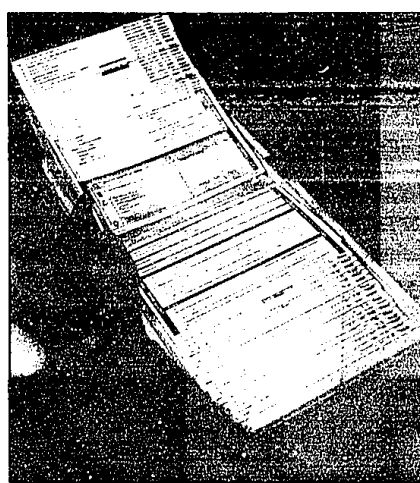
With the cost of training all 22 dispatchers and providing EMD cards, the Hills Fire Department has a significant investment in the system. However, Bersche and Garr said, the payoff is increased safety and better care for the people who need it most.

"The dispatchers are the eyes and ears of the fire department," Garr said. "They're on the scene before we get there. If you have a good picture of what you're walking into, you can bring the right tools and have a plan to deal with the situation."

"That is the most dramatic difference for our response crew," Bersche added. "That's what our officers are telling us, that it was great to know what the situation was before they got there."

While it has added about 50 seconds onto the department's average response time — from 4.89 minutes to 5.75 minutes — the slower, safer responses to non-emergency cases has been well worth the lost time. What's more, Bersche hasn't had a complaint about slower responses to the lower priority calls.

"We're very happy with the program," Bersche said. "Overall, this has gone very well."



**Easier:** The card system makes it easier to prioritize 911 emergencies and reduce the calls in which sirens and lights are needed.

# Land purchase targeted for future school building

BY STACY JENKINS  
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While vacant land in western Oakland County is becoming a rare commodity, Walled Lake district officials decided to grab 83 acres while it's available.

The school board voted to spend \$4.1 million for the land, located near Bigey Lake and Cooley Lake roads in Commerce Township, for a future school building site.

"Our feeling was that we should buy it while it's available," said Superintendent James Geisler. "We know we'll continue to expand."

The district typically purchases property for unspecified

**Walled Lake Western and Walled Lake Central high schools are near capacity, with more than 1,600 students enrolled at each.**

future use, but Geisler said land purchased by previous school boards has either been used or sold.

"We have been looking for property and we've used the parcels we've had," he said. The purchase will come from the district's general fund. The

board resolved that the general fund will be reimbursed from a future bond issue, but a bond proposal has not been drawn.

The property purchase may coincide with the findings of the district's feasibility committee, which is expected to report to the board next month. Assistant Superintendent and committee

member Mick Beauchamp said the most critical space need is at the high school level.

Walled Lake Western and Walled Lake Central high schools are near capacity, with more than 1,600 students enrolled at each.

Beauchamp said the feasibility committee studies data compiled

by two demographics services and then recommends the building of facilities, time lines and future bond issues to fund the new buildings.

The purchase agreement for the property will be signed in June and will be in effect until

September, said Geisler. The land will be surveyed and environmental testing will be completed, to determine if the property is suitable for a new school facility.

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