
MEMORANDUM

CL-C 16-2021

Subject: Next Generation (NG911) Dispatch Consolidation Update

Date: March 25, 2021

To: Regional Council

**From: Kevin Smith, Chief, Niagara Emergency Medical Services
& Director, Emergency Services**

This memo is provided in follow-up to report CSD 3-2021 and Council direction to;

- continue the planning for the implementation of NG911 in coordination with partner agencies, Boards and Councils
- develop a recommended model of a consolidated emergency dispatch service for Niagara
- provide an interim update report to Regional Council at the March 25, 2021 Council meeting with the final report presented no later than the Regional Council meeting being held on June 24, 2021.

Since the approval of CSD 3-2021, staff have completed a procurement process to secure a consultant to complete the initial phases of evaluation of implementing a NG911 solution in Niagara. Work on this project is anticipated to commence before the week of March 28 with a report expected to Council no later than August 26, 2021.

Regarding the issue of consolidated emergency dispatch, the following update is provided:

- **January 28** - meeting with all local area fire chiefs, Niagara Regional Police Services (NRPS) and Niagara EMS representatives to review CSD 3-2021 direction of Regional Council
 - Agreed-upon deliverables in the consideration of consolidated dispatch to include technology, facilities and governance
 - Established strategy to inform the deliverables to include one-on-one consultations with municipal fire chiefs and respective CAO's, NRPS Chief and Police Service Board rep and NEMS Chief with Region CAO

- Interviews to be completed by NRPS Deputy Chief Bill Fordy, Regional Fire Coordinator Chief Bob Lymburner and NEMS Chief Kevin Smith
- **February 3-18** – completed P25 radio testing in the six municipalities not on the digital radio system to identify/address performance concerns
- **February 22 - March 12** – completed 14 consultation sessions (12 LAM's, 1 NRPS, 1 EMS)

Findings to Date

P25 Radio Performance

Of the twelve municipal fire services in Niagara, five are on the P25 (Project 25) radio system operated by NRPS with one additional municipality completing migration to this system. The five fire agencies as well as NRPS have had no concerns of the performance of the radio system. In fact, many fire services commented that their radio communications had improved significantly with the switch to P25. One service specifically cited an incident with the analogue system, which resulted in loss of communications leading to serious risk to firefighter safety. The Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) has also recently announced it will be upgrading to the P25 platform operated by NRPS.

The six remaining fire agencies that continue on the analogue system had cited performance concerns as one reason for not adopting the new digital system over the legacy analogue. To better understand the extent of the performance concerns and identify any action required to address any systems issues, radio testing was conducted in the six municipalities. Testing was completed by St. Catharines Fire Service who provide dispatch services to five of these municipalities and each of the municipal fire services had representatives participate in the radio testing. The findings were validated by NRPS public safety radio staff. Of the six municipalities where radio testing was completed, five of the local fire representatives found there were no performance issues and in fact, the digital system outperformed the current analogue system.

The single municipality that is not in agreement that the P25 radio system performs as good or better than the current analogue system has requested additional testing be performed. This testing has been scheduled with the results pending. In addition to radio testing, this municipality has also raised concerns regarding the capacity of the P25 system and reliability in a large-scale emergency event. While subject matter experts indicate that the digital system is more reliable and provides enhanced responder safety, discussions with the municipality continue to ensure all concerns are addressed, whether consensus on the P25 performance can be achieved or not.

Cost

Despite safety being paramount in any decision of a common communications system, the cost to implement the P25 radio system in the remaining municipalities is a significant concern and could potentially be the barrier to consolidation, at least in the short term. Expenses related to the capital investment in the purchase of new hardware is exacerbated by monthly operating costs paid to NRPS. The six fire services that have transitioned to the P25 system have invested significant monies in this upgrade. For the remaining six municipalities to also upgrade to the P25, this would require similar significant capital investments. For the majority of these municipalities, affordability to commit to a budget necessary to achieve this is unachievable, particularly in the short term (2-3 years).

Many of the stakeholders interviewed noted that in 2019, the Province of Ontario examined the potential to amalgamate municipalities and services. As a result of the review, a decision was made to request that municipalities and regions try to find efficiencies. The working group will be undertaking a more comprehensive cost analysis of potential economic models to achieve consolidation, including having all agencies on a common radio system. It should be noted that EMS is currently mandated to operate on a provincial radio network and all hardware is supplied by the province and there are no monthly fees. The province is in the process of migrating to a P25 radio system and it has been confirmed that local EMS is able to have interoperability with a local P25 system.

Governance

Thirteen of the fourteen stakeholders interviewed all identified the value of a consolidated dispatch to be administered at the Regional level. There is consensus that service delivery, operations and policy should be completed by experienced professionals in their respective field i.e. fire dispatches fire, police dispatch police and EMS dispatches EMS. An existing Regional service such as NRPS or NEMS could physically host a centralized fire communications program within their facility.

Over the course of the next two months, further analysis will be undertaken specific to the information provided through the consultations including further confirmation of P25 reliability, cost scenarios and governance options. A fulsome report will be made to Regional Council no later than June 24, 2021. This report will include recommendations specific to the continued advancement of consolidation and options of potential models for consideration.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Kevin Smith
Chief/Director
Niagara Emergency Medical Services