

Report Highlights

OPEGA Report No.
SR-PSAP-09

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Emergency Communications in Kennebec County – Fragmented Network Presents Challenges; Quality and Rate Issues Need to be Addressed to Optimize Public Safety



What issues did OPEGA identify during the course of this review?

- PSAP centers are making blind transfers to dispatch centers
- Emergency Communications Centers are not handling 9-1-1 calls consistently
- CMRCC needs more active supervision on the call center floor
- Dissatisfaction persists among CMRCC's customer groups
- ECC rate methodologies are inconsistent and not comparable
- Costs of handling 9-1-1 cell phone calls are not equitably covered
- PUC rate case on DPS rates did not address root causes of higher rates
- CMRCC has vacant space

More information about these issues, including OPEGA's recommendations for addressing them, are included in the Recommendations section of the full report.

What questions did this review focus on, and what are OPEGA's answers?

1. *What does the current network of Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) and dispatch service providers for Kennebec County customers look like? Does the current configuration provide adequate coverage for rural communities?*

The current network has become fractured as each community has sought to balance cost and quality to secure a good value. Five primary emergency communications centers (ECCs) serve Kennebec County: three providing only dispatch services and two that provide both PSAP and dispatch services. All Kennebec communities have access to ECC service and the network presents no public safety issues unique to rural communities.

2. *Are there differences in the quality of services provided by the Department of Public Safety's Central Maine Regional Communications Center (CMRCC) compared to other entities that are serving customers in Kennebec County? If so, what factors are creating those differences? Is public safety being jeopardized?*

OPEGA compared Kennebec's two larger ECCs to best practices and found both have room for improvement. The need for improvement in the areas of standardized protocols and quality assurance practices was evident from the call handling issues OPEGA noted while listening to a sampling of calls. To the extent that call handling issues result in errors or affect timely response, public safety is not optimized. CMRCC, in particular, should also make improvements to supervision of staff.

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3. *How do cost structures and rate methodologies differ between CMRCC (the regional PSAP) and other entities that provide PSAP and dispatch services to customers in Kennebec County? Are costs being equitably allocated to those who are benefiting from the services?*

CMRCC is the only ECC with a formal rate methodology that includes all operating costs in its rates. Other centers either charge what CMRCC did prior to its 2009 rate increase, or they charge rates based roughly on the incremental costs they incur when taking on external customers. CMRCC has higher costs in the area of personnel and also has additional costs associated with services it provides that benefit both customers and non-customers. As a result, CMRCC's rates are higher than the other four centers.

4. *What are the funding streams for each of the PSAP and dispatch service providers and how are they affecting the cost of providing service and/or the rates charged to customers? Are there more efficient and/or equitable ways to fund the provision of PSAP and dispatch services?*

Funding is relatively consistent among all centers other than CMRCC, which is the only ECC funded solely through rates charged to customers. Other centers get some rate revenue from external customers, but are mostly funded with municipal and county revenue. No centers get surcharge revenue to cover any operating costs, even if those costs are directly related to PSAP service. This is similar to other states, although a few do use E9-1-1 surcharges for operating costs. Establishing special districts and collecting revenue through those districts is another possible option for funding emergency communications services.

5. *What are the impacts on the State, County and municipalities in Kennebec County from towns not participating in the CMRCC or from towns changing service providers? Are there factors other than cost and service quality driving the changes?*

CMRCC loses revenue each time a customer leaves, but some of the workload remains because CMRCC receives all cell phone calls for Kennebec County regardless of which ECC municipalities utilize. CMRCC operates as an enterprise fund, so its revenue must cover all expenses. As a result, when customers leave, costs must be cut or rates must be raised for remaining customers which include several State agencies. OPEGA's survey results show cost and quality are the primary factors driving municipalities to change providers.

6. *What benefits have been realized from Statewide PSAP consolidation and how do they compare to what was expected?*

The Legislature's intent in consolidating PSAPs was to keep the E9-1-1 surcharge low. To date, that goal has been met. However, stakeholders expected a variety of other benefits from consolidation that have not emerged and, in many cases, the opposite of what they were expecting has occurred.