



Colorado Springs Fire Department debuts new emergency response system for 911 calls



EMT Ryan Macek stands by the back doors of an ambulance during the announceme... ▲

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As of Tuesday, some Colorado Springs residents may hear something different when they call 911.

"A unit will respond when a unit is available," call takers will say to residents in the south part of town who contact the emergency service for non-emergency situations — for example, when symptoms indicate the flu, a sprained ankle or a fractured hip.

"This will be somewhat of a shift for the community," said Jayme McConnellogue, deputy chief of operations for the Colorado Springs Fire Department.

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TMFRD Chief Moore

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Instead of immediately dispatching an ambulance, firetruck or other substantial vehicle, new Community Medicine Response Units — in medically outfitted SUVs that are on back order — will arrive at the scene.

Emergency medical technicians will render aid and determine the best course of action, Fire Department officials said Tuesday, while announcing the start of the program at the agency's headquarters on Printers Parkway.

The appropriate response could be EMTs requesting an ambulance to transport the patient to a hospital; setting a telehealth appointment for the patient; sending the patient to an urgent care center; or applying a splint, dispensing pain medication and helping the person get connected with an orthopedic center, said Fire Chief Randy Royal.

"With an ankle sprain, you may not want to sit in an emergency department for several hours," said Dr. Matt Angelidis, co-medical director for the Colorado Springs Fire Department.

While 911 calls are prioritized based on information the reporting person provides, the new approach will change the response from a "one size fits all" to an individual basis, said Dr. E. Stein Bronsky, also medical director for the Fire Department.

"With the low-acuity calls, we don't need advanced life support, so we can keep the heavy apparatus for life support," Royal said.

Nationally, 65% to 75% of the calls fire departments respond to involve a medical issue, he said.

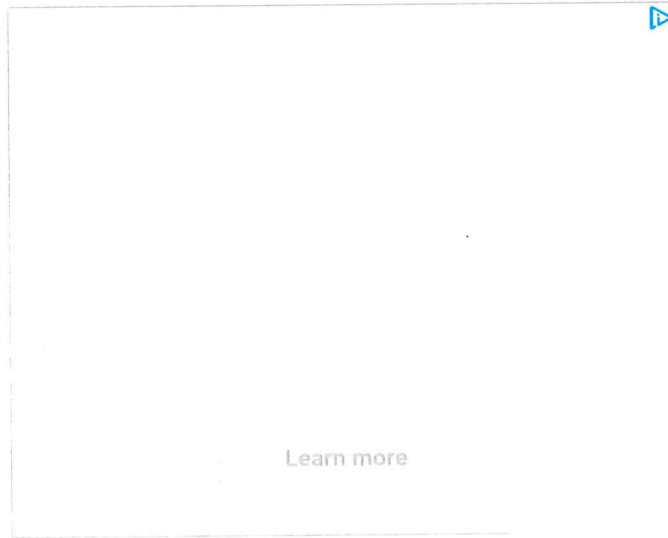
"911 was an emergency line that over time morphed into a lot of people's first access into medical care," Royal said.

Under the new tiered response, high-acuity emergencies such as a bad traffic accident, heart attack, stroke, gunshots or a fire still will receive the same immediate call-out, he added.

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Four units working 40 hours a week are kicking off the program, with a goal of providing 24/7 coverage throughout the city, the fire chief said.

Officials decided to target the south part of town because data show that's where many low-acuity calls originate.

Fire stations 1, 8, 4, 7 and 11 generate more than 50% of call volume, Royal said, compared with 20% of call volume at others. "So we're focusing on the busiest stations."

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Calls for assistance involving people who are homeless can be handled in conjunction with **another specialized response team** of the Fire Department that handles behavioral health issues, he added.

Each specialty unit costs \$450,000 to \$500,000, Royal said, which has been approved in the department's annual budget.

"But the impact is going to be huge," he said.

While the cost of one firetruck is \$600,000, Royal said, it also uses more fuel. And as the city grows, the volume of calls to 911 is increasing, he said.

"If we don't address the call volume, our response times drop," he said. "It's shifting some money from higher response side to lower response."

The program has been developing for several years, officials said. The Fire Department's Community and Public Health Division piloted the idea in 2016 and 2018, using a Colorado Springs Health Foundation grant.

"We learned we could create a better system through efficiencies," McConnellogue said.

The first call the Community Medicine Response Unit went on during the pilot run and again on Tuesday freed up a firetruck that responded to a fire in its district, she said.

"So we know what this value is going to be," she said.

Under the traditional model, a firetruck from another district would have had to take the call while the firetruck was on the medical call, Royal said, which would

have increased the response time.

The pilot program proved that alleviating the stress on heavy apparatus is important and beneficial, said paramedic Lindsey Pastore, who is working on one of the new teams.

First responders such as Pastore are driving backup squads for the 911 system until the new SUVs arrive.

Contact the writer: 719-476-1656.

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