

# Re-Review of the 2012 Performance Audit of the Fire-Rescue Department's Emergency Medical Response Process

## Why OCA Did This Study

The City of San Diego's (City's) 911 emergency response system is a critical public safety service, ensuring that those experiencing a serious or life-threatening emergency receive an appropriate and timely response. The City's Fire-Rescue Department (Fire-Rescue) dispatches resources to all fire and medical emergencies in the City—from life-threatening incidents like heart attacks to minor injuries like falls. Quick response to critical medical calls is vital—the faster a first responder arrives on scene, the sooner life-saving care can begin.

Therefore, we conducted a re-review of our 2012 performance audit of Fire-Rescue's emergency response process with the objectives to determine whether Fire-Rescue:

1. Balances its limited resources with the need to quickly respond to high-priority calls for service; and
2. Uses dispatch data to evaluate emergency response performance, resource allocation, and the adequacy of performance reporting to the public and City leadership.

## What OCA Found

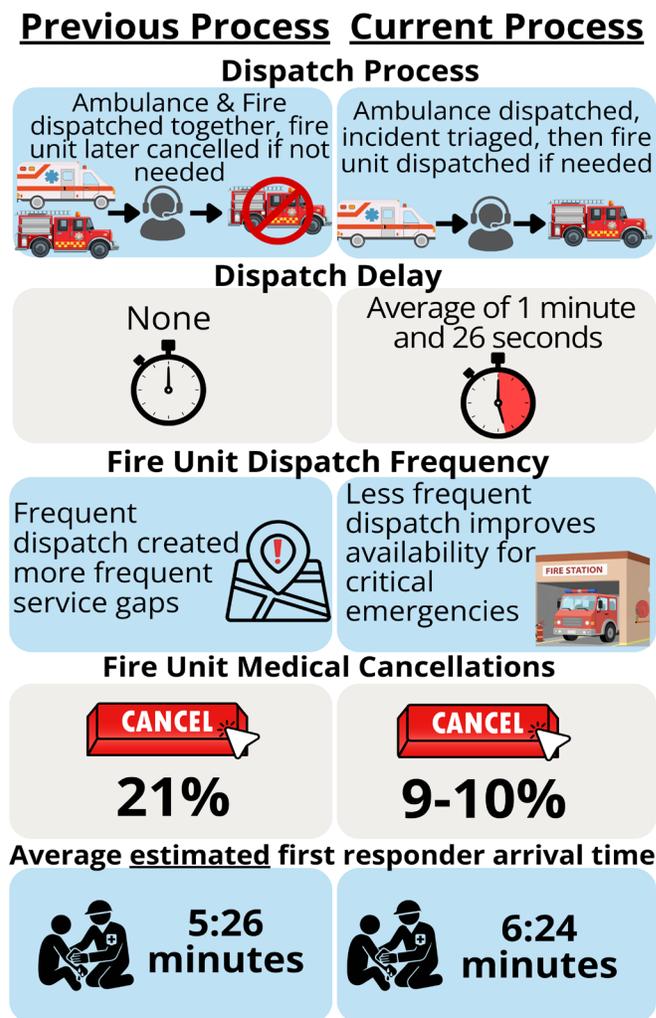
### Topic 1: Process Evaluation

The Fire-Rescue Department should annually report on its emergency medical dispatch process to inform City leadership and the public about the trade-offs associated with its current process.

- Fire-Rescue adopted the prior audit's recommendation to simultaneously alert ambulances and fire units; however, in FY2019, it pivoted to a different protocol for medical emergencies, dispatching an ambulance first, then after triage, dispatching a fire unit if the incident warrants additional support.
- While **Fire-Rescue's current dispatch process has some advantages over the previous process**, such as reduced fire unit cancellations and improved resource preservation, it can **increase response times for the most severe medical emergencies by an estimated average of 58 seconds**.

- While both dispatch processes require a trade-off, **City leaders are not routinely informed on the costs, benefits, and rationale behind the City's emergency response process.**

### Exhibit 8: Fire-Rescue's Current and Previous Dispatch Processes Have Various Pros and Cons



Note 1: While there are multiple variables that influence analysis of the emergency response process, our conclusions demonstrate that the current process takes longer than the previous, a conclusion which Fire-Rescue agrees with.

Note 2: This analysis was performed on incidents where both a fire unit and an ambulance were dispatched, and both arrived. Fire-Rescue conducted a parallel analysis, estimating a 56 second delay compared to our estimate of 58 seconds. Both analyses are limited by the many potential variables in the process, but it is clear the average arrival time delay and potential operational changes that would improve response times require further analysis.  
 Source: OCA created based on data provided by Fire-Rescue, interviews with Fire-Rescue, and Fire-Rescue policy.

## Topic 2: Data Collection and Reporting

The Fire-Rescue Department should track all phases of the emergency response process and evaluate and standardize turnout times to increase accountability.

- Fire-Rescue adopted the prior audit’s recommendation to collect data on all phases of its emergency dispatch process. However, it should also **report on all phases of the process to increase oversight and transparency** to City leadership and the public.
- There is **currently no requirement** for Fire-Rescue to **formally and routinely report on and present information on its emergency response process and performance.**
- Comprehensive reporting would help Fire-Rescue **inform City leadership’s decision-making and requests for additional resources.** Reporting can also give City leadership and the public insight on emergency response performance by phase and geographic area.

**Exhibit 15: From FY2023 Through FY2025, Fire-Rescue Exceeded Its Arrival Time Standard of 6 Minutes and 30 Seconds for High Priority Medical Incidents Across All Council Districts By 1 Minute and 7 Seconds to Almost 3 Minutes**

Council District	Arrival Time (90 <sup>th</sup> Percentile)	Percent of Fire Unit Arrivals Within 6 Minutes and 30 Seconds	Total Incidents Average
1	9 minutes 24 seconds	57%	7,025
2	8 minutes 57 seconds	66%	10,327
3	7 minutes 41 seconds	81%	19,827
4	8 minutes 14 seconds	69%	8,020
5	9 minutes 13 seconds	57%	6,111
6	9 minutes 11 seconds	60%	6,482
7	8 minutes 51 seconds	59%	7,355
8	9 minutes 0 seconds	69%	11,374
9	7 minutes 37 seconds	78%	9,825
<b>Fire-Rescue’s Arrival Time Standard: 6 minutes and 30 seconds</b>			

Note: The arrival time of 6 minutes and 30 seconds includes the time of dispatch to arrival time on scene. It does not include call dispatch time.

Source: OCA generated based on emergency response data provided by Fire-Rescue.

**Emerging Issue: Turnout Time**  
**Fire-Rescue did not meet its arrival time standard from FY2023 through FY2025 in large part due to slow turnout times.**

- **Fire-Rescue has consistently fallen short of its arrival time standard, with underperformance in turnout time** likely contributing to longer total response times (also known as arrival time).

- **Turnout time across all stations was considerably longer than the standard** of 1 minute and 30 seconds or 2 minutes, depending on the time of day, with average turnout time across the scope period taking 2 minutes and 54 seconds.
- With the triage delay and slow turnout times across **all fire stations, crews do not leave the station to respond to an incident for over 4 minutes.**

**Exhibit 12: Fire Units Do Not Leave the Station for an Average of 4 Minutes and 20 Seconds From Dispatch of an Ambulance for Some Medical Emergencies**



Source: OCA generated based on incident and emergency response data provided by Fire-Rescue.

- Fire-Rescue typically attributes substandard arrival times to a lack of fire stations in its public reporting. While this is one factor, **our analysis indicates that slow turnout times are a more significant contributor.** Therefore, Fire-Rescue should establish a metric by which to measure, evaluate, and report turnout time performance.

## What OCA Recommends

We made 3 recommendations to Fire-Rescue, which are intended to improve awareness of the trade-offs Fire-Rescue makes in its dispatch process, and to help monitor and improve turnout times. Specifically, Fire-Rescue should

- Create a policy requiring annual reporting on each phase of the emergency dispatch process, trade-offs associated with the current and alternative processes, and response times of fire units and present findings to City leadership; and
- Establish an internal policy that standardizes how turnout time is tracked and evaluated and report on performance by fire station and fire unit.

The Fire-Rescue Department agreed with all 3 recommendations.

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