

Minutes
Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network
Board of Managers Special Meeting
November 12, 2021

The November 12, 2021 special meeting of the Board of Managers of the Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network (GHC 9-1-1) convened at 10:18 a.m. in the Board Room of the GHC 9-1-1 headquarters at 10220 Fairbanks N. Houston Rd., Houston, Texas 77064.

Board Members Bill Anders, Mark Denman, Russell Rau, Dennis Storemski, Vergil Ratliff, and legal counsel Phillip Berzins, Harris County Assistant Attorney, were present for the special Board meeting. Board Member Shawn Thompson did not attend the meeting; 17 people were in attendance.

Agenda Item 1—"Pledges of Allegiance." The U.S. and Texas pledges of allegiance were recited.

Agenda Item 2—"Citizens Appearances." There were no citizens wishing to appear before the Board.

Agenda Item 3—Action—"Discussion and Consideration of Options that Could Aid HEC and Other 9-1-1 Call Centers in the Harris and Fort Bend County Area to Process 9-1-1 Calls." Chairman Rau stated that the purpose for the special Board meeting was to discuss some solutions to the issues that lead up to an investigative report by local news media regarding Houston 9-1-1 callers being sent to recording. Mr. Rau noted that 9-1-1 call centers and other businesses all over the country are being affected by staffing shortages. He added that the GHC 9-1-1 Board would like to help 9-1-1 call centers with a contingency/back-up plan. Mr. Heffernan mentioned he recently attended a call center conference for large commercial centers, and it was said that the attrition rate during the pandemic has created a challenge for all. Mr. Heffernan stated that GHC 9-1-1 wants to do everything we can to help HEC and the other 9-1-1 emergency call centers. Board Member Denman and Storemski expressed their views and opinions regarding how much involvement and responsibility GHC 9-1-1 should have in the 9-1-1 call centers answering performance. Chairman Rau agreed with both views and stated that the call centers are responsible for handling and responding to all emergency calls, but GHC 9-1-1 should continue to work with the call centers as a partner as has been done in the past. Mr. Rau mentioned several items that GHC 9-1-1 can look into to help aid the call centers such as: mutual aid agreement between HEC and Harris County Sheriff's Office (HCSO), a pool of retired/trained staff, high school students, or establish a triage level based on emergency calls that would make the call-taker more efficient. Board Member Storemski suggested revisiting Texas Commission on Law Enforcement's (TCOLE) hiring/training requirements and reaching out to regulators for rule changes. Hiring the high school students or retired police officers to

be 9-1-1 call screeners would be a good idea, but impossible due to TCOLE requirements. Board Member Denman asked if there was an organization of traveling certified emergency responders that GHC 9-1-1 can contract. Mr. Heffernan answered that there is an organization, but that resource is more for weather related or other types of disasters that affects staffing at 9-1-1 call centers. He added that the recording is a critical part of any call center, and needs to be ready to deploy for both emergency events and in normal operations. Chairman Rau asked if it's possible for a 9-1-1 call to go to a call-taker screener instead of going to recording. Mr. Heffernan stated that there are many possibilities that technology can do, however, GHC 9-1-1 would need to work with the call centers which have different call handling protocols. Board Member Ratliff asked if the call-taker can work remotely. Mr. Heffernan answered that the GHC 9-1-1 system can be accessed at any location in the network, and the ruggedized laptops have been tested from a home location with a hot spot without an issue. Unfortunately, the call centers dispatching technology, CAD and radio, cannot currently accommodate a remote call handling environment. Board Secretary Anders stated he would like to hear from PSAP personnel about what they think would help/aid their centers. Chairman Rau asked Mr. Berzins if a committee was formed with two Board Members, would a public meeting need to be announced. Mr. Berzins stated he would look into it.

Chairman Rau invited HCSO and HEC representatives to come forward and speak on their 9-1-1 call-taking process. HEC Division Manager, India Summers and George Buenik, Director of Public Safety and Homeland Security, City of Houston (City), HCSO Lieutenant Lameka Whitehair and 9-1-1 Coordinator, Tim Staten introduced themselves. Mr. Buenik commented that regarding the investigative report, the reporter had been meeting with HEC Director, Robert Mock and requesting information, which HEC provided to him back in June, 2021. Mr. Buenik stated that it is unknown how many calls went to the recording, but the recording was implemented during Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Chairman Rau added that GHC 9-1-1 can determine how many 9-1-1 calls go to the recording, and it is more than it should be. Mr. Buenik mentioned that HEC can look into the following; hiring retired dispatchers/police, a triage level for calls, part-time positions, public information campaign that helps the public differ between emergency and non-emergency calls. He also expressed the idea of hiring a temporary agency to help staff call-takers. Mr. Buenik explained that HEC does have the capabilities for call-takers to work remotely, but that would not work in all scenarios. For example, on July 3, 2021 when an electrical incident occurred at HEC, the 9-1-1 system did not go down, however, the CAD system was affected and call-takers could not transmit the information for police and fire via the CAD system. The CAD information was transmitted using paper and pencil. Mr. Buenik asked if HEC and HCSO personnel are interchangeable, could HCSO call-takers be sent to HEC, and is their system the same. Chairman Rau added that theoretically the opportunity could be made to every PSAP in the region, for those call takers looking to make additional income. Mr. Heffernan explained that the 9-1-1 system would be common to everyone,

but the challenges would be the CAD, radio, and other specific agency protocols. A training program may be needed for a call-takers to be certified to take 9-1-1 calls at HCSO and HEC. Mr. Storemski inquired whether the transfer from the call-taker to the dispatcher uses the same CAD technology. Mr. Heffernan stated that HCSO call transfer is more complicated, because they transfer to many more locations, but the technology is similar and the screen display may look different. Chairman Rau asked HCSO if they have experienced any staffing shortages, or have plans in place for potential staffing shortages. Lieutenant Whitehair stated HCSO has experience some staffing issues, but it has not affected HCSO's service level. She mentioned that recruiting more people is a good idea, since it has become more frequent that employees are quitting. Board Secretary Anders inquired about why HCSO employees are quitting the job, some without notice. Lt. Whitehair said employees quit the job, because they want to seek other job opportunities with better pay. Board Secretary Anders asked if HCSO employees are working 12-hour shifts. Lt. Whitehair responded that employees are working only 8 hours per shift. Chairman Rau inquired about how it has affected HEC employees working 12-hour days. Ms. Summers answered that because of the staffing issues employees are working 12 hours 3-4 times a week. The majority of younger employees who want the work-life balance, simply do not want to work 12 hours a day. There was some discussion about creating a recruiting campaign to help recruit call-takers for 9-1-1 call centers. Public Information Officer Sonya Clauson mentioned that GHC 9-1-1 is working on creating a recruiting video that will highlight responders, a series of short PSA's, and promote recruitment on social media pages. Chairman Rau asked who the citizen would contact if they are interested on the job. Ms. Clauson stated that GHC 9-1-1 does not do the hiring, but on the GHC 9-1-1 website there are job postings from various call centers. GHC 9-1-1 is working on updating the website homepage to promote and direct citizens to the job postings. Board Member Denman asked if call-takers can take calls in a different call-center. Mr. Heffernan explained that it is possible, call-takers may go to another call center and log into the system to take calls, but the challenge is the CAD and radio will not interoperate with each other.

Next, Chairman Rau summarized the topics that were discussed: a contingency staff pool driven by GHC 9-1-1, research of TCOLE regulations hiring/training requirements, and GHC 9-1-1 assisting with recruitment efforts.

Board Member Anders stated GHC 9-1-1 could provide the citizen with direct contact information on what call center is hiring. Ms. Clauson mentioned that there are job postings information for any specific call centers, including the two major centers are listed in the GHC 9-1-1 website. Board Member Ratliff inquired about the pay per hour for a Telecommunicator. Mr. Buenik said the City of Houston's rate was \$15-\$17/hour. Board Member Ratliff, being a retired police officer, pointed out that a retired police officer may not be attracted to work for that pay-rate. She stated that the focus should be on training and raising the salary for telecommunicators. Mr. Buenik said that as a

former HPD recruiter, a signing bonus might help recruit people. He mentioned that Mr. Mock has spoken to City of Houston Human Resources and put in a written request to get a signing bonus, but does not know if it would get approved. Another strategy that Mr. Buenik mentioned was employees helping recruit workers, and as a reward, the employee would get an incentive for a successful referral. Board Member Ratliff asked what is the contract commitment made by HEC for the signing bonus. Mr. Buenik stated he did not know, but for police officer recruits, the City used legal language to enforce recruits to commit and finish the academy. In regards to the committee that will be formed to review solutions to help the call centers, Mr. Buenik recommended that GHC 9-1-1 include call-takers for their insights about the training/hiring process and handling of 9-1-1 calls. Mr. Buenik said that one of the issues that HEC is facing when it comes to hiring employees is the City's long hiring process. Board Member Storemski suggested the committee speak to TCOLE personnel about their regulations and requirements. Mr. Heffernan answered that GHC 9-1-1 can get in contact with TCOLE personnel to discuss.

Board Member Denman noted HEC's low service level in September 2021, and an improvement in service level in October, 2021. He inquired about what HEC did to improve their service level in October, 2021, and what the status is now in regards to staffing. Ms. Summers explained that during the summer months May through July are their busiest months. During the months when school is in session, HEC has part-time intern students to assist with non-emergency calls, but when the students are no longer there for the summer, they have to pull some of the full-time call-takers to answer the non-emergency line. Ms. Summers added that the recording is always there ready to be deployed, but because the peak of call volume during those months the recording was used many times. Ms. Summers stated it is hard to pin-point a single cause. Board Secretary Anders asked if the officials such as the Mayor, are aware of HEC's staffing shortage. Mr. Buenik said that the officials are not specifically aware about HEC staffing issue, but are aware about the staffing shortages in the City departments such as police, fire, solid waste, etc., but the Mayor and his chief of staff were made informed about HEC investigative report.

Board Secretary Anders inquired about a way to measure the calls that went to the recording. Mr. Heffernan stated that any discussion about the capacity of the 9-1-1 system or information about the numbers would be a security risk, and deferred to GHC 9-1-1 Service Officer, Roger Hauck. Mr. Hauck explained that, when a call-taker is not available, the 9-1-1 calls will go into a queue and wait for an available agent. Once the call is in queue, it will immediately get the recorded message, but if a call-taker becomes available during the recording, the call will immediately be sent to that available call-taker. He added that GHC 9-1-1 has an idea of how many calls went into the queue. Mr. Heffernan mentioned that GHC 9-1-1 will work with the call centers and provide them with helpful reports. Mr. Buenik stated that HEC would welcome call-takers from HCSO and other PSAPs that would like to also answer 9-1-1 calls at HEC

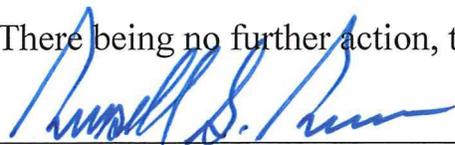
for an opportunity to make extra money. Chairman Rau added that Mr. Buenik's idea is an immediate solution, and would like for the committee to prioritize and focus on immediate, secondary, and long-term solutions. Chairman Rau stated that since GHC 9-1-1 reimburses certain HEC/HCSO salaries, GHC 9-1-1 would need to communicate with HEC/HCSO or maybe think about a payment solution such as; a bonus/stipend/or overtime payment. If, Board approval is required for facilitating an immediate solution, to please have it on the agenda for the December 8, 2021 Board meeting. Chairman Rau inquired about HEC funds. Mr. Fonseca stated that HEC will exceed the budgeted overtime expenses by over \$1 million dollars, which could be allocated for temporary pay. Board Member Storemski commented that the overtime overage was still within the amount of the budgeted funds that were approve for HEC. To Mr. Fonseca's last point, Board Storemski stated that the question to be answer is, is GHC 9-1-1 willing to go beyond the approved budget amount to help HEC solve their issue. Chairman Rau said, yes. Board Member Ratliff said she would have to look at the totality of everything that the committee puts together, before she could make a decision. Chairman Rau asked what kind of salary increase, at the City of Houston, could a million dollars have covered. Mr. Fonseca said he wasn't sure of the answer to Chairman Rau's question, but noted that the Board approved an equity pay increase of about \$275,000 in the 2022 budget for HEC.

Lastly, Chairman Rau recapped the following important items discussed by the Board: contingency staff pool, mutual aid agreement between HEC, HCSO and other PSAPs in the GHC 9-1-1 territory, TCOLE research on regulations/policies/training, 9-1-1 telecommunicator recruitment effort by GHC 9-1-1 for all of the call centers, bonus/stipend/overtime incentives. The Board discussed the formation of the committee, and appointed Mr. Heffernan in charge of the committee.

Board Member Storemski made the motion to appoint Mr. Heffernan to form the committee and address the issues previously discussed by the Board. Board Member Denman seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Rau thanked everyone for attending the special Board meeting. Board Member Denman thanked HEC and HCSO for addressing the issues, he added that the Board and GHC 9-1-1 staff would do everything they could to help PSAPs, and encouraged everyone on doing a great job.

There being no further action, the meeting adjourned at 11:53 a.m.



Russell S. Rau, Chairman



William B. Anders, Secretary