

**HALIFAX COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE
County Administration Conference Room
1050 Mary Bethune Street
Halifax, Virginia
January 25, 2023 / 11:00 AM**

CALL TO ORDER

Committee Chairman Roller called the meeting to order at 11:03 a.m.

ATTENDANCE

Committee members attending were: Committee Chairman Roller; and Chairman Short

Staff members attending were: Scott Simpson, County Administrator; Jason Johnson, Emergency Services Coordinator; and, Charlene Hendricks, Executive Administrative Assistant.

News Reporter attending: Miranda Baines, The Gazette Virginian

BUSINESS ITEMS

1. General Discussion – Status of Fire and EMS in County

Committee Chairman Roller said the Public Safety Committee is a new committee formed to look at our public safety and identify improvements which can be made in the County. He noted we have some challenges and anticipates there will be more coming up in the future.

Mr. Simpson stated some issues have already been addressed internally, so the next step is to address the overall public safety for County, which is eventually going to be a Board of Supervisors action. He said the Committee was formed to figure out where we are, where we are headed, and then we can present something to the Board of Supervisors and all of the agencies. He noted when someone dials 911, they expect the phone to be answered before it rings, and as soon as they hang up with 911, they expect to open the front door to see a firetruck or ambulance there, which is important to everybody. He stated if there is a breakdown in the system it results in delays in responding to calls or delays in dispatching calls, which is at the core of public safety and service to the community. He said it is time to take the next steps to figure out how to ensure the long-term goals for health in the community.

Mr. Simpson said over the last several years, the Board of Supervisors has made investments in the 911 staff as far as significant salary increases. He stated the 911 center is close to being fully staffed and has some longevity of people in the building, so when somebody calls, their call is going to be answered.

He said the next step is the call going out to dispatch fire, EMS, or rescue squads and how quickly the truck rolls, and how many people are on it. He said if there are simultaneous calls, the question is how can that be handled.

Committee Chairman Roller stated he needs an orientation on departments, volunteers, and paid employees, who does fire, EMS, and rescue to get an overall view of everything. He noted he reviewed the documentation sent out by Mr. Johnson for Charlotte County, Mecklenburg County, and Lunenburg County, and the recommendations from their studies, which included a report on 20 things to develop and establish. He said part of the discussion needed from the Committee is to determine if Halifax County needs to have an evaluation completed through the Virginia Department of Fire Programs. He commented a lot of departments are doing their own thing and we need to be prepared going forward.

Mr. Johnson said the study would be a starting point. He said the email he sent out included studies from other Counties, and they basically have the same results. He said the report is not identical, but noted their recommendations are about the same across the board. He commented the study takes approximately 6 months to be completed. He emphasized the County needs more manpower, and it is imperative to move forward with a plan as quickly as possible because of the call volume. He stated throwing money at the issues will not solve the problem, because we need to find the right people and get them trained.

Mr. Johnson stated there is an upcoming EMT class starting next week and 30 people have already signed up, but noted there is no way to determine how many will actually complete the class and stay in the local area. Chairman Short stated some of them drop out after the first couple of weeks for one reason or another. Committee Chairman Roller said it takes a special person who is willing to provide that type of service, because it is not for everybody.

Mr. Johnson said call volumes have increased. He stated during the week Mondays are the biggest call volume day for the rescue squad and noted there were 631 calls throughout the year. He said Thursdays are the second busiest day for calls and noted there were 635 calls throughout the year. He noted on Wednesdays there were 585 calls throughout the year, and on Sundays, there were 582 calls throughout the year. He stated there were 4,267 calls for the year for the rescue squad and those calls are just in their territory, so those numbers do not include other County calls from North Halifax, Turbeville, or Chase City, Charlotte County, and Mecklenburg County for advanced life support assistance. He noted the rescue squad also gets dispatched to help assist North Halifax and Turbeville when they have a patient who is critical, and they also need additional assistance for vehicle accidents and so forth.

Chairman Short commented the 3 agencies that transport in the County include Halifax Rescue, North Halifax, and Turbeville. Mr. Johnson said Cluster Springs is in the process of getting certified. He noted they have been trying to obtain their Medicare number, so they can bill.

Chairman Short wanted to know if the 4,267 calls for the rescue squad were answered calls. Mr. Johnson said dispatched calls were 4,910 calls including the Advanced Life Support (ALS) assist calls to all Counties, mutual aid calls, and local agencies. He verified they answered 4,605 calls for the year, which was the majority of the calls.

Chairman Short asked if he had numbers available for North Halifax and Turbeville. Mr. Johnson said there were 927 calls for North Halifax and they were able to respond to 683 calls. He stated Turbeville

had a total of 420 calls and they responded to 190 calls. He commented Halifax County is the third largest County in the State, and we are operating basically with 3 and a half ambulances, which is unheard of. He said Campbell County operates with 7 ambulances, and Pittsylvania County is operating with 5 ambulances.

Mr. Johnson emphasized the call volume is becoming a huge issue for the County. He said if additional funds are allocated to the local agencies, the County needs to be involved to ensure the salaries for paid employees are being handled efficiently. He noted with Mecklenburg transitioning to paid employees, the County will most likely lose some of our EMT personnel.

Chairman Short wanted to know if Turbeville crosses over into North Carolina and Mr. Johnson verified they do not go into North Carolina. Mr. Johnson said the County is not allowed to cross over State lines unless it is a request for mutual aid. There was some additional discussion between the Committee members noting that North Halifax will go into Pittsylvania County and vice versa and Campbell County will come into Halifax County if requested.

Chairman Short wanted to know if the local agencies have enough manpower for paid staff and Mr. Johnson verified they do not. Chairman Short asked if there was any information available on paid staff. Mr. Johnson stated the local agencies are sharing, and he said what he means by that is if they can work a 24-hour shift with the rescue squad one day, take the next day off, and then the following day go to North Halifax and work a 24-hour shift for them.

Chairman Short commented the County's immediate need seems to be manpower, but he asked if there were enough emergency vehicles. Mr. Johnson said there are approximately 9 ambulances in the County belonging to different agencies. He stated the rescue squad has one employee out, and they are also in the process of hiring an employee to insure that they have four people on a shift to be able to provide service for 2 ambulances per shift. He said the other local agencies need at least 2 people available each day to run calls.

Committee Chairman Roller wanted to verify that the shifts are 24 hours, and Mr. Johnson said that is correct. He stated for operations 16 individuals are needed, because if they work a 24-hour shift, they would be off for 72 hours. He commented he has worked a 24-hour shift, and emphasized you need the next day off to rest noting fatigue is a factor to be considered.

Mr. Simpson said if you work 24 hours, you need 72 hours off to recharge and be ready for the next shift. He stated the County is short on providers, so they can pick up an extra shift on that middle day, which allows them to work another 24-hour shift with another local agency. He commented burnout will eventually happen.

Mr. Simpson asked Mr. Johnson to explain what he means by having 3 and a half ambulances available to run. Mr. Johnson said it basically means having 2 to 3 crews, and then there is one person standing by that needs a driver. He stated the rescue squad usually has a crew and a half, which gives them 2 people to run an ambulance, and a third person is there at the building to hopefully cover the next call, if they can find a driver. He noted the rules and regulations are very specific for EMS. If you have an Advance Life Support (ALS) ambulance and if the call is for ALS, there must be an EMT on the vehicle. He said if something happens to that paramedic in the vehicle during ALS procedures, the EMT can take over care of that patient at a minimum by doing Basic Life Support (BLS) care.

Mr. Simpson wanted to verify that it takes a driver and EMT to put a BLS ambulance on the road. Mr. Johnson said that is correct. He stated if an agency has 3 people sitting in the building, including a driver and EMT, they go out on a call, then another call comes in, they have an EMT sitting there at the building, but no driver is available. Mr. Simpson noted it takes time to get a volunteer, so it could take 20 minutes or more before responding to the call, which is unacceptable.

Mr. Johnson said the EMS plan for Fire Commission was recently approved. He stated the EMS response plan meets the State objectives. He said the State has set up objectives for each County to follow within a specific timeframe. There was some discussion between the Committee members about the coverage area in the County, and the distance and time it takes to respond to a call and the steps, which need to be taken to implement a plan to provide adequate manpower and emergency vehicles. Everyone agreed that an emergency plan is needed to better serve the Citizens of the County.

Chairman Short said it seems that more manpower is the first issue to address, and then more ambulances would be the next issue.

Committee Chairman Roller said there is no way to tackle everything at one time, but addressing the immediate needs is imperative. He noted the study will also be beneficial in determining how best to move forward.

Mr. Johnson discussed the spreadsheet he previously sent out to the Volunteer Fire Departments. He noted all of the fire departments completed and returned the form, which includes a list of equipment and line of duty steps.

Committee Chairman Roller wanted to know how close is the rescue squad tied to the Volunteer Fire Departments. Mr. Johnson verified that the rescue squad is not tied to any other entity. He commented the rescue squad has fundraisers and donation drives, but they also bill insurance companies for their services.

Mr. Simpson stated the Halifax County Rescue Squad receives funds from different avenues. He said the majority of their funds are from billing the insurance companies, and he noted the County provides a supplement of approximately \$175,000. He stated the rescue squad has been able to maintain, but more manpower per shift is needed, which is expensive. He said if 6 individuals are hired and depending upon salaries, most likely it will cost about \$750,000 in order to have enough manpower to operate one ambulance and a half. He discussed the possibility of more calls being run, because they have more manpower, and if they ran 12 to 15 calls per day, 2 ambulances might not be enough to provide adequate coverage. He said there is one paid individual on staff for 8 hours at Turbeville, which means they need a volunteer to come out in order to run a call, so response time is delayed. He commented in rough numbers, it would cost the County approximately \$500,000 to have a full-time ambulance in Turbeville.

Mr. Simpson said North Halifax is very similar, since they have one individual who is paid staff, but their hours are a little longer. He noted they have to tone out for a driver explain there are times when there is a call in North Halifax's territory, they have an EMT sitting at the building ready to go, but they don't have a driver resulting in a delay long enough that the Rescue Squad gets toned out. He said the rescue squad literally drives by the station at North Halifax where the EMT is still waiting for a driver so they can respond to the call, which is a huge waste of resources for everyone. He stated it also compounds issues in town, because they are short on ambulances and staff since one of their ambulances is tied up

for 2 hours or more in the northern part of the County. He said if one of the ambulances for the Rescue Squad is out in the northern end of the County, Turbeville is then trying to respond and cover the call that is happening in town. He emphasized it is a compounding problem by not having proper staffing in the right places full-time.

Chairman Short asked if having 2 Rover ALSs in Halifax would be beneficial. Mr. Johnson said it would be a good start. He noted a lot of territories are backing ambulances down to a BLS crew where there is just an Emergency Vehicle Operators Course (EVOC) driver and EMT. He stated the paramedic would roll as a first response, and if they are needed on the ambulance, they can get on the ambulance, but if not, they get back in the Quick Response Vehicle (QRV) truck and go back to the station to be available for the next call. He commented the County could possibly get by paying 4 to 6 paramedics per day on a Rover and having them placed in different parts of the County. Chairman Short noted it would also be less expensive to pay a Rover driver. Mr. Johnson said a driver and paramedic are allowed, but a waiver from the office of the EMS is needed, and proper documentation is needed on every call sheet.

Mr. Simpson asked when a call is dispatched, if there is an indicator that you need either basic lifesaving or advanced lifesaving. He said he assumes if there is a call where someone is having a heart attack, ALS is needed. Mr. Johnson said there are ways to send calls out in that manner, but it is getting more advanced in the EMD section of it for the dispatchers because there is more training involved, and he doesn't know if the extra training is within the budget. He stated if they have to change CAD systems, it might be something worth looking into.

Chairman Short wanted to know if the paramedics and EMTs can legally turn down a call once they arrive on the scene. Mr. Johnson said not in the State of Virginia. He stated if the patient wants to go to the hospital by ambulance, they are required to transport them. Chairman Short commented when that happens, it hurts emergency services because they have to transport a patient to the ER even if it is just for a nosebleed. Mr. Johnson said several people also use the ER as a clinic.

Chairman Short asked if an ALS is needed on a childbirth call, and Mr. Johnson verified an ALS is needed. He said BLS has been taught the procedure, but it is a good idea to have a paramedic coming, not necessarily for the baby, but for the mom especially if they have not had prenatal care.

Mr. Simpson asked Mr. Johnson to explain the qualifications of an ambulance driver. Mr. Johnson said the driver is required to take an Emergency Vehicle Operators Course (EVOC). He asked Mr. Johnson if the EVOC driver has any medical training. Mr. Johnson verified EVOC drivers have CPR and First Aid training, which is about a 6-hour course. Mr. Simpson asked if it is proper to designate EVOC drivers to a shift, and Mr. Johnson stated it could be done that way. He said if the paramedic is starting Advanced Life Skills (ALS), such as starting an IV, hooking the patient up to a cardiac monitor, or giving them drugs, then an EMT is required to be on the truck with the paramedic by the office of EMS regulations. Mr. Simpson said that would make 3 people on the truck. He stated if the driver is an EMT, you could get by with an EMT and paramedic, and Mr. Johnson said that is correct because the EMT and driver could be the same person.

Mr. Simpson said if you want to run as lean and efficiently from a financial standpoint, then you would want all of your drivers to be EMTs. Mr. Johnson stated currently there is no move-up in the process, because we don't have enough staffing. He stated there would be more ability to move trucks, if locations were fully staffed.

Mr. Simpson commented more trained staff is needed with the individuals being the right people, such as EMT drivers or paramedics. He stated local agencies most likely are not able to hire additional staff or else they would have already done it. He said Emergency Services are needed in the County, and it will most likely cost a few million to get the County to where it needs to be. He stated that supervised funding and structuring need to be determined for the 3 agencies to get the most efficient results. He commented some agencies bill and others may not bill as much, hourly rates vary for employees, some squads cover the expense of health insurance, and others don't even offer health insurance. He emphasized there needs to be some consistency with the salary and benefits structure. He stated in an effort to get employees, we might need to offer an incentive. He discussed the possibility of creating a department in the County so everybody could be on the County payroll, which would provide employees to have benefits, and a salary structure that can be universal. He stated if the County is funding all of that, the agencies would not have as large of an expense anymore, which means they will become highly profitable. He noted the free market is not a problem, but it is almost like everything needs to be rolled into one group. He stated he does not know the best way to proceed, but another option to consider would be to slowly supplement the agencies as needed.

Mr. Simpson stated there are several ways to structure the process, but the difficulty is it will take somebody to coordinate all of it. He said from a simplicity standpoint, you could write a check and roll on, but you lose the effectiveness of those funds that way because you have people using them in different manners. Chairman Short agreed with Mr. Simpson on both scenarios. He noted pay rate for the EMT's would be based on experience and the different departments probably would not like it, but consistency is needed. Mr. Simpson commented the funds being currently provided to the different agencies are proportional.

Mr. Johnson noted at times, the rescue squad is taken out of their service area. He said if a patient wanted to be transported to Duke, it could put an ambulance out of service for a minimum of 3 to 6 hours, and Chairman Short commented it is like that for almost all of the agencies. He said if North Halifax ran a call and the patient wanted to go to Lynchburg, it would put that ambulance out of service for a minimum of at least 3 hours. Mr. Johnson said it is not unusual for a patient to remain on the stretcher for 25 to 40 minutes after arrival at any of the hospitals. He noted the handoff of the patient does not take place until a bed is available. There was some further discussion about billing procedures including, first, second and third notices. Mr. Johnson noted most billing companies get a percentage of what is billed. He stated the rescue squad's return for 2021 was over a million dollars in ambulance billing. Chairman Short stated it might be more beneficial to pay a minimum wage salary for an employee to send out billing invoices.

Mr. Simpson said in the last couple of budget cycles, funds from the Con-Edison money were set aside to be used toward fire and EMS training, and then this year funds were set aside from personal property taxes for future EMS needs. He said funds are being reserved to be utilized towards the process, but he noted if it all goes directly to payroll, it will only cover payroll for about one year. He stated long-term steps need to be discussed, so the first step would be for the Committee to begin discussions, so everyone will have the same knowledge and understanding of what is going on. He said ultimately adding the agencies to the Committee to have discussions about how they are operating and what their challenges are, will be important.

Chairman Short said having the Committee and agencies together would help determine the positives. Mr. Simpson said once paid staff is brought on, there are concerns from volunteers who are working the same hours and shifts. Chairman Short stated it would also be a good idea to discuss paid drivers at minimum wage. Mr. Johnson noted background checks are another issue to keep in mind when seeking paid drivers. Committee Chairman Roller stated offering incentives to volunteers might help to make

them feel appreciated. Chairman Short mentioned the possibility of purchasing gift cards for gas to help volunteers with the cost of fuel.

Committee Chairman Roller stated determining how much manpower is needed should probably be the first step to validate the amount of funding. He said a meeting with the organizations also needs to take place to ensure that everyone is on the same page to see what is trying to be accomplished. It was suggested meeting with the local agencies individually at first, and then bringing everyone together later would be the best way to move forward with the process.

Chairman Short commented it is important not to get EMS confused or comingled with the fire departments. Mr. Johnson stated the overtime rule is different under the guidelines for fire departments and EMS. Mr. Simpson said it would be up to each agency to determine how they structure their payroll. He agreed with Committee Chairman Roller that the next step is to try to meet individually with the 3 agencies to understand what their needs and challenges are, and then bring all of the agencies together for further discussions.

Mr. Johnson said he announced the Public Safety Committee had been formed at the last Fire Commission Meeting, so they are not caught off guard. He stated nobody asked why the Committee was formed. Mr. Simpson said EMS services is the only thing being discussed right now. He stated Turbeville and North Halifax are the only agencies that need to be aware of the matters currently being discussed to avoid any confusion.

Mr. Simpson stated in order to be prepared for the next meeting, discussion with all 3 entities needed to take place, and they need to be prepared to give a certain amount of information. He noted financials, the number for paid staff, and what it will take to add staff are some of the items needed. He said once the meetings take place with all the agencies, the Committee could have another discussion to process all of the information and determine the immediate needs. Mr. Johnson commented the 3 agencies input will be invaluable, because they know their system and agency better than anybody else.

2. Radio System Installation Update

Committee Chairman Roller said the next item is the Radio System Installation Update. Mr. Johnson said the installation for Sheriff's Department is basically complete, and they are working on the South Boston Police Department vehicles. He stated there have been some hiccups with the system. Committee Chairman Roller wanted to know if everything is currently on schedule, and Mr. Simpson verified that is correct.

Committee Chairman Roller asked if all the issues with the radio system is being documented and forwarded. Mr. Johnson stated Ms. Jones at the 911 Call Center is documenting the information daily into a spreadsheet. He noted they are trying to define if the issues are specific to an area, or if it is power specific.

Mr. Simpson stated the new system needs to be fine-tuned and tweaked because some towers overpower others. He said it should take about another 6 weeks for the installation process to be complete, and in another couple of months, Motorola will have their fine-tuning finalized. He commented everybody should be working off of the new system by the end of February or the first of March, and then the old system can be taken completely offline.

Mr. Johnson said the old system will remain on the Sinai tower for paging purposes for the fire departments, because UHF pagers were not purchased. He said the paging system has always worked for all fire departments from the Sinai tower only.

Mr. Simpson stated overall the new system is being implemented on schedule, and things are progressing as well as possible. He said the next part is going to be a 911 Board question. He stated all agencies are being provided with radios and portables so if any of the agencies want to add additional radios at their expense, it will need to have the input from the whole 911 Board. He noted the 911 Board would need to put a protocol in place. He said all radios are encrypted, and the software is password protected.

Mr. Johnson said somebody approached a vendor about purchasing a slimline, which looks like an old tech cellphone. He noted those were taken off of the market about a year ago, but there are wholesalers that still have them sitting on the shelf. He commented out of date products should not be used on the new system. Committee Chairman Roller said standardized equipment was one of the recommendations from the Fire Services Board.

Mr. Simpson asked the Committee members if they wanted to hold off on the fire programs study until discussions have taken place with the providers, since it would most likely have the same results as the other Counties, or if they wanted to move forward with the study. Committee Chairman Roller stated it seems best to hold off from having the study completed, because the County already has some of those items checked off. He noted having an external study completed would give the validation on a recommendation with how to proceed.

Mr. Simpson said a Resolution from the Board of Supervisors is needed to begin the study. He stated it might be a good idea to see how the meetings go with the three agencies. After those meetings take place, the Board of Supervisors can move forward with the study if needed, and the Committee members agreed. Mr. Simpson noted the agencies should be given a few weeks notice, so they can gather the information needed for the meetings. The Committee members decided the meetings could be pushed out about 4 weeks.

ADJOURN

Motion made by Chairman Short, seconded by Committee Chairman Roller, to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:38 p.m.