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A REPRIORITIZING OF RESOURCES



The Chandler Fire, Health and Medical Department has been dispatching two-person crews on less-urgent calls rather than sending a full crew and engine or ladder truck on every call.

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Chandler Firefighters Dwayne Stearman (left) and Matt Kowalski are part of a two-person crew that responds to less-urgent medical calls to keep full crews freed up for higher-level emergencies.

Chandler Fire reprioritizes resources

2-person crews take less-urgent calls

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Chandler is changing the way it responds to certain lower-urgency medical calls in order to keep more crews freed up for higher-level emergencies.

Since early January, the Chandler Fire, Health and Medical Department has been using two newly created units whose primary purpose is to respond to calls involving minor medical calls. The two-person crews, one of them a department paramedic, also are dispatched on calls involving fire alarms or other non-emergencies.

The system, called a low-acuity response unit, uses a smaller truck to replace a previous protocol in which a four-person crew who staffed either an engine or ladder truck normally was dispatched to any call, including where that level of response was not necessary, said Chief Jeff Clark.

“We want to match the resource we send with the need that is being called for,” Clark said. “Rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach to responding like we have had in the past, if we only need a low-acuity response unit, based on what 911 is being activated for, then let’s just send a low-acuity response unit.”

An important part of the change involves the way dispatchers question callers who dial the 911 emergency line, Clark said. Based on a series of questions, they help determine whether the call can be assigned to the low-acuity response team. Chandler calls are handled by the Phoenix Fire Department Regional Dispatch Center.

The Chandler department’s goal for responses to 911 emergencies is 5 minutes or less, Clark said. For calls to the low-acuity team, it is 15 minutes or less. If it is determined that the call fits that latter category, dispatchers advise the caller of the potential wait time.

The two crews operate between 8:30 a.m. and 8:30 p.m., when call volumes are highest, Clark said. One crew is based at a station at Hamilton and Pecos streets, and the other at Ellis Street and Fry Road. Officials determined those two locations are within 15 minutes of any point within the city, Clark said.



PHOTOS BY NICK OZA/THE REPUBLIC

“We want to match the resource we send with the need,” says Chandler Fire, Health and Medical Department Chief Jeff Clark.

“We are attaining a much higher response time than that. In most cases, we’re still getting there in less than 10 minutes,” he said.

The two-person trucks are staffed with existing fire personnel who rotate shifts from stations throughout the city. The department retrofitted an existing smaller truck for one of the units, and purchased and equipped the other one new, at a cost of about \$75,000, Clark said.

The trucks are fitted with equipment that would allow the crews to respond to a medical emergency deemed more serious if need be, such as a heart attack. They also include a small pump and hose that can allow the crew to attack a small brush or dumpster fire.

If the two trucks are tied up on calls and another minor medical emergency call comes in, a traditional four-person unit would be dispatched, Clark said.

The department saw the practical benefit of the system the first day it was used, Clark said. One of the new units responded to a call for someone with abdominal pain. At the same time they were on that call, another call came in for a structure fire. A four-person fire crew that would have otherwise been on the medical call was able to respond to the fire.

During the first 30 days the system was in place, the new units responded to 342 calls that otherwise would have diverted a four-person truck. Of those calls, 66 percent were medical responses and 26 percent were for other services such as checking an odor or assisting someone who had fallen. Another 8 percent were fire alarms. The 342 calls were about 17 percent of all calls during that period.

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The two-person trucks come fitted with firefighting and medical equipment.



NICK OZA/THE REPUBLIC

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Resources

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In 2014, the Chandler department responded to 21,442 incidents. Of those, 15,652 — about 73 percent — were medical.

Clark said based on early results, the department anticipates 25 to 30 percent of overall calls can be handled by the two-person crews.

"We didn't add any personnel to do this program. This is a true shift in priority and adjustment in the resources we already had in the department," he said.

A four-person crew costs the city \$160 an hour, while the two-person crew is half that, Clark added.

In the Phoenix area, most municipal departments see about three-fourths of their calls come in for emergency medical responses. In 2013, according to a *Republic* analysis published in December, 88 percent of calls in Phoenix were medical in nature. Tempe had 80 percent of calls that were medical that year, Mesa 75 percent, Chandler and Scottsdale 72 percent, and Gilbert 69 percent.

Mesa Fire and Medical Department began a similar program, using what is called Community Care units, in 2006. In 2013, it expanded the program to include responses to various behavioral health-related calls.

Dwayne Stearman, a Chandler paramedic working a low-acuity response

Medical calls

Here is the percentage of calls that were medical in nature, by municipality, in 2013, based on a *Republic* analysis in December:

Phoenix: 88 percent.

Peoria: 85 percent.

Tempe: 80 percent.

Buckeye: 77 percent.

Mesa: 75 percent.

Chandler: 72 percent.

Scottsdale: 72 percent.

Gilbert: 69 percent.

unit on a recent Friday morning, explained how a call that morning quickly was elevated to a more serious status when it was determined a person may have suffered a stroke. But the team was able to begin treatment right away.

"It works out well with the types of calls we're doing," he said. "With the call we just went on, the son thought it initially was a code, but we can initiate CPR right away with that."

His partner, Firefighter Matt Kowalski, said it's been quickly apparent that the two-man crews are a more efficient use of resources.

"The type of calls we go on aren't in need of four people," he said. "If somebody needs help up, or somebody has nausea, vomiting and flulike symptoms, they might not even need to go (to a hospital). We might just give them some medications to stop the nausea and vomiting and they'd be good."