



CITY OF
ST. CATHARINES

Corporate Report

Report from Fire and Emergency Management Services, Fire Chief

Date of Report: March 11, 2013

Date of Meeting: March 25, 2013

Report Number: FS-075-2013

File: 68.13.8

Subject: Unknown 911 Calls

Recommendation

That Council direct the Fire Chief to maintain the current level of service provided to the citizens of St. Catharines and continue responses to unknown 911 calls. FORTHWITH

Summary

At the request of Councillor Stevens, Council directed the Fire Chief to report back on responses to unknown 911 calls based on the fact that some of the other municipalities in the Niagara Region are reducing their level of service and not responding to these types of calls.

Background

Niagara Region implemented its 911 emergency telephone system in 1989, which allows the residents to call a universally recognized telephone number and quickly access emergency services from the Police, Ambulance or Fire Departments. These calls are routed through the 911 centre located at the Niagara Regional Police Service, where a 911 operator determines the location and the nature of the emergency and transfers it to the appropriate agencies. Niagara has an enhanced 911 system which automatically displays the caller's address information so that it can be relayed to the responding agencies in case the caller is unable to speak or is disconnected during the call.

An unknown 911 call occurs when a 911 operator receives a call, but is unable to make verbal contact with the caller. In Niagara, whenever the nature of the call cannot be determined, all three emergency services are dispatched to the caller's location. The Niagara Regional Police Service is considered the lead agency with respect to unknown 911 occurrences.

The majority of unknown 911 calls are false alarms that are a result of problems with the caller's telephone (e.g., low battery on a cordless phone), technical problems with Bell telephone lines, or technological "glitches" in the 911 system.

The second most common cause of unknown 911 calls related to Police matters such as domestic disputes or crimes in progress. Because of the significant risk posed to the health and safety of firefighters by potentially encountering an unknown violent situation, the Fire Department response protocol was changed in 2008 to non-emergency response (i.e., no emergency lights or sirens activated which allows the responding truck to be rerouted to another emergency should the need arise). Firefighters are also required to await the arrival of Police before approaching the building unless there are obvious signs of fire. Niagara Emergency Medical Services has made similar changes to their protocols.

Report

Staff reviewed unknown 911 calls over a three year period and found 29 incidents where a fire response was required including a house fire, motor vehicle collision and medical incidents. Although this represents less than 2% of all unknown 911 calls resulting in actual incidents, staff believe there is still value in responding to these types of calls. The main reason volunteer services, such as Lincoln, Grimsby and Niagara-on-the-Lake, have discontinued response to these types of calls is because they do not have crews in their stations. This is not the case in St. Catharines with having fully staffed stations 24/7.

Financial Implications

Minimal; as the cost to the Corporation associated with this, is the cost of fuel.

Conclusion

Staff believes that responding to unknown 911 calls is a value added service that has proven its worth on several occasions.

Prepared & Approved by:

Mark Mehlenbacher, Fire Chief