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P.O. Box 478
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Letter to the Editor
Newsday
80-02 Kew Gardens Road
Kew Gardens, New York 11415-1154

Re: Garbage In, Garbage Out

Dear Editor:

I attended the 9-11 Commission hearings and wish to commend *Newsday* for trying to pry the lid off the truth about NYC's lack of emergency radio preparedness on 9-11.

As you know, at that hearing Mayor Bloomberg's made much of his proposal to combine most of this City's Emergency Dispatchers in the same building in what he described as a major upgrade of NYC Dispatching Centers. But Bloomberg did not inform the 9-11 Commission that he plans to use the existing NYPD Dispatch Building at Metrotech Center, which is a non-hardened commercial building. Simply put, it is hard for me to understand how the City's technocrats sold such an ill-advised idea to a well known computer expert. Mayor Bloomberg's proposal to combine the City's dispatchers in a Metrotech site which lies in a major truck intersection near the Manhattan Bridge is sheer folly because the bridge and its approaches will long be a favored target for possible terrorism.

It's also hard to imagine how quickly this City Administration is willing to repeat the mistakes of the Giuliani era. Former Mayor Giuliani laughed off his critics when they complained about the City's Emergency Operations Center being established in the World Trade Center Complex. But on 9-11, when the City of New York faced its worst public emergency since the Civil War riots, Giuliani's Emergency Command Center lay in the Ground Zero rubble. Given this Metrotech building's inherent vulnerability, I agree with former OEM Director Richard Sheirer that 11 Metrotech is "unsafe" for such a concentration of emergency dispatch personnel and mission critical computers. If Bloomberg proposed building a secure dispatch building on say Fort Totten, I would state that the City has finally learned something from the 9-11 disaster. In the meantime, the City should proceed with the upgrades to the existing Fire Alarm Borough Offices which have the security advantage of being spread out in these dangerous times.

Moreover, the City has made major misrepresentations about the EMS Computer Aided Dispatching System (CAD) and software. When EMS was part of HHC, EMS contracted with PRC Public Sector (now a division of Northrop-Grumman) for their Computer Aided Dispatching software. This software has been running on the EMS Dispatching computers for over twenty years time through many incarnations of paired mini-mainframe computers. This system has an excellent track record with over 99% reliability through the years. When HHC operated EMS, they even responded to our complaints about backup computers and dedicated an extra backup computer to operate EMS CAD at their remote HHC location. This was done through high

capacity "T1" telephone lines which are quite capable of handling the computer data necessary to operate the CAD system using off-site computer(s).

When there was a water main break outside of Maspeth EMS Communications in 1999, FDNY insisted on moving the EMS Dispatchers into trailers and then to the Metrotech Complex. Instead of rehabilitating the water-damaged Maspeth EMS Dispatch Center so that it could become a "live" EMS Dispatch backup center, FDNY stripped down the EMS/HHC Communications Center and turned it into a storeroom. FDNY continues to impair the effectiveness of the EMS Dispatch System by refusing to spend the money to upgrade the EMS CAD Geography files to improve EMS CAD dispatch information by adding new Police Precincts, newly created streets and so forth.

I also take strong exception to the claim that the EMS system is not adequately connected to the NYPD system. For over twenty years the two systems have operated an "interface" computer system which links the NYPD job with the EMS job through respective call ID numbers. This means that an EMS Call Receiving Operator (CRO) does NOT have to retype basic information in the EMS 911 system because it is sent to his/her Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) by the relay computer. While the EMS CRO will verify the address info they receive on the screen, the dispatch info does NOT have to be re-typed. Instead, the EMS CRO is conducting a medical interview with the caller to categorize the EMS call and, since the EMS CRO's and Dispatchers are all Emergency Medical Technicians, they can then instruct the caller on how to administer first aid and/or perform CPR over the 911 phone. So even if the EMS CRO's moved into the same Metrotech building, there would still have to be a referral of the EMS calls to the EMS Communications personnel unless the City wished to train the hundreds of Police Operators as Emergency Medical Technicians.

Because of these linked NYPD/EMS computer systems, both the EMS and PD Dispatchers can send real time computer messages back and forth to each other which are routed to the appropriate Dispatch screens by the interface computers. This system has also been up and running for over twenty years time. In addition, for about the last seven years, the NYPD has had their Enhanced 911 System working which is invaluable for tracking back the source of 911 calls if there is a problem locating the location of the call or the patient.

Since there is an active real time computer link between the NYPD and EMS computers, this meant that on 9-11 the EMS Dispatchers could read the entries made in the NYPD Computer Aided Dispatch System (CAD) by the NYPD Special Operations Dispatcher concerning NYPD Aviation's warnings about the imminent collapse of the World Trade Center Towers. As a result, the EMS Dispatchers knew the status of the buildings because these mission critical computers are properly cross-linked. This type of real time cross-linkage is not possible with the ancient limited capacity FDNY Starfire computers because these old FDNY computers would be overwhelmed by the data capability of the NYPD and EMS computers.

As a result, the Fire Dispatchers were also in the dark about the collapse status of the WTC towers on 9-11 because of FDNY's repeated failures to properly upgrade their Fire Dispatch Computers. As to the repeated proposals to upgrade the FDNY's Dispatch computer systems,

there is probably has been no greater waste of taxpayers' money over the last twenty years than the attempted upgrades of the FDNY "Starfire" Dispatch system.

When FDNY finally undertakes a project to comprehensively upgrade their outdated Dispatch computers, the City Administration suddenly pulls the plug on FDNY's badly needed computer upgrades. Worse, the City again cuddles up to Motorola Radio, which was involved in the disastrous failures of the FDNY radios on 9-11. Motorola has no inherent expertise in the emergency CAD dispatching field but rather is bidding on these critical mission contracts after "buying out" a dispatching computer software company in the year 2000. Mr. Rosenzweig is quite correct when he states this newly proposed CAD system could cost the City many hundreds of millions of dollars to install. Because of the size of this 911 system, it will also take many years for an inexperienced Motorola to get the combined CAD system up and running.

By suddenly halting the FDNY Dispatch computer upgrades, the City is creating an additional threat to public safety because it will push the desperately needed FDNY computer upgrades back for years to come. Indeed, the FDNY's Fire Alarm Dispatchers are largely in the dark today because the NYPD and EMS computers simply can't be allowed to fully interface with the FDNY's outmoded Dispatch computers to avoid overloading the ancient FDNY computers. The FDNY Dispatchers and the public they serve simply can't spare the time it would take to start FDNY CAD development and computer upgrades from scratch again.

I respectfully urge the Mayor to go to these emergency Dispatch Centers and "plug in" to these consoles to see first hand how emergency equipment is dispatched in this City. While I would agree with the Mayor that computer integration is desirable, the EMS/NYPD systems are already integrated and working. Given that fact, Bloomberg has obviously accepted bad advice and has set the desperately needed upgrades of the outmoded FDNY Dispatch computers back for years on end by approving yet another FDNY "pork barrel" project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard J. McAllan".

Richard J. McAllan
Senior NYC EMS Paramedic

P. S. The writer is a Paramedic with 31 years of service to the City of New York and is former President of EMS Local 2507.

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