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City Changes Way of Recording Ambulance Calls

By Edmund Newton

The director of operations for the Emergency Medical Service, the city's ambulance system, has changed the way in which calls for assistance are recorded. Critics of the system say that the change has the effect of covering up widespread delays in getting ambulances to the sick and injured.

The system's second in command, Peter Murray, has issued a memorandum ordering an end to the practice of keeping a running account in the service's computer of calls for assistance that are put on "hold" while the stricken wait for ambulances.

In an article published yesterday, Newsday revealed that because of personnel and equipment shortages, the ambulance system has been lapsing into borough-wide "backlogs" in which even reports of heart attacks and serious injuries are placed on hold. An examination of records also indicated that large areas of southern Queens, from Ridgewood to Rosedale, have been left uncovered except by ambulances from adjoining sectors.

Murray denied yesterday that the change in the recording system had been made to cover up the system's

inadequacies. He said that his "computer people" had asked him to make the change because dispatchers had not been entering the information properly.

Murray's memorandum to supervisors and dispatchers was issued Aug. 9 after the agency's administrators had been informed that Newsday was looking into reports of delays of an hour or more in getting ambulances to the seriously ill and injured. Newsday has obtained a copy of the memorandum.

"Effective immediately," Murray ordered, "the use of the Z# will be discontinued and therefore all HOLD calls will no longer be entered into the computer system by way of the [computer] keyboard." Agency workers, who have asked that their names be withheld, explain that "Z#" refers to a system for recording the number and length of delay of calls held in the computer.

Murray said that information on hold calls would be recorded manually on identification cards that would then be keypunched. "A computer run will be made [with the properly punched cards]," he said.

One source familiar with the system said that the identification cards were not "IBM cards," but forms on which the information is written by hand.

Until now, the number of hold calls and their average delays were recorded in monthly reports. For example, in April and May of this year, 10 per cent of the rush—or top-priority—calls were placed on hold. Murray has described the 10 per cent figure as a "historical phenomenon"—one which has existed for the past four or five

The average time that patients had to wait for the arrival of ambulances in April and May was 22.7 minutes. Critics say that the commonly accepted standard for an effective ambulance system is a response time of four to six minutes—the maximum length of time that a victim of cardiac arrest has before irreversible brain damage occurs.