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# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## Local

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### 9-1-1 advisory board hears calls for change Death of SB woman cited in Sacramento meeting

By SCOTT STEEPLTON NEWS-PRESS CITY EDITOR  
 November 21, 2014 6:14 AM

A former Santa Barbara fire chief choked up recounting for a state advisory board how cellphone incompatibility with California's 9-1-1 system is believed to have contributed to the death of a family friend, 24-year-old Jordan Soto of Santa Barbara earlier this year.

Speaking in Sacramento on Thursday, Warner McGrew, who retired from the Santa Barbara Fire Department in 2006 after 35 years, the last seven as chief, told the Governor's Office of Emergency Services State 9-1-1 Advisory Board that Ms. Soto lived less than one mile away from both a fire station and Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital.

Yet, Ms. Soto died after a delay in emergency medical response that the retired chief and her family blame on cellphone incompatibility with the 9-1-1 system - a problem that leads to hundreds of deaths in the state every year.

The problem is a cellphone call first goes to the California Highway Patrol, which then transfers it to a local dispatch center.

Mr. McGrew explained that cellphone 9-1-1 calls from Santa Barbara are answered 30 miles south in the CHP's Ventura office, then transferred to the appropriate agency.

In the case of Jordan, the medical response team didn't arrive at her home until 20 minutes after the initial 9-1-1 call, which was made from a cellphone.

She died later that day.

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As reported in Thursday's News-Press, a complaint filed on behalf of Jordan's parents and young son in Santa Barbara County Superior Court alleges wrongful death and gross negligence on the part of various entities, including the 9-1-1 Advisory Board for failing to maintain the emergency call service.



The death of Santa Barbara resident Jordan Soto, shown here in a picture from her memorial service earlier this year, was cited as an example of a need for 9-1-1 system overhaul Thursday in Sacramento.  
NIK BLASKOVICH / NEWS-PRESS

The complaint names advisory board director Karen Wong personally.

Mr. McGrew said the system's inability to recognize 9-1-1 cellphone call locations results in loss of time, life and property. And he cited CHP and city dispatch confusion the night Jordan collapsed at the home she shared with her parents and then 6-month-old son, Dominic Dash Soto.

"The delay in response is believed to have led to her death," he said. "The 9-1-1 routing failed Jordan Soto and her family."

"We ask that you provide a solution to this problem as soon as possible so that tragedy is not repeated."

Also addressing the board on the issue of wireless routing and citing Ms. Soto's death, was Dr. Angelo Salvucci, medical director for emergency medical services agencies in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

"In January of this year, the ultimate tragedy occurred," he said.

Dr. Salvucci expressed frustration at the board's lack of response when he has offered to help secure funding that he says would help fix the problem.

"The only barrier is financing," he said.

However, three offers to help have fallen on deaf ears.

"My assistance has not been communicated to you in any way."

Before the men spoke, the board passed a motion to study the issue and come back with a report in January.

"What I'm hearing is there's another review process and the quote, unquote state bureaucracy," he told the board. "We think that this needs immediate action."

Some call transfers are appropriate, he said, offering as an example, "When there's a crash and the call is sent to the fire department for medical fire response."

But it's inappropriate when someone goes into cardiac arrest a half-mile from a fire station and the CHP "simply transfers and delays" or when the person answering does little more than "interrogate" the caller, said Dr. Salvucci.

Every minute of delay in the event of a sudden cardiac arrest, Dr. Salvucci said, reduces the likelihood of survival by 10 percent.

He urged the board to set aside another study and move on the matter without delay.

"Folks we're all on the same team here," he said.

"I'd be looking to sign a contract tomorrow, because somebody's gong to die tomorrow."

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By SCOTT STEEPLTON, NEWS-PRESS CITY EDITOR

November 23, 2014 12:20 AM

Not that you'd do it, but imagine making a wireless 9-1-1 call to the Santa Barbara Police Department from the steps of police headquarters on Figueroa Street or to your local firehouse from the sidewalk out front. Depending on your carrier, either call may be routed 30 miles south, to the Ventura office of the California Highway Patrol, before being transferred to the agency you need.

For this, you could expect a delay on average of a minute or more.

That same call made from a landline would go directly to the Santa Barbara dispatch center.

Absurd as these first two examples may seem, they're based on the reality of California's 9-1-1 system, and they point up why the system is in need of fixing, according to Dr. Angelo Salvucci, medical director for emergency medical services agencies in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

In fact, ever since the debut of cellular technology, emergency medical responders have been dealing with a 9-1-1 system that can't determine the caller's location and use that location to send that call to where it needs to go — in government parlance, the most appropriate public safety answering point.

The issue of misrouted wireless 9-1-1 calls is at the heart of a complaint filed in Santa Barbara County Superior Court alleging wrongful death and negligence in the January death of Jordan Soto, 24, who collapsed in the Santa Barbara home she shared with her parents and her toddler son.

Medical responders didn't arrive for 20 minutes after the initial call, after having been sent to the wrong address, about five miles away.

Dr. Salvucci is active in trying to turn things around.

"With landline e911, the system we had when I first started this 20 years ago, every phone was registered with an exact address. When you placed a 9-1-1 call, that database was accessed by the carrier and used to route the call to the appropriate PSAP."

A cellphone's location does not pop up in any database. Instead, the calls are routed first to the CHP and then to the local center.

In 2006, the state recognized this problem, and two years later launched the Routing on Empirical Data (RED) Project, which was envisioned to look at all of the calls in a given cell sector and find out what percentage went to the right place.

"The RED Project was to look at the (cell) towers, see if they were there, which way they were pointing, map the sectors and which PSAP they should be routed to," Dr. Salvucci told the News-Press.

But the project marked fewer than 10 percent of the towers before being terminated in 2011, reportedly for budget reasons.

"There's no organized way to know when towers are coming up, if they re up, if they are pointing in the right direction," said Dr. Salvucci. "Or when calls are transferred and why."

"There's no system in place to monitor the wireless 9-1-1 system."

It's not that the people responding to the calls are falling down; it's the system is failing them.

"These are good individuals working in a bad system."

As Jordan Soto's death points out, says Dr. Salvucci, the system is failing patients as well.

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Cindy Jacobs-Soto holds a photo of her daughter, Jordan Soto, and grandson Dominic Dash Soto, 15 months. A lawsuit blames Jordan Soto's death on cellphone incompatibility with the 9-1-1 system.

NIK BLASKOVICH/NEWS-PRESS



Dr. Angelo Salvucci

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In a letter to Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Santa Barbara, the doctor sums up the state of affairs this way: "Every link in the Chain of Survival has been strengthened in our system except one — the routing of wireless 9-1-1 calls to the correct PSAP."

Dr. Salvucci is not the only one trying to change things.

Dr. Gregory Gilbert, president of the EMS Medical Directors Association of California, sent a letter to Gov. Jerry Brown in August detailing "California State 9-1-1 System Dysfunction."

"This problem may, according to estimates from published medical studies, be causing the deaths of hundreds and perhaps thousands of persons each year," Dr. Gilbert wrote. "Today 80 percent of 9-1-1 calls are made via wireless devices, and in most cases the exact location of the caller is not immediately known."

The multiple-step process "to meet the needs of wireless 9-1-1 callers results in delays in both the arrival of EMS responders and in the provision of important medical care instructions delivered by dispatchers," he wrote. "Call delays and transfers also increase stress and confusion, and may result in disconnected calls or hang-ups, depriving dispatchers and responders of essential information."

The solution?

According to Dr. Gilbert and his colleagues, it's the Wireless Optimization Service, which uses the technology and procedures of the RED Project.

"The service examines individual cell sectors, maps the historical location of wireless 9-1-1 calls and determines the most appropriate PSAP for future calls. For a projected cost of \$3.5 million per year for three years, every wireless sector in the state can be optimized."

"Californians are suffering and dying daily from delays in EMS responses," he continued. "It is essential that our 9-1-1 system be given every chance to do what the public should and does expect — to save lives by responding to emergencies as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"We strongly encourage the immediate deployment of available technology to make that happen."

At its meeting last week, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services State 9-1-1 Advisory Board heard about Jordan Soto's death and the problems with the 9-1-1 system from Dr. Salvucci and retired Santa Barbara fire Chief Warner McGrew.

The board, which along with its director is named in the complaint, reported first by the News-Press, passed a motion to study the issue and come back with a report in January.

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