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Medical dispatch idea put on ice

By DAN SPRINGER / La Crosse Tribune

A proposal to develop an Emergency Medical Dispatch operation at no expense to taxpayers drew a chilly reception from the heads of three area police and fire agencies Monday.

Under the EMD operation, La Crosse County dispatchers would send first responders and Tri-State Ambulance paramedics, then transfer the call to Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center's dispatch center to provide medical advice until emergency crews arrived, Gundersen Lutheran spokesman Mike McKee told the La Crosse County Public Safety Communications Governing Board on Monday.

The proposal also would make it possible for dispatchers to use caller information to decide which level of care was needed at the scene.

But concerns from La Crosse and Onalaska officials nearly killed the idea Monday before County Administrator Steve O'Malley suggested accepting but not acting on the proposal until potential costs to the county could be assessed.

For more than an hour, La Crosse Police Chief Ed Kondracki, La Crosse Fire Chief Gregg Cleveland and Onalaska Fire Chief Don Dominick voiced opposition to the plan.

The officials said the dispatching changes would place emergency workers at greater liability if they chose to use

lights and sirens for calls dispatchers then determined were non-emergencies.

Kondracki doubted claims that having medically trained dispatchers advising callers would reduce response times.

"Common sense says we're expanding the response time, we're not reducing it," Kondracki said. "I can't imagine how we're reducing the response time by building in another step."

Tri-State Director Matt Zavadsky countered that EMD would add services but not delay dispatching help.

McKee and Zavadsky said their agencies are proposing the EMD and absorbing the cost as a public service. And, they said, neither agency will gain financially from the plan.

La Crosse Mayor Mark Johnsrud — who is not a member of the committee — said he was not convinced.

"No company is going to invest in this and provide this service unless there's some financial benefit," Johnsrud said.

Cleveland said he is not opposed to EMD but thinks the county should run it.

Despite those objections, other committee members said the proposal sounded like a good way to increase services at no cost to the county.

The committee will meet again May 30 to receive a report from County Emergency Services Administrator Jay Loeffler on the cost and feasibility of having the county develop EMD services.

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