

## Charge of bad data in EMS feud

Fire officials say the county's numbers are invalid and cannot be used to make informed cuts.

**BY ANNE LINDBERG-4/23/14**

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When county officials hired a consultant to analyze proposed changes to Pinellas' emergency medical services system, they used real statistics from 201101-20111 for comparison.<sup>1</sup> But when they came to the County Commission in February with a proposal to radically change the way the system is funded, they didn't use the most recent data that was readily available on their own computer system.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they estimated the workload by adding 4 percent to the 201101-11 statistics.<sup>1</sup> But doing that severely underestimates the actual workload for the firefighter-paramedics who provide first response EMS service, fire and city officials say.<sup>1</sup> The difference is so serious, that the proposal is flawed and unworkable, they say.<sup>1</sup> 'They created a simulated Pinellas County,' Clearwater fire Chief Robert Weiss said.<sup>1</sup> 'In their own report, they state their simulation does not represent reality. We work in reality.' It's not the first time Pinellas fire chiefs have complained about the county's use of data.

'It's another example of how we have struggled over the years to get reliable data and use up-to-date statistics,' said Bert Polk, head of the Pinellas County Fire Chiefs Association. 'Here we are in 2014 and we're getting ready to implement some of the most sweeping changes in how we deliver EMS . . . and we're using assumptions.' Polk, chief of Pinellas Suncoast Fire and Rescue, added, 'Those numbers continue to be at the root of a lot of the controversy.'

'Our system collects data instantaneously. I don't see how that is so problematic to get up-to-date information,' Polk said. 'I'm still at a loss as to why we're using assumptions for data that is almost instantaneously available out of the (county computer).' Bruce Moeller, the county's director of safety and emergency services, agreed the numbers were estimates. But he defended the methodology, saying that using the real data would have taken too long and would have added to the cost.

'It's a lot of work,' Moeller said last week. 'It would have been expensive. ... It would have been cost-prohibitive.' Besides, Moeller said, the estimates were accurate as to the workloads of each fire vehicle in the county.

'We didn't lose calls in this,' Moeller said.

But Weiss and other chiefs say Moeller is wrong.

Take Clearwater, for example. The report estimates that the city fielded 23,279 calls for fire and EMS service in 2012-13. In reality, Weiss said, the city answered 26,355 calls, or 3,076 more than is shown in the county proposal.

The same is true elsewhere.

The county's study estimated Largo answered 18,348 calls in 2012-13. In reality, fire Chief Shelby Willis said, Largo responded to 22,870 fire and medical emergency calls, or 4,522 more calls than the county estimate.

And in Pinellas Park, the county estimated there were 13,126 calls for service that fiscal year. Fire Chief Guy Keirn said the county's computer shows his city answered 15,238 calls during that time, 2,112 more than the county estimated in creating its proposal.

The chiefs say they're not being picky. The mistake, they say, is crucial when trying to figure out if the county plan will work. Among other things, the proposal would radically change the way the county pays the five busiest departments - St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman - for providing first-response EMS service.

Currently, the county pays for 24-hour shifts filled by firefighter-paramedics. Under the proposal, some firefighter-paramedics would still be paid for 24-hour shifts, while others would be paid for 14-hour shifts. The effect is to remove firefighters from the streets. That would happen between the hours of 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., when the county says there are fewer calls for service. Moeller and other county staff members say it's a workable plan that won't adversely affect service or endanger sick people. They point to the analysis to support their claim.

But the chiefs say that analysis is so flawed it makes the plan unworkable. Translate those underestimated calls, they say, into time. Moeller agrees that the average time a firefighter-paramedic spends on a call is 25 to 30 minutes.

In the case of Clearwater, multiply that duration by 3,076, the number of uncounted calls, and you come up with 1,282 to 1,538 hours a year that the county didn't figure into its calculations. That's between about 3½ to 4 hours a day that's unaccounted for in the county plan. That, the chiefs say, will translate into longer waits for sick people and fire victims who call for service.

'All we're saying, is the (proposal) doesn't reflect reality, doesn't reflect (what's happening) on the street,' Weiss said. 'Those calls reflect work.'

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