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Delay in Pinellas EMS protocol change meant to avoid legal battle

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CLEARWATER - In a move that may head off a legal battle, Pinellas County officials are set to delay a controversial change to the county's 911 medical-emergency system until at least the middle of July.

County commissioners in January approved changes to the county's emergency dispatch so that only an ambulance would be sent to about 14,000 low-priority medical calls, a move that fire chiefs said would mean longer waits for distressed 911 callers.

That criticism and the threat of a lawsuit from St. Petersburg, prompted commissioners to push back the change until June 1, long after a Fitch and Associates study into overhauling the EMS system was expected to be finished.

With that report delayed, though, county Medical Director David Bowden is recommending the Medical Control Board delay the EMS protocol change until 45 days after the county receives the study, which is expected June 1. The board, which includes emergency-room physicians and hospital administrators, will vote on the recommendation at its May 16 meeting.

"I don't want to start heading down the road we think is correct and then Fitch has a different nuance on it or come up with something different," said Bruce Moeller, the county's public safety director.

With the deadline for EMS changes looming, St. Petersburg City Council members on Friday instructed city attorneys to draft another resolution calling for a delay until after the study is released.

That resolution many end up being unnecessary, but it reflects the fierce opposition the county has met as it has looked for ways to reduce the roughly \$45 million it will pay this year to Pinellas fire departments to act as medical first-responders.

County leaders say they can no longer afford a 911 service that dispatches both a fire truck and ambulance to every medical call no matter how minor. Under the proposal known as Phase III, only an ambulance would be dispatched to calls that 911 call-takers classify as "falls" and "sick persons," which make up about 10 percent of 140,000 medical 911 calls made annually.

At least seven Pinellas cities, including St. Petersburg, and at least four fire districts approved resolutions opposing the EMS changes.

City officials said it made no sense to make changes before the study was released.

Fire districts are also concerned that reducing the number of calls they make could impact future staffing levels.

It's a debate that is likely to heat up again when the Fitch report is released.

"At some point, we will either end up in resolution, mediation or a lawsuit," said St. Petersburg City Council Chairman Karl Nurse. "Maybe that report will suggest some different things that begin a conversation. We've been doing this same argument back and forth for three years."

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