Without Minutes To Spare. Call processing time should reflect nature of the crisis

By Greg Scott

Not too long ago we received a letter from a MPDS® user who was asking about national standards for total dispatch transaction time (i.e., from receipt/pick-up of initial 9-1-1 call, caller interrogation, determinant prioritization/selection and tone out of resources); and for a position from the perspective of the National Academies of Emergency Dispatch® (NAED®). This was not an unusual request. People frequently ask us about adequate time frames and/or standards to fully assess and select the final determinant for ensuring proper response. Some centers have adopted the National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) standard, which requires emergency calls to be dispatched in 60 seconds, 95 percent of the time. The reality is that there is no validated research to support a 60 second dispatch standard, particularly one that requires 95 percent compliance to all calls, regardless of their nature. Is it really reasonable to expect the dispatch time standard on a sprained ankle be the same as for a sudden arrest?

The NAED does not endorse a single, one-size-fits-all national standard for call processing times. Why? For one thing, existing computer-aided dispatch (CAD) technology is not standardized enough across emergency call center boundaries to accurately compare times from agency to agency. Beyond that, there may be design and control weaknesses that significantly affect conclusions based on the data. Until we reach a consensus, the following information may be helpful in setting your standards locally.

We know that address verification time—the first stage of call processing—is lengthening on average because of the widespread use of wireless technology and the greater proportion of 9-1-1 calls originating from a wireless phone. Also, we know that when using our EM D program properly, the highest priority calls are coded faster than the intermediate and lower priority cases. Generally, ECH Os take about 35 to 45 seconds to code AFTER address verification has been completed and DELTa’s take, on average, about 50 to 55 seconds.

I recommend that your call processing standard reflect the nature of the call. That is, DELTa’s and ECHO’s could have one target time window, while the remainder could have another longer time window. In general, a 90 (to 100)-second time frame is a reasonable target for completing DELTa and ECHO cases, although 90 or 95 percent fractal compliance to such a target is difficult to meet given the issues with address verification from wireless phones.

There are other questions you might address, also, before setting your standards.

These include:

- Do you know the percentage of 9-1-1 calls come from wireless sources in your region? According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the number of 9-1-1 calls placed by people using wireless phones has more than doubled since 1995, to over 50 million a year. While the location of the cell tower used to carry a 9-1-1 call may provide a very general indication of the location of the caller, that information is not usually specific enough for rescue personnel to deliver assistance to the caller quickly.

- Are dispatchers following their call-taking protocol? Calltakers who follow a protocol consistently can gather more information in the same time frame or faster than those who try to make up questions and instructions on the fly.

- Is the center using the ProQA® EM D software? The software assists dispatchers in quickly determining the appropriate response determinant code for each case and then guides dispatchers in providing all relevant Post-Di spatch and Pre-Arrival Instructions, as well as important case completion information.

- Are dispatchers being given enough time to complete their call-taking protocol so as to be accurate and safe in their information gathering? Or are they being pressured to meet a time standard simply to make the stats look good to outside observers?