

Portland rejected union solution to reduce time 911 callers spend on hold

AFSCME Local 189 said a sizable pay raise would help recruit and retain staff, but an arbitrator picked the City counterproposal.

By Don McIntosh

If you call 911 in Portland, expect to wait on hold for 23 seconds before speaking to a dispatcher. That's according to a damning June 7 report by the City of Portland's ombudsman's office. The report says managers knowingly reported inaccurate wait time numbers to City Council. The goal of the City's Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC) is to answer 90 percent of its calls within 20 seconds, but the report says BOEC is answering only 67.8 percent of calls in that time. And BOEC is aiming low: The national standard is for 90 percent of calls to be answered within 10 seconds — BOEC answers only 29.6 percent of its calls in 10 seconds.

AFSCME Local 189-2 and its members at BOEC have been sounding the alarm about call wait times for years. Both union

and management agree the failure is caused by a severe staffing shortage. BOEC has been budgeted for up to 120 positions, but has been able to fill — and keep — only about 80. The short-staffing is resulting in lots of overtime. Last year there were enough overtime hours to fill 10 full-time positions. And the overtime, especially short-notice forced overtime, is causing workers to quit. That's a vicious cycle, in which BOEC is unable to retain enough of the workers that it hires and trains to dent the short-staffing. Fully 70 percent of new hires leave or are let go within their first two years.

What could break the cycle? In contract bargaining last year, Local 189-2 proposed a 10 percent pay increase over three years to help attract and retain more dispatchers, solving the overtime crisis. [Pay at the time started at \$21.70 an hour for trainees and topped \$36 for senior dispatchers.] But BOEC management said no, arguing that higher pay would mean BOEC could afford fewer dispatchers. BOEC counter-offered

with a combination of longevity pay and overtime bonuses. The two sides were unable to reach agreement, so the dispute went to binding arbitration.

Under Oregon law, public safety employees like 911 operators can't strike. Instead, if union and employer reach impasse, they submit their final contract offers to a mutually-agreed-on arbitrator. The arbitrator has to pick one side's whole package, and can't pick and choose the best parts of each offer.

The union's 10 percent pay increase proposal was in addition to inflation-based cost-of-living increases. The union also proposed that workers earn double time for all overtime scheduled with less than 24-hours' notice, to discourage that practice. And it proposed that workers be allowed to refuse forced overtime twice every six months. Finally, the union proposed new pay premiums for shift work — a 4 percent premium for night shift and 3 percent for swing shift.

The employer proposal came

at the overtime problem a different way: a new longevity pay step of 2 percent after nine years of service, and \$500 and \$1,000 bonuses for working 75 and 150 hours of overtime respectively in a calendar year. Management agreed with the union's proposal of a 4 percent night shift pay premium, but proposed 2 percent for swing shift. And it proposed to allow workers one overtime refusal every six months, plus another for each eight instances of forced overtime.

In January, arbitrator Paul Roose toured the 911 facility and held five days of hearings. On April 26, he issued a binding decision — in favor of management's proposal. Explaining his decision, Roose wrote that the union offer would go further than the employer's, in some areas, to address the retention problems, and he credited the union for "an eloquently and forcefully stated theory that the entire industry underpays its dispatchers." But he faulted the union for being unable to cite even one example of a compa-

rable 911 call center that had improved retention by increasing base pay. Most surveyed ex-BOEC employees had cited stress and overtime — not inadequate pay and benefits — as the reasons they left, Roose wrote. And in the hearings, the City had even argued that "cliques, bullying, and hazing — not money" caused dispatchers to leave BOEC. Roose found that BOEC's employees are paid above market, on every measure.

The arbitrator's ruling means members are stuck with a three-year contract they didn't agree to. It runs through June 30, 2019.

"We were not in concessionary bargaining, so it's still a gain," says Oregon AFSCME negotiator Rob Wheaton. "But we don't think it's going to be enough to help with staffing problems."

ONLINE EXTRA

Read the City ombudsman's report at <http://bit.ly/2s9r0nl> and the arbitrator's decision at <http://bit.ly/2r742Nz>



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