



CITY OF TOPEKA

CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

SPECIAL COMMITTEE: POLICE & COMMUNITY

CITY COUNCIL
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Date: April 30, 2021

Time: 3:00pm

Location: Classroom A; Law Enforcement Center 320 S. Kansas Ave (virtual attendance was available as well)

Committee members present: Councilmembers Karen Hiller, Sylvia Ortiz (Chair), Michael Padilla

City staff present: City Manager Brent Trout, Police: Chief Bryan Wheelles, Vidal Campos, Gretchen Spiker

1) Call to Order

Chairwoman Ortiz called the meeting to order at 3:00pm. Committee members introduced themselves.

Chairwoman Ortiz clarified some misinformation that had been sent out by the media with regard to Public Input. Until further notification, public input will not be solicited during the Police & Community Special Committee meetings. Members of the public may continue providing written comment to the committee members.

2) Approve minutes from March 19, 2021 meeting

Committee member Hiller made a motion to approve the minutes. Committee member Padilla seconded the motion. Motion approved 3:0.

3) Continued Discussion: Outreach & Customer Service

[This presentation can be found on the committee's webpage]

Chief Wheelles expressed appreciation for the items brought up during this initial discussion. He will be able to report back about some changes that have been implemented recently.

4) Presentation - Dispatch/Operations [Video 7:05 minute mark]

[This presentation can be found on the committee's webpage]

Shawnee County Emergency Communications Director, Melanie Bergers, provided a presentation to include internal operations, operations with other emergency personnel, and information for the public.

Presentation Highlights:

- Overview of Shawnee County Emergency Communications Center (SCECC) division. They are under the Shawnee County Sheriff's office and provide dispatch to TPD, SSO, TFD, 7 rural fire depts., 3 other municipal police depts. within Shawnee County.
- When to call 9-1-1
- What callers should expect
 - Be prepared with location/address
 - Your emergency - specific details but as brief as possible
 - The phone number
 - Do not hang up until directed to do so. SCECC will end conversation with "call back if anything changes"
- Chart showing internal process from time citizen calls 9-1-1
- Law Enforcement Dispatching
 - Auto GPS was implemented in 2018 to allow dispatch to contact unit nearest location of priority call
 - Calls dispatched by priority
 - Dispatchers responsible for answering phones while simultaneously radioing with unit
 - Dispatchers also responsible for correctly tracking officers that self-initiate onto calls
- Communication Specialists track several units and calls at once. A single screen showing one discipline within the Communications Center was shown on the presentation slide. Dispatchers have upwards of seven screens they look at and operate during a call.
- Stats at a glance:
 - Calls increase during afternoon/evening hours, and warmer weather.
 - Average of 320,000 calls annually
 - 107,000 entered for TPD
 - There are 2.8 million radio transmission on main talk groups
- Two employees most responsible for radio system. Radios are updated every two years. There are about 6,000 users within the radio system and having it operate correctly is extremely important.

- Enhancements to the process Priority Dispatch Software will allow for input from partner agencies to know what they would like to see. There is one liaison from each group that will be questioned with this program. The current program does not include the buy-in with all of the partners to consider what additional information they may want to see.
- With Priority Dispatch Software, the Police component will be the most difficult to train on as situations can change in an instance.
- Telecommunications Specialists/Dispatchers recently recognized as Emergency First Responders in the state of Kansas.
- SCECC training program:
 - 4-6 weeks in classroom, will expand with new software system
 - 40 hours continued education every two years
 - Supervisors required to have same continued education as well as sit in the dispatch center for a minimum of 4 hours/monthly to take calls.
 - Training is 2 weeks long for all three disciplines
 - Must learn geography and resources available
 - Learn about what resources each department has
 - Following Academy - Practice with a trainer on real calls
 - Participate in a ride-along with TPD, SSO, TFD
 - Visit rural fire stations
 - Move to radio. This area is where many people quit
 - Dispatchers are trained to be calm, empathetic, but somewhat calloused to what is going on. To stick to business without inserting their emotional feeling into each call.
 - Vicarious experience is another area where a lot of people leave. They work hard with the Peer Support team. Dispatchers are not ever alone.
 - Always needing more dispatchers. Urging anyone interested in becoming Fire/Police/EMS to reach out to Dispatch who works with all of them
 - Information and application can be found at www.shawneesheriff.org

Questions/Comments:

- Committee member Padilla: From what you just told us, you projected a very busy place. During time at TPD, it was felt to be very important to have a supervisor nearby, is that still the case? Yes. Director Bergers also brought up a skill known as “split ear”, where dispatchers are able to multitask not only what they are looking at, but can hear multiple conversations occurring around them and be able to know what is going on.

Committee member Padilla wanted to make known to the public that although it is a busy environment, it is a very controlled environment. He also felt having Peer Support was very important.

- Are there any other requirements to participating in the Peer Support Team? No. The dispatchers are under Shawnee County Sheriff's office and have a great relationship with the Sheriff, and the partners. There are civilians, sworn officers, dispatchers are all part of the Peer Support Team. Accommodating the Peer Support needs are critical and taken seriously.
- In an age of transparency, how have you accommodated feedback from citizens relating to being told an officer was not coming now because busy with other call? That type of feedback is received. Dispatchers can become callous. There is also a need, within this new training, the trainers are mandated to have worked in a dispatch center but must also have experience within the discipline they are teaching. Customer service is number one aspect that has to constantly be in the forefront of the mind of the dispatchers. Although in the grand scheme of priority, one call may not be a priority, for that caller it is a priority. That feedback is appreciated, and a timely response is provided to the caller, usually within 48 hours. Poor behavior is not acceptable. There may be a number of reasons that a dispatcher was not on their best game, however it is not an excuse for the poor customer service.
- What is the coaching for what to tell callers during a call when the priority is low, or no officers available? Transitioning to a model that will explain to callers that we are holding calls right now. Being able to explain to callers as to why their call may be placed on hold, whether all of the officers are on other calls, or on calls where persons/property are in danger, just allowing a bit of transparency while empathizing that the call is important, will help with people understanding the situation. More administrative calls taken than emergency calls. Public asked to call non-emergency number when possible and not defaulting to 9-1-1 for something that may not be an emergency.
- What can you say about callers who may call when they hear a noise outside of house but are not in the house? Dispatch trained to find any resources available to get moving toward location, even if it is not the "appropriate" department. With the new priorities, they will be especially be moving toward that. Chief Wheelles interjected that dispatch also will report over the radio about calls holding and the address. This allows officers who may be on a call, but could clear it and begin moving toward the addresses on hold to help with response time. He stated that an additional way to assist with dispatch, is to create community awareness of the non-emergency phone numbers. There is a delicate balance to answering administrative calls and emergency calls. TPD has tried to assist with taking some of the administrative lines by hiring a third

shift records custodian, and the front desk. Committee member Hiller suggested that calls being answered at the alternative locations may prevent people from calling around to other lines.

- Suggestion from Chairwoman Ortiz would be to create magnet to include non-emergency number, and other helpful information. Director Bergers also referenced a “Service Map” found on City’s website. [<https://s3.amazonaws.com/cot-wp-uploads/wp-content/uploads/neighborhoodrelations/ServicesMap.pdf>] Chairwoman Ortiz stated this map should be updated, and added to if necessary, and pushed out again. She found it very helpful. Committee member Hiller reminded there was an obligation to ensure calls were answered, or responded to within a reasonable amount of time to avoid people calling around.
- On the slide in the presentation showing what the dispatcher’s screen looks like, what does the officer see? They see the answers. Currently working on program that will allow responding units the most important information of the call. The survey will be helpful to know what information the officers will find to be important to add to that list.
- Emergency Communications Center has alert system built in to add alerts that departments might implement, such as the Take Me Home or Behavioral Health Alert, etc. How do we get that information to the public about these types of programs? Appreciates being proactive in allowing people to enter that information. Link on website to allow people to enter that information.
- What do you do when an officer does not answer when you call them? Current policy is to call the officer once and say their unit number and name. If they do not answer, a backing unit is sent out, if officer was last known to be on a call. When the back is on the way, dispatchers “tone” the officer, which is a simulcast on various frequencies. Dispatch continues to call the officer until the backing officer reaches them, or until the initial officer begins communicating a response. The radios also have an orange button that will immediately call dispatch. There are more times when officers’ children push the button, rather than actually during a dangerous situation. Hitting the orange button is done when the officer is not able to speak, such as during a fight. Pressing the button opens their mic for 20 seconds which allows dispatch enough time to get a backing unit on the way.
- Do you still provide tours of the SCECC? Yes. It was closed for a time during the pandemic, and currently is not offering the larger scale tours like it had previously, but we are allowing observers to come back. The job is eye opening for people, and it is serving an important need within the community.

- Is there still a program with Washburn Tech to go through the communications class? Not currently. The classes were halted during COVID-19. TPD has a public safety program with USD 501's T-CALC, and it is a benefit for not only the police department but also for the communication's department. There is a student and parent on the board. There is a benefit for dispatch to be involved within the program, as they can hire on at 18 years old, and get some valuable training until they are 21 and old enough to move on to fire or law enforcement.
- Could the Choose Topeka incentive be an opportunity to also recruit people to the Communications Center? Chief Wheelles stated that for individuals aged 18-21, this is an opportunity to bridge the public safety gap and learn a more well-rounded understanding of what is going on.
- Committee member Hiller wondered if recruiting from call centers would be fruitful? The people who are interviewed that come from a different call center setting tend to have the idea that they will be able to walk in and do the job. Working in an emergency communications call center is far different from the average call center setting. It's not only the calls, but the radio component and large multitasking requirements show to be the biggest hurdle. For larger areas, such as Houston or New York, something along that line might work. However, smaller cities such as Topeka and even smaller, have a much different set-up.

5) Discussion: Recruitment [Video 1:18:30 minute mark]

[This presentation can be found on the committee's webpage]

SGT Vidal Campos became the TPD Recruitment Sargent in 2017, the numbers were very low. Gimmicks such as the sign-on bonus, and presences at many career fairs were continuing to yield low numbers. Once the pay increase to stay competitive, began, and the changes to the internship program, the program grew.

Highlights:

- Challenges faced over past year:
 - COVID-19 presented many challenges with recruitment
 - Internship program was halted
 - Could not go out to military institutions and schools to do the face-to-face recruitment activities. Some Zoom meetings were held, but none of those individuals came in to take the test.

- Current events of the nation have also had a significant impact with recruitment.
- Military recruitment opportunities will begin again in May.
- 11 interns will be able to participate in the program this summer.
 - Universities participating in the program are:
 - Washburn University
 - Ft. Hayes University
 - University of Southern Mississippi
 - Program has gone from 3 weeks to 4 weeks
 - Partnered with agencies within the city to help with the program.
- New strategy – Social Media
 - Lateral transfers and how to join TPD
 - Competitive pay
 - 10 hour shifts & 10 paid holidays per year (time-and-a-half in addition to paid working)
 - Compensation for certifying as a bilingual officer
 - Making difference in community
 - TPD believes in recruiting the best, brightest, most diverse candidates to serve the citizens and make the community safer.
- SGT Campos sells what the city has to offer, along with what the department has to offer.
- Chief Wheelles added that the recruitment team believes in and understands that people matter. We want to add the personal touch, not simply figures and fancy things.

Questions from the Committee:

- Where are we at with the tutoring and training to help get applicants to better understand the test in order to pass? The numbers are here. What ended up hurting the numbers was the pandemic and the current climate of the culture. SGT Campos would like to see the department offer an additional recruitment class to the 2021 schedule, to avoid having to play “catch-up”.
- The questions that Chairwoman Ortiz receives center around wondering why there are not more minorities on the force. Can you give a better answer? SGT Campos noted that the number of minorities hired have increased significantly

since 2017. In the Midwest, there are not as many minorities. However, half of the incoming academy is a minority and about half of the recently graduated academy are minorities. Chief Wheelles stated he felt the department is trending in the right direction, and that work will continue to occur.

- What is the diversity of the recruitment team? Very diverse. The team is not only racially diverse, but also spans various ranks, various departmental units, women, and time on the department.
- Committee member Padilla asked SGT Campos to expand on the comment about “selling” the department and the city to recruits. Additional comments about internship program and recruitment strategy:
 - Visit Topeka, Forge, Greater Topeka Partnership give a tour of various locations like the Zoo, Capital, Washburn and meeting interns from other areas within the city.
 - Ramada Inn is comping all rooms and providing breakfast for all of the interns during the 4 week internship program.
 - New 15-passenger vans to allow for taking interns around the city/county...Lake Shawnee, other locations to see there is more to do in the area.
 - Once we are able to “sell” the city, we are able to then work on promoting the department. Chief Wheelles noted that it is not only the applicant who is recruited, the family is recruited. There is a wholistic approach to the process.

6) Crime Reduction Strategy

This topic will be moved to the May agenda.

7) Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) Training

This topic will be moved to the May agenda.

8) Peer-Support Team & City of Topeka’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

This topic will be moved to the May agenda.

9) Discuss Future Topic Ideas [Video 1:45:00 minute mark]

- Chairwoman Ortiz would like to have a brief follow up with Recruitment.
- Crime Reduction Strategy
- ABLE Training
- Peer Support and CoT EAP

- Qualified Immunity
- Citizen Review Board
- Recap on customer services & outreach
- Deployment
- Juveniles
- Black Lives Matter list (Was sent to media, copies provided to committee.)
- Committee member Hiller reviewed the original list to decide if they should be acknowledged or taken off of the list.
 - QI
 - Chokehold
 - Ways officers are involved in community
 - Chief's advisory board/Citizen board
 - Crime summits or quarterly meetings for community input

Committee member Hiller inquired about whether the Committee had an idea when public input sessions could begin. Chairwoman Ortiz would like to have information put into a report that includes the updated practices/policies before making a recommendation, as well as bringing in the USD 501 Student group to discuss SRO's. Chairwoman Ortiz feels there needs to be a commitment from everyone at the table, not only to hear from one side. She would like for the public to know that the committee has been listening. Chairwoman Ortiz would like to hear from the youth in the community. She wants to hear positive stories as well as the critiques. "Looking through the Lens". There will be a final comprehensive presentation made to the Governing Body once these items have been addressed. There was discussion to review the Equity Council.

Committee member Hiller would like to cover issues and allow for public comment if they have been reviewed. Chairwoman Ortiz noted there was one main topic that was included in the original list that she would like to have it covered in-depth before moving forward with public input sessions, but agreed that hearing from the community once that has happened would be her preference as well. Committee member Padilla stated he wanted to be intentional and purposeful with recommendations for change. He stated that being able to share with the community about what items have been addressed, helps him to dwindle the list to the point where new suggestions could be brought up for consideration of recommendation.

Committee member Hiller noted there may be a need to regroup, but that as a committee, she would like to only receive updates and new information. From her understanding, the task of the committee was to review the issues brought to the Governing Body and sift out whether or not there was an issue, and to create some possible options for moving forward. She would like to create a listing of items that have been reviewed, and decide which of those need further attention. Chairwoman Ortiz stated the directive to the Committee was to search out the issues and bring recommendations back to the Governing Body. And that the Governing Body could create additional directives if they chose to.

In the recent letter from Black Lives Matter, some new questions about new concerns have been brought up.

Committee member Padilla stated that getting input from the community and testimonies was important, but he wanted to commend Chief Wheelles on the professionalism of he and staff to present the information as required, and that in some way, this information has been able to answer some of the questions and allegations about the department. Chief Wheelles stated he felt the department was tasked with providing accurate and direct information related to the department in a professional and respectful manner to assist with supporting the Committee. He has appreciated being able to provide department detail about issues brought forward, and feels it has helped clear some misconceptions or misunderstanding.

Committee member Hiller inquired about the hiring process for the new police chief, and public input. It was discussed that media had perhaps misunderstood and had advertised to the community that the City was hiring and was open to input. City Manager Trout advised that was not what he had said, and was premature, and that the press had been contacted. City Manager Trout stated a citizen component would be part of the process. He asked that Council members please forward any submitted input to him.

10) Set net meeting agenda and date

Chairwoman Ortiz will be coordinating the agenda and next meeting date with the City Council Assistant. To receive notice of future meetings when they are posted to the City of Topeka's Public Calendar, please complete the information found on the E-Notify program at: <https://www.topeka.org/e-notify/>

Citizens wanting to speak on the items may contact the committee. Questions or comments should be sent to the Liz Toyne, City Council Assistant, at etoyme@topeka.org .

11) Adjourn

Chairwoman Ortiz adjourned the meeting at 5:15pm.

Meeting video can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/zGIZRteuwBU>