

**TUOLUMNE COUNTY
GRAND JURY
12855 Justice Center Drive
Sonora CA, 95370**



**Tuolumne County 911:
Sheriff's Dispatch Center Report
May 31, 2024**



Tuolumne County Justice Building, 28 N. Lower Sunset Dr., Sonora, CA

SUMMARY

The successful performance of the Tuolumne County Sheriff dispatch center is vitally important to the 54,531 residents who live within the 2,274 square miles of Tuolumne County—an area about the same as half of Connecticut. It is imperative that the center be prepared and able to always handle an emergency. The dispatch center is a part of the Tuolumne County Sheriff Department, and according to a 2023 Union Democrat article, the sheriff dispatch center is the “hub for all first responders—fire, ambulance, law enforcement” in the county.¹³

Based on a tour of the Tuolumne County Sheriff’s dispatch center, interviews with past and current staff, and review of pertinent information, it was determined by the grand jury that the dispatch center needs to either be relocated to another site or the current building must be renovated to meet present and future emergency dispatch needs. Additionally, the Tuolumne County Sheriff’s dispatch needs to continue to address staffing. For optimal 911 service to the residents of Tuolumne County, additional dispatchers should be hired and retained.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code, Section 929, requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

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GLOSSARY

Communications center	Another term for dispatch center
Dispatcher	A 911 dispatcher works with police and emergency medical teams to provide quick responses to emergencies.
HVAC	Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning is the use of various technologies to control the temperature, humidity, and purity of the air in an enclosed space.
Mini-split	Heating and cooling systems that allow you to control the temperatures in individual rooms or spaces
Net server	A computer that stores software and a website's files. A server connects to the Internet and supports physical data interchange with other devices connected to the web.
NexGen	Next Generation 911 (commonly referred to as NG911) is a digital, internet protocol (IP)-based system that will replace the analog 911 infrastructure that's been in place for decades.
PSAP	Public Safety Answering Points, also known as 911 Call Centers
Relief dispatcher	An employee working to relieve employees who are not scheduled to work or to work various assigned shifts.
Server room	A server room is a room, usually air-conditioned, devoted to the continuous operation of computer servers.

BACKGROUND

The Sheriff's Office Communication Division (also known as 911 Dispatch) is the conduit for vital information associated with all Sheriff's office functions. As the primary public safety answering point for Tuolumne County, the dispatch center is responsible for answering approximately 140,000-150,000 phone calls annually, and relaying information to foster the safe and efficient functions of patrol operations, ambulance operations, medical care, fire/first responder services, to include coordinating non-emergency services for the community. The Communications Center 911 dispatchers are certified in emergency medical dispatch--a program that allows dispatchers to render aid to the public in emergency first aid while awaiting first responders to arrive on scene. ⁶

The successful performance of the Tuolumne County Sheriff dispatch center is vitally important to the citizens of Tuolumne County. It is imperative that the center be functioning optimally to always handle emergencies. All 911 calls in Tuolumne County go through the Sheriff's dispatch center, and in March 2024 alone, the center handled 7983 calls involving 3796 incidents—an average of 257 calls a day. The dispatchers also performed 16 life-saving interventions and dispatched 710 medical emergencies. ¹¹ (Appendix A)

The dispatch center is part of the Tuolumne County Sheriff Department at 28 North Lower Sunset Drive in Sonora. Known as the Tuolumne County Justice Building, the complex was built in the 1960s with some modifications made in 1984 and 1992. The center consists of the 911 dispatch center, the records department, the sheriff's administrative offices, and the defunct county jail.

In 2021, the county saw the opening of the new \$70 million Tuolumne County Superior Courthouse, the new \$20 million Motherlode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility and the new \$51 million Dambacher County Jail. It must be noted that Tuolumne County received state grants to pay for most of the construction of the Regional Juvenile Detention Facility and most of the \$51 million Dambacher County Jail. The construction on the new courthouse was paid for by the State Judicial Council. However, these funds do not extend to the sheriff's department, which includes the administration offices, records and the dispatch center. Currently, the county rents a building on Cedar Avenue to house the Sheriff patrol, investigations, professional standards and the evidence and property room. ¹

In August of 2023, the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors reviewed a preliminary funding report completed by Capital PFG for a Law and Justice Center for TC Sheriff Administration and USFS. ⁵ However, the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors were not willing to incur approximately \$32 million in debt required to construct a new Sheriff's department with administration offices and a new dispatch center. ¹³ The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors acknowledged the need for improved facilities, however, and the Board directed county staff to

investigate alternatives. The County told the board that it would work with [outgoing] Sheriff Pooley on a “full-court press” to identify possible sources of state or federal funding and to explore potential alternate locations, before coming back to the board for further discussion.¹

It is important to note that an unused section of the old jail adjacent to the sheriff's administration consists of over 5,000 square feet of concrete and steel structure that could be converted into additional space for the Tuolumne Sheriff Justice Center. A renovation of the Tuolumne County Sheriff Justice Center and the unused jail—premises currently owned by the county--would be more cost effective than building a new facility. Furthermore, the sheriff patrol, investigations, professional standards, and evidence and property offices could be moved out of rented space and into the Lower Sunset building. (Appendix C)

In addition to the issues with the current facility, the Tuolumne County Dispatch Center is understaffed. The Tuolumne County Sheriff dispatchers sometimes work as many as 16 hours per day under very stressful tasks. In a major emergency such as an earthquake or fire, the dispatchers could be held over for more hours. The Sheriff's office and the county administration are working to address the staffing issue with some recent success. However, continued hiring and training of additional dispatchers would reduce stress caused by fatigue and provide a larger pool of trained dispatchers to cover for vacations, illnesses and other reasons.

METHODOLOGY

The grand jury toured the Tuolumne County Sheriff Dispatch Center at 28 North Lower Sunset Drive, Sonora, CA, on 01/17/2024. The tour started at 2:00 pm and lasted 2 hours.

After the tour, the grand jury interviewed personnel at the dispatch center interviewed pertinent personnel including the out-going sheriff, the in-coming sheriff, the dispatch supervisor, the deputy coroner and a second deputy.

The committee reviewed the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors 8/15/2023 Meeting Minutes, the Report dated 8/15/2023 by Capital PFG on Preliminary Funding for a Law and Justice Center for TC Sheriff Administration and USFS), the Tuolumne County Sheriff Webpage “Communication Dispatch”. Additionally, the jury reviewed multiple Union Democrat articles pertaining to the dispatch center issues and multiple websites with pertinent information.

Although no previous Tuolumne County Grand Jury reports related to the Tuolumne County Sheriff’s dispatch center were found in report records, grand jury reports related to 911 dispatch services from other counties such as El Dorado and Orange County were reviewed for the purposes of this report.

Confidentiality

Grand Jury members are sworn to secrecy regarding any matter brought before them. This assures all individuals that their testimony will be strictly confidential. Each Grand Juror must keep all evidence confidential. It is a misdemeanor to violate the confidentiality of any individual or evidence brought before the Grand Jury.

Recusal

The Grand Jury recognizes that a conflict of interest may arise during its investigations. In such instances, the juror may ask to be recused from all aspects of an investigation. Those members do not investigate, attend interviews and deliberations, or assist in the making and acceptance of a final report that may result from an investigation.

Therefore, whenever the perception of a conflict of interest existed on the part of a member of the 2023-2024 Tuolumne Grand Jury, that member abstained from any investigation involving such a conflict and from voting on the acceptance or rejections of any related subject.

DISCUSSION

The Tuolumne County Grand Jury investigated the Tuolumne County dispatch facility to determine its adequacy for responding to emergencies and for modern dispatch operations. In the opinion of the Grand Jury, the facility requires either relocation or a major renovation to function reliably. Additionally, staffing issues should continue to be addressed for the dispatch center to function optimally.

FACILITY INSUFFICIENCIES

Electrical Inadequacies

The sheriff's 911 dispatch center is essential for Tuolumne County emergency services. However, the center experienced six failures of the 911 system in 2023 (one of which lasted an hour), a 2023 fire that likely resulted from an old circuit breaker, a generator failure in January of 2024, and most recently, a malfunctioning cooling unit in the server closet in May of 2024.

The inadequacies of the 911 dispatch center are age-related issues. Most notably, the building's electrical panels are old and unable to handle an increased load. The panels are difficult to repair, and parts are hard to replace. At a recent Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors retreat, a county official with knowledge and experience in the construction of PSAPs (dispatch centers), stated on the record that Tuolumne County's dispatch center was "the worse one [he] had ever seen."

The center's electrical limitations have ramifications for not only the current, but also for future of 911 emergency services. The Tuolumne County dispatch center--like most nationwide--was built using analog rather than digital technologies. As a result, dispatch centers need to be upgraded to a digital or Internet Protocol (IP)-based 911 system, commonly referred to as Next Generation 911.

Next Generation 911(NexGen 911) enhances emergency number services to create a faster, more resilient system that allows voice, photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to the 911 network. It also improves dispatch's ability to help manage call overload, natural disasters, and transferring of 911 calls and proper responses based on location tracking. While California's existing 911 system has been a success story for more than 40 years, it has been stretched beyond its limit. Old school 911 lacks the reliability and monitoring capabilities needed to support today's increased disaster environment.⁴

The Tuolumne County sheriff's dispatch center already has a NexGen server provided by the California State Office of Emergency Services as part of a pilot project. However, when a state

engineer reviewed the center for the pilot program, he warned that nothing else could be added to the grid as it was “maxed out.”

Other electrical issues in the dispatch center contribute to reduced workplace safety and comfort. These include outlets in the dispatch workroom with exposed wires. There has been a work order with the county for two years to attend to the exposed wires; however, dispatchers continue to use the outlets at the risk of being shocked.

Additionally, the Tuolumne County dispatch workroom floor is only partially anti-static. In workspaces with sophisticated computers systems, anti-static floors are recommended to ground the personnel as they move around the site. Without the safety flooring, headphone shock can occur due to the buildup and result in the delivery of a small shock to a wearer’s ear. Anti-static flooring is also recommended because it prevents operational failures such as dropped calls, and system outages which can cost lost productivity and outright systems failures.

Finally, the server room is in the dispatch workspace. If the servers overheat, they can malfunction and shut down, which can lead to data loss and performance issues. In the 2023 outages, it was not possible to cool the server room due to electrical outages and failed generators. A window in the breakroom next door to the server room was used to keep the servers cool and operational. Since that time, a mini-split ductless cooler and a backup generator have been installed to prevent damage to the servers should they overheat. The mini split cooler malfunctioned recently, and once again, the window in the breakroom had to be used to cool the electronics.

Non-Electrical Issues

The Sheriff dispatch workroom is small. The space includes six workspaces for dispatchers each housing multiple monitors and computers. The Tuolumne County 911 dispatch workspaces are roughly 6 x 6. There is little room between dispatchers’ stations which makes standing up and moving around between the stations difficult. There is a concern that the workspace is not ADA compliant as it would be difficult for someone with mobility issues to navigate the space. The Xybix Blog (ergonomics workspace providers) recommends that the average sized dispatch workspace should cover 10 x 12 area to allow for side surfaces, CPU cabinets, and circulation areas (i.e. ADA clearances). ⁷

Another important issue with the dispatch center is the workroom location at the front of the building. The workroom also shares a non-bullet proof wall with the public entrance. Per a leading construction company specializing in government and unique building projects, “Current best practices include placing dispatch centers **near the center of a building** away from exterior windows and doors. This positioning can help prevent vandalism or restricted entry...Other incidents might include a vehicle driving through an exterior wall or window. While unlikely and

unthinkable, **mitigating such threats helps ensure that operators can continue to serve the public without disruption.**”²

Currently, the Tuolumne Sheriff’s Justice Center HVAC system does not function properly. A new cooling and heating unit was installed ten years ago, but it has not functioned properly despite multiple attempts to correct the problem. As a result, during cold temperatures, noisy space heaters are used to heat the dispatch workroom—not ideal in a structure already experiencing electrical failures due to overload.

The Tuolumne County Sheriff Justice Center does not have a functioning fire alarm system. The malfunctioning is attributed to the age of the system, and replacement parts are obsolete. The alarm goes off regularly, and the switch to turn off the alarm is in the old jail—approximately 150 feet (and through 4 locked doors) from the administrative and dispatch area of the facility. During weekdays, a response to a false fire alarm can take 2-5 minutes. However, during weeknights, after office hours, or on weekends or holidays, the Fire Department must respond by shutting off the alarm as dispatch personnel cannot leave their stations. There have been multiple incidents where the alarm sounded for 60 minutes before the fire department could silence it. With 8 of the 14 alarms in the records and dispatch area, the alarm noise is unsufferable and impermissible. On the day that the grand jury was interviewing at the dispatch center, the fire alarm was turned off. On the day in 2023 that a fire did break out, the alarm was on but did not work.

Dispatch Center Staffing Shortage

The Tuolumne County Sheriff dispatch provides 24-hour emergency and non-emergency services to the public. This includes communications via telephone and radio to the fire department, Search and Rescue, Animal Control, Boat Patrol, the Public Works Department, Forest Service, Highway Patrol, and Tuolumne County Ambulance, and law enforcement.

Tuolumne County dispatchers work 12-hour shifts, nights, holidays, and weekends to provide 24 hour and 7 days-a-week service. As a result, some overtime work may be required, and in a major emergency, dispatchers may be on call 24 hours a day. Additionally, the work environment can be stressful at times as the calls dispatchers handle usually involve some sort of distress. Dispatchers are often the first people the public contacts when they call for emergency assistance. Dispatchers receive complaints and requests from the public about crimes, fires, and other emergencies.

When dispatchers receive calls, they must carefully question each caller to determine the type, seriousness and most importantly the location of the emergency. Dispatchers must then quickly prioritize an incident, determine the number of units needed, and then relay the information to the appropriate services. Dispatchers also monitor the activities of the responding personnel by using computer-aided dispatch systems. Typically, one dispatcher will handle the dispatching of

the calls to the appropriate units, while another dispatcher receives the incoming calls and monitors the location of the emergency responders.³ All dispatchers have a high level of accountability for their actions and decisions, and a high level of responsibility.¹²

Based on a site visit to the Tuolumne County dispatch center and interviews with personnel, it is noted that the Tuolumne County Dispatch Center is not fully staffed. The usual number of dispatchers on staff is three dispatchers working 12-hour shifts. However, the outgoing and incoming sheriffs and the dispatch supervisor agree that a staff of three or four full time dispatchers at the center is optimal. As of recent, dispatch has hired several relief dispatchers, two current trainees and several potential trainees in process. The recent hiring of relief (part-time) dispatchers is significant as they can provide breaks for dispatchers or cover absences and sick days. Additionally, the sheriff convinced the county administration to increase dispatch starting salaries to attract and retain personnel. These developments are positively impacting staffing at the dispatch center. However, more full-time and fully trained dispatchers would be optimal. When the grand jury recently visited the dispatch center, there was a relief dispatcher, a trainee dispatcher, and only one full time dispatcher answering the 911 calls.

There are also issues that affect long-term retention of dispatch personnel. The congestion and condition of the workspace, difficulty moving up on a pay scale, and dispatch salaries compared to other local agencies all make it difficult to retain dispatchers. There are funds for increased staffing, and the current administration is working to address changes to working conditions that will lead to the retention of dispatchers.

Working Conditions

In terms of the environment, the dispatch center lacks working conditions conducive for 911 dispatchers. Currently, there are workspaces for 6 dispatchers. Each workspace is roughly six feet by six feet (Appendix B). The dispatch work room does not have any windows; therefore, there is no natural light for the employees working long 12-hour shifts. This is particularly concerning in the winter months when dispatchers might not see sunlight during their workdays. Various studies show that exposing workers to only artificial lighting puts their physical and mental health in danger. A 2015 study published in *Chronobiology International* concludes that lack of exposure to natural light at work is related with high levels of cortisol and low levels of melatonin at night, which is itself related to depressive symptoms and a poorer quality of life.¹⁴

Also related to working conditions is the small breakroom just outside the workroom for the dispatchers. The breakroom does not function as a kitchenette as there is only a small microwave for preparing food. There is also no sink or water source in the breakroom. Dispatchers cannot leave the 911 center for meals during their 12-hour shifts, so meals must be prepared in the breakroom with the small microwave. Additionally, dispatchers must use water from and wash their dishes in the sink in the small restroom that is directly across the hall from the workspace.

This single restroom is for all 20 employees of the communication center, and it offers little privacy from the dispatch workspace.

Hiring and Retention

At present, Tuolumne County hires and trains dispatchers. No experience (other than HS equivalency) is required.⁸ The county offers an outstanding on-the-job training program that takes about 6 months. Employees hired from outside the county must have 2 years of prior experience. Currently, the county is posting employment for entry-level dispatchers with salaries ranging from \$27 to \$30.⁹ That salary is in the Level II salary range because at the sheriff's urging, the county agreed to pay entry-level dispatchers the Level II salary to be more competitive with other employers. The increase appears to be working as there are three new relief dispatchers and several trainee new hires.

Presently, the Tuolumne County administration is offering a hiring bonus of \$12,000.¹⁰ However, the dispatcher salary must compete with other local agencies, and there is little opportunity for growth and advancement in a small dispatch center. Dispatch supervisors reiterated that the county has funds to pay for more dispatchers. Progress is being made due to the sheriff's and the county's efforts to train and retain.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS

Findings

F1. The Tuolumne County Sheriff Dispatch Center has many well-documented structural deficiencies that render the facility unable to meet current and future electrical, technological and safety needs.

F2. The Tuolumne County Sheriff's dispatch center is recruiting and hiring relief dispatchers and trainees. However, the dispatch center continues to be understaffed.

Recommendations

R1. The Grand Jury recommends that Tuolumne County Administration and the Board of Supervisors identify sources of funding to either locate an alternative site for the Sheriff's Dispatch Center or renovate the Tuolumne County Sheriff Justice Center to meet current and future needs. (F1)

R2. The Grand Jury recommends that Tuolumne County Administration creates a more conducive working environment to attract and retain sheriff dispatchers including a more functional and safer dispatch workroom, a suitable breakroom, and a more acceptable restroom for the 20 dispatch center employees. (F1, F2)

R3. The Grand Jury recommends that the Tuolumne County Sheriff's department increases the number of full-time dispatchers on staff. (F2)

R4. The Grand Jury recommends a more aggressive approach to attracting potential dispatchers by collaborating with Columbia College to offer courses and certification for public service dispatch. (F2)

Commendations

The Tuolumne County Sheriff dispatch center professionals continue to rise to the challenge of carrying out their life saving mission. The dispatchers are required to be detail oriented as they gather essential information to determine a situation's severity in record time and ensure information is dispatched to the appropriate emergency response agency.

In 2022, in recognition of outstanding service in the line of duty over an extended period, eleven members of the Tuolumne County Communications Division were awarded the Distinguished Service Award 7.

The Tuolumne County Grand Jury appreciates and commends the critical role our public safety dispatchers play in keeping our community safe and secure. Additionally, the grand jury commends the Tuolumne County Sheriff for his dedication to creating a safer, more efficient, and operative facility to meet the public's safety needs now and in the future.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Required Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933(c), responses are required from the following governing bodies within 90 days:

- * Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors (Finding 1, Finding 2), (Recommendation 1, Recommendation 2)
- * Tuolumne County Sheriff (Finding 2), (Recommendation 2, Recommendation 3, Recommendation 4)

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APPENDIX A



TUOLUMNE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

MARCH 2024

STATS AT A GLANCE

DISPATCH

Total Calls:	7983	
Total Incidents:	3697	
Calls for Service:	2905	
Life Saving Interventions:	16	
Emergency Medical Dispatching:	710	

PATROL

Deputy Cases:	281	Citations:	34
Total Arrests:	130		
Felony:	44	Misdemeanor:	86
Fentanyl Cases:	14	Suicides:	0
Unhoused Contacted:	103		
Unhoused Incidents:	98		
Assist Other LE Agencies:	15		
Mental Health Crisis Response:			21
Community Oriented Policing Patrol (COPP):			42
Average # of Deputies per Shift:			5

JAIL

Bookings:	307		
Male:	219	Female:	88
Non-Binary:	0	Unknown:	0
Avg. Daily Pop.:	140		
Jail Incidents:	144	Citations:	7

OTHER

- SAR Incidents: 1
- Congratulations on your appointment Sheriff Vasquez!
- Jail Work Crew will be starting up again in April.

<https://www.facebook.com/tuolumnecountysheriff/>

APPENDIX B



https://www.uniondemocrat.com/news/article_2dd2df40-a3a4-11eb-8fa8-a7f173d9c8d8.html

APPENDIX C



28 N Lower Sunset Dr., Sonora, CA. Unused section of Tuolumne County Justice Center