
WASHOE COUNTY EMS

TYPICAL STANDARDS

The typical standards at most departments for response are:

1. Arrival of basic life support capability (EMT intermediate) in less than six minutes from call.
2. Arrival of advanced life support capability (paramedic) in less than eight minutes from call.

Many fire departments have tighter standards. Los Angeles County Fire's standards, like North Lake Tahoe's standards are four and six minutes.

The American Heart Association standard is that advanced life support must be started in eight minutes from a heart attack for the patient to have any chance of survival, and most emergency room physicians will tell you six minutes is the requirement.

THE INITIAL IDEA

The initial idea, dating from the mid-1980s, was that Reno Fire would provide BLS, and a private ambulance service would provide ALS and transport. The ambulance service evolved into REMSA, with an exclusive franchise, separate dispatch, and the right to charge fees for both ALS and transport. This was initially confined to what is now known as "the eight minute response zone" for REMSA, which is essentially the part of Reno within the McCarran Loop, and the western part of what is now Sparks.

So, Reno Fire wrote six minute standards for BLS response. And the REMSA franchise specified an eight minute response.

EVOLUTION

TRUCKEE MEADOWS FPD

As the City and County grew, and more homes and businesses were built outside the McCarran loop, the County created Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District. Since it was staffed by Reno Fire, and Reno Fire provided BLS, the decision was made to retain the fire department as BLS supplier, and REMSA as ALS. But this territorial expansion created two problems:

1. The Reno and TM fire stations are too far spaced in the unincorporated area (and indeed in much of the City) to provide 6 minute response for BLS.
2. REMSA, being a private business, has no incentive to station ambulances in areas where the number of calls is not large enough to justify the expense, so there is no eight minute ALS, either.

So, Reno Fire is unable to provide the service in TMFPD, and REMSA had their franchise re-written by a cooperative Health Department to classify much of the unincorporated area as "Best Efforts".

NORTH LAKE TAHOE FPD

The North lake Tahoe Fire Protection District has the “exclusive operating area” of Incline Village and Crystal Bay, Nevada, following a vote of the residents for increased medical services by allowing the Fire District to provide Advanced Life Support care (paramedics) and ambulance transport. This occurred in 1982, prior to the existence of the franchised ambulance system (REMSA). Washoe County District Health Department excluded NLTFPD, Gerlach and the area serviced by the Mt Rose First Aid squad from the Franchise Agreement.

REMSA decided that North Lake was too far and there was not enough traffic for them to make a profit, so they decided not to cover North Lake. NLTFPD then began to transport patients with fire-department ambulances and charge for the service (much like many other cities do). North Lake’s EMS response time is about four minutes, including call processing.

SIERRA FPD

What is now Sierra Fire Protection district already had paramedics when it was operated by the Nevada Department of Forestry. Each engine company had (and has today) at least one cross-trained fireman/paramedic and full paramedic equipment. REMSA kept the transport franchise, and now charges both for ALS and transport, (even though most of the time the fire district paramedic has already stabilized the patient before REMSA’s “best efforts” response arrives). When Washoe County took over Sierra, the citizens lobbied for and got a small tax increase primarily to keep the paramedic service.

WHY ARE WE STUCK?

The system evolved from one that made sense to one that does not perform, because the right resources do not arrive in time. Each agency developed an investment in their role, coveted the income that it provided, and resisted changing the plan. Neither Reno Fire nor REMSA was interested in changing the system to provide the originally-specified service level throughout the County.

WHAT IS THE COUNTY DOING?

The County is doing two things.

1. The Commission ordered the convening of a “Multi-Stakeholder EMS Task Force, which has had one meeting this year so far. The Commission apparently imagined that this would result in recommendations, and that might yet happen. However, REMSA only participated if the Task Force would not address their role at all, and County staff states that the real expectation of the group is that it will write an RFP so the County can hire a consultant.
2. The staff has written an extensive report to be presented at the March 8th Commission meeting that states that the County should set required response times at those it presently can achieve with no system changes. This has no basis in science at all, and is simply a justification of the current County practice. The revised times are attributed to a consultant, but the other reports the same consultant has written reflect the science, and have much more prompt response times in them. And the consultant reports supposedly recommending this never have been made public.

SO, WHAT IS THE RIGHT ANSWER?

There are four parts to the issue: first, the time it takes to process the call; second, the time it takes the responder to get out the door; third, the length of time it takes to travel to the incident; and finally, does the responder have the right skills to be effective. Here are some short-term changes to improve the situation.

DISPATCH

The current system has two different PSAPs. Your 911 call goes to Reno dispatch, is then switched to REMSA, and then switched back to Reno dispatch. This process is insisted upon by REMSA, and has been criticized by every independent study undertaken in Washoe County in the last five years for adding several minutes to dispatch in Reno and TMFPD. REMSA adamantly refuses to accept changes to this, and this refusal will ultimately lead to the same kind of confrontation that is currently occurring with Reno Fire's unions.

North Lake uses its own facility in North Lake Tahoe, and Sierra is dispatched by Reno dispatch before the call is transferred to REMSA.

What most other providers in the country do is to provide all-risk dispatchers as a single PSAP. REMSA's problem with this, other than it would reveal their performance, is that they use a dedicated computer system that positions ambulances and occasionally reassigns them enroute to minimize their costs.

A temporary workaround for TMFPD would be to adopt, for all calls coming from the unincorporated area, the same protocol that Chief Michael Greene devised for Sierra—dispatch of the fire response BEFORE the call is transferred to REMSA. This saves minutes, and lives.

TURN-OUT TIME

The second issue is the inordinately long time Reno Fire takes to get out of the station after the alarm. Most fire districts clear the door on the average in one minute, and the better ones are better than that. Data supplied to us from Reno Fire indicates that their turn-out time is two and a half minutes on average. This is simply unacceptable. If you have only eight minutes to save a life, you have to get out the door sooner.

DRIVE TIME

Fire station locations are an issue. Every station in Washoe County, with the sole exception of Somerset (not staffed now) has been here in the same location from well before the County population started to expand. A real question is, are they in the right places?

SKILL SET

Citizens expect emergency responders to be properly trained and equipped. In the present case, having BLS show up in six minutes is inconsequential if you need ALS and it doesn't arrive for fifteen minutes. This means that all fire stations, of whatever district, which are outside the REMSA eight minute zone must have full paramedic capabilities. Neither Reno nor Reno's offshoot, TMFPD, provide that at this time. This is simply unacceptable, and the additional cost to provide it is reported to be small (per Mary Walker). 80% of all calls are medical, and what the County has effectively said is that for those calls, "we're not sending what you need, but please keep paying your taxes to us".