“911, where is your emergency?”
Or should your first question be:
“911, what is the nature of your emergency?”

Should you send police, fire, EMS or some combination? What risks are those at the scene or responders en route exposed to? Are specialized responder skills needed? Are specific apparatus required?

Protocols Defined

In 911 communications, protocols refer to a series of questions whose answers are intended to assist the dispatcher in identifying risks the emergency present, the type of resources to send, where to send them, and how quickly help is needed.

The public has high expectations of 911 dispatchers. When they call 911, they expect:

- A prompt answer to their call;
- The person answering their call to be professional and knowledgeable;
- That appropriate help will be sent immediately;
- The 911 dispatcher to give them advice on what to do until help arrives;
- That first responders arrive at the correct location before the situation deteriorates further; and
- In the event of a medical or traumatic emergency, transport to the facility best equipped to handled their emergency.

Protocols gather information that are the foundation of effective dispatch. They provide a method for structured information gathering that allows call-takers to obtain the information they need to initiate a response chain that might commence with the provision of immediate pre-arrival instructions.
Some communication centers have created their own protocols for emergency medical dispatch (EMD), law enforcement and/or fire emergencies. Others expect their dispatchers to use their experience and judgment on call-taking and dispatching with very little oversight from management. Still others have purchased a protocol system from one of the three main vendors of 911 protocol systems:

- APCO International
- Priority Dispatch or
- PowerPhone.

Whether your agency wants to overhaul its protocols or is looking to implement protocols for the first time (e.g., EMD implementation due to state law or regulation), this paper is intended to help you identify the 911 protocol vendor whose product and service best meet the needs and culture of your 911 communications center.

What Protocols Do

Any given protocol system should follow the logical, natural cycle of the call:

- the initial intake;
- questioning to assess risk and determine scene conditions;
- the dispatch of appropriate responder types;
- the gathering of additional information for responders en route;
- the delivery of pre-arrival instructions when necessary; and
- the call closure.

Incident-specific lines of questioning help dispatchers make objective dispatch decisions, give responders insight into the situation they are about to be confronted with and offer appropriate pre-arrival instructions to callers.

Traditionally, communication centers dispatch specific units or number of units in a geographic area on the basis of call type and general guidelines set in advance. Incident-specific lines of questioning contained in protocols, help dispatchers set priority levels and type(s) of responder needed based on actual scene conditions.

Protocols also help dispatchers paint a picture for responders while they’re en route to a scene and provide updates as the circumstances on scene change. Example: The call starts as “difficulty breathing,” but the situation worsens as the call progresses. The dispatcher can alert the responder that they are now heading into a CPR situation.
The Benefits

A protocol system improves the standard of care your agency delivers—as well as that of the police, fire and EMS departments you work with.

A protocol system from any of the vendors should help mitigate your agency’s exposure to liability. The vendor assumes a portion of the liability. The vendor is responsible for vetting the system and ensuring it meets all applicable standards.

It’s been a struggle for dispatchers to be recognized as professionals, and a protocol system helps your dispatchers deliver a consistent standard of care, from person to person and shift to shift. Protocols help set a standard for the profession.

Protocols reduce dispatcher stress because they don’t have to come up with the questions in the heat of the moment. The protocols guide the questions and help the dispatcher know what pre-arrival instructions are appropriate in order to aid the caller.

Protocols help dispatchers give appropriate guidance to responders, information that will keep them safe and bring them home at the end of their shift. Information is power, and many of the questions and instructions are focused on scene safety. They help the dispatcher know what to tell responders to do and what not to do.

The zero-minute response time is another consideration. Emergency response times used to be measured from when the vehicle left the station. Now, the clock begins the second you answer the phone - if not on the first ring. Protocols are caller/victim focused, and pre-arrival instructions shorten the time lapse for emergency care to begin.

Example: The call starts as “difficulty breathing,” but the situation worsens as the call progresses. The dispatcher can alert the responder that they are now heading into a CPR situation. Or following a road accident, a vehicle that the caller claims caused the crash, takes off at speed before responders arrive. A brief description of the vehicle and its occupants, together with direction of travel is relayed to responders en route.

Pre-arrival instructions help stabilize a situation, offer safety advice or preserve evidence until responders can reach the scene. They can help make the caller an active participant in the resolution.

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After the Call

Validate Performance
Quality assurance (QA) is the only effective way to validate your agency’s performance.

QA should look at the entire system—protocols, policies and procedures—and ensure the system is working the way it should and is intended to. And yes, QA should also be used to ensure the dispatcher is following the process.

The QA assessment process that accompanies protocol usage, should allow dispatchers to learn from their handling of prior calls, and provide an opportunity to gain exposure to scenarios they haven’t yet encountered. The benefits from some participation in call assessment by all dispatchers shouldn’t be underestimated.

The monitoring of trends from assessment data will also provide help to PSAP directors to identify training and staffing needs, procedural updates and what equipment needs to be upgraded.

Choose Your Vendor

All three of the major vendors:
• Strive to improve the standard of care
• Champion better call consistency
• Better inform responders
• Offer pre-arrival instructions

Their approach to QA may differ, so consider the implications of each one on your operations and resources. The ultimate goal should be the same, but the path to get there may not.

The key differences lie in their philosophies and approach to call-taking and dispatching. Ask the vendors to pull back the curtain. Is the system rigid? Does it rely heavily on your own resources to develop the protocols? Does it offer flexibility? What type of service will you receive?

Your agency’s goal should be to choose the vendor that best fits its culture. What do you want?
If EMD makes up 10% of your call volume, will you be ignoring the other 90% (police and fire) by purchasing a stand-alone EMD system? Are you sure EMD is all you need? If you run a primary PSAP, is it realistic to expect dispatchers to determine; what is a medical call, that justifies protocol use, and what isn’t? In the event you elect to deploy protocols to cover a proportion of calls, the system should be scalable in the event your agency grows and the services you offer expand?

Some vendors offer a COTS’ approach (i.e., a consumer off-the-shelf model) and ask the agency to adapt to the product rather than customizing it to your operation. But a protocol system is a long-term investment, and it must meet your agency’s specific needs.

Don’t let the tail wag the dog, the responsibility is yours. A system that isn’t able to adapt to your agency’s operating environment going to be used consistently?

Do an honest self-evaluation of your agency. What’s your culture?

Will your dispatchers react well to a forced path that is perceived as ridged, inflexible and punitive towards deviation from the script? Will this approach encourage your staff to develop their skills or just make them dependent upon following the scope of each script?

Would a protocol system that is structured but allows guided flexibility be a better fit? Do you want the protocol to be a tool in the hands of a trained professional able to exercise some judgment in its use? Does the vendor understand that calls are dynamic and that dispatchers are better motivated if they’re allowed to use their training, experience and knowledge to respond to what the caller is saying?

Both approaches are proven to work, but the success of their implementation will be influenced by your preference, your agency’s culture and its operational needs.

What about Quality Assurance (QA)? Over time, it’s come to be seen as the retrospective review of calls in order to generate an arbitrary score. This can lead to dispatchers learning to ‘beat the system’ in order to attain a high score, resulting in unnecessary questions being asked of callers, time delays and high user frustration.
Remember: Protocol System is Quality Assurance

Too many agencies fail to recognize that their protocol system is a quality system. Instead they regard QA as an adjunct to the protocols, that carries with it the option to ‘do QA’ or not. Does the protocol system you’re evaluating seem to be based upon the mindset of catching people doing something wrong—or does it recognize the importance of constructive feedback and continuing improvement? Does it promote the sharing of best practices across the agency? Does it motivate everyone to see the many benefits from continuing call assessment and encourage a drive to maintain a consistent high level of service deliver.

Does your agency prefer paper or software for its protocols?

How protocols are presented to the end user will greatly affect the success of their adoption. Look at the entire delivery approach. Then look at the form factor and design of both. Where the card holder (Is there more than one?) be stored when it is not in use? How will this fit with other equipment at the operator’s workstation? Will you need another monitor, or can the software be installed on existing hardware? How intuitive is the system navigation when used under pressure? Dispatchers don’t need something else to trip them up and make their job more difficult.

Do you want one system or three? Three separate software modules or card-sets can be difficult to manage and switch among. The days of calling and just getting police or just getting an ambulance are going away. There are many scenarios that require a multi-agency response. How seamlessly does the protocol system support the user when handling a call that requires more than one agency type? Does the protocol system integrate police, fire and medical protocols in multi-agency scenarios or does it treat them separately, thereby requiring the operator to choose? How might you validate that choice after the fact?

Can the protocol system be integrated with and have the ability to interface with other systems in your agency, such as the CAD or telephony?

Beware of third party interfaces that try to control flow of information or only send information one way.

Don’t just look at upfront costs. Look at ongoing costs, initial certification, recertification, training, back-fill costs, online training, CE requirements and costs, maintenance costs. What are you going to get out of that maintenance? Make sure you compare the proverbial apples to apples and don’t just look at the bottom line.

Beware of third party interfaces that try to control the flow of information or only send information one way.
Fully vet the vendor. What’s their reputation in the industry? Are they innovators? Are they maintaining the status quo? What’s their sell process? Can they answer your questions? Does the salesperson know how the product works?

Get the good and the bad from your colleagues using the system.

Dig deep into the implementation process. Implementation is a cooperative effort. You need support during implementation. Will the vendor be proactive?

What post-implementation support is offered?

Be wary of complex contracts and agreements.

Listen to your instincts. Does the vendor share your philosophy? Will they be your partner or they out to make a quick buck?

The Choice Should Be Obvious

Once these questions have been answered to your satisfaction, the answer to what vendor to choose should be obvious. For Cabell County (W.Va.) 911, the answer was the Total Response Integrated Protocol System from PowerPhone.

Cabell County has a population of 96,000, and the communications center serves 16 public safety agencies and is committed to a high standard of care. They began looking for a protocol system due to a state mandate to implement EMD.

Cabell wanted a protocol system that would:
- integrate with its CAD system
- be simple to use
- be concise

Importantly, the dispatchers had to understand it and agree to use it.

Steve Rutherford, support services coordinator for Cabell County, says they went with PowerPhone because, “It’s important to us to move toward accreditation. We want credibility. We want the public to understand that we have high standards and high levels of training.”
Rutherford says Cabell has already realized benefits in terms of “greater consistency with all of our call types. There’s one standard way to handle questioning and offer pre-arrival instructions. We have a consistent way of ensuring scene safety. The protocols have empowered our call-takers. They understand what they’re doing and feel like they’re part of the chain of care. We’re providing the highest level of care every day and across all shifts.”

**Bottom Line**

Protocols do work. They empower dispatchers to give lifesaving pre-arrival instructions.

Good people want to progress, grow and do more. Protocols are a tool to help your dispatchers grow and do more.

When choosing a protocol system and vendor, make sure the product can stand on its own. Make sure the people you’re dealing with know the industry and know their product. Choose the vendor that best fits into your agency’s culture and can best help you meet your goals.