How to Choose a 911 Protocol Vendor
Finding the Best Fit

“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? Is specialized equipment 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 what the emergency is, where to send what resources 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 will 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 serve as the foundation of call-taking and dispatching, providing a method for structured information gathering that allows call-takers to obtain the information they need to meet and exceed these expectations in a logical and consistent manner.
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 guidance 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 white 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 determine scene conditions;
- the dispatch;
- the provision of additional information to responders;
- the delivery of pre-arrival instructions to callers; and
- the call closure.

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 help dispatchers set priority levels and type(s) of responder needed based on actual scene conditions.

Protocols 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.

Pre-arrival instructions help stabilize a situation until responders can reach the scene. They make the caller an active participant in the resolution.
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 limit 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:** They don’t have to come up with the questions to ask on their own. The protocols guide the questions and help the dispatcher know what pre-arrival instructions are appropriate and will 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.
After the Call

Quality assurance (QA) is the best way to validate the total system.

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 process that accompanies protocol usage allows dispatchers to learn from their mistakes and their successes.

The data obtained from examining the call helps directors identify training and staffing needs, 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

All three offer a QA option so dispatchers learn from their mistakes.

With these commonalities, the key differences among the vendors 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.
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? Can the system scale as 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 agency-specific needs.

Don't let the tail wag the dog. The responsibility is yours, so the system should at least in part conform to your agency's operating environment to ensure that it’s used and used consistently.

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

Will your dispatchers take well to a forced path, one that’s based on command and control, with robust policies and procedures that allow little to no deviation from path? Would your agency make its people secondary to the protocol?

Does your agency empower your people to adapt to changing conditions? Do you want a protocol system that is guided but flexible? Do you want the protocol to be a tool in the hands of a trained professional? Does the vendor understand that calls are dynamic and that dispatchers need to use their training, experience and knowledge to respond to what the caller is saying?

Both approaches work, but you need to be clear about your preference and your agency’s culture.

What’s your approach to QA? Over time, it’s come to mean a retrospective review with an arbitrary score. This leads to dispatchers who are going through the motions to achieve a high score, unnecessary questions being asked, wasted time and high frustration.

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Protocol System = Quality Assurance

Call assessment is part, not all, of QA. Does the protocol system you’re evaluating go into it with the mindset of catching people doing something wrong—or doing something great? Does it allow you to share best practices across the agency? It should take away the fear of the call assessment and encourage a high level of service delivered consistently.

Does your agency prefer paper or software for its protocols?

Look at the entire system first. Then look at the delivery method. Look at the form factor and design of both. Is the system easy to navigate under less than ideal circumstances? Dispatchers don’t need something else to trip them up and make their job more difficult.

Do you want one system or three? Three applications or cardsets can be difficult to manage and switch among. The days of calling and just getting police or just getting an ambulance are going away. A domestic assault, for example, will require both police and EMS personnel. Does the protocol system integrate police, fire and EMS or treat them separately?

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

Beware of products 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.

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.*

- 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.