

EL DORADO COUNTY
GRAND JURY 2020-2021
REPORT



**WEST SLOPE EMERGENCY SERVICES,
JOINT POWERS AUTHORITY AND
AMBULANCE SERVICE**

CASE 20-05

Public Release

JUNE 30, 2021

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BACKGROUND

Approximately forty years ago, only two ambulances served the western slope of El Dorado County—one private, one from Pollock Pines Fire Protection District. In 1976, the private ambulance company left the County, necessitating that changes be made to the County's Emergency Medical system (EMS). In 1976, the voters passed a special tax to provide needed Ambulance service, resulting in the creation of County Service Area # 7 (CSA 7), which covers the West slope of El Dorado County. In 1996 the County Board of Supervisors, requested that the voters in the Western Slope approve a special parcel tax of \$ 25.00 to fund additional ambulances, this also passed. CSA 7 then funded additional ambulances staffed by firefighter/paramedics and EMTs from Pleasant Valley, Pollock Pines, Cameron Park and El Dorado Hills Fire protection districts.

At this time, to provide a more comprehensive emergency medical system it was recommended that the Fire Districts form a Joint Powers Authority (JPA), named El Dorado County Emergency Services Authority, as allowed by California Law. This was accomplished in 1996, with ten fire agencies joining: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire), Cameron Park Community Service District. (CPCSD), Diamond Springs/El Dorado Fire Protection District (FPD), El Dorado County FPD, El Dorado Hills County Water District (El Dorado Hills Fire), Georgetown FPD, Garden Valley FPD, Mosquito FPD, Pioneer FPD, and Rescue FPD.

METHODOLOGY

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

- The El Dorado County Emergency Services Authority, 2017-2022 Strategic Plan
- *The Joint Powers Agreement Revised* dated January 23, 2019
- *Contract for Prehospital Advanced Life Support and Dispatch Services* between the County and JPA
- *Advanced Life Support Ambulance Agreement* between the JPA and Fire Districts
- Several JPA Board of Directors Meeting minutes
- El Dorado County Civil Grand Jury fire protection reports – 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020

Interviews

- Fire district staff and directors
- County staff
- JPA staff

DISCUSSION

ADMINISTRATION

The CSA 7 ambulance service is organized in a manner that is unique to El Dorado County. The County has overall responsibility and oversight for the service. The County contracts with the JPA to provide the ambulance service. In turn, the JPA contracts with five fire districts to operate and staff eight ambulances. The JPA also contracts with CalFire to provide 911 dispatch services through the Emergency Command Center (ECC) in Camino.

The current contract between the County and the JPA is dated July 1, 2018, and expires on June 30, 2023. The Scope of Services includes emergency medical standards and requirements, system designations, system status management, emergency medical service requirements, personnel requirements, training requirements, community education plan, quality improvement/quality assurance, response time standards, backup unit coverage requirement, mutual aid requests, disaster/multi-casualty incident requirements and standby and special event coverage. Compensation paid to the JPA is \$11,300,000 annually, and is adjusted yearly by the Medicare Ambulance Inflation Factor released by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Studies. In addition, the JPA received \$500,000 for each of the first three years of the contract for repair and replacement of capital assets.

The JPA is governed by a Board of Directors (BOD), and has one full time staff and a part time Executive Director. The current JPA staff started in the fall of 2020. They are in the process of reviewing and updating equipment, files, and procedures. The organization of the JPA office has suffered inefficiencies over the last couple of years, largely due to inconsistent and temporary staffing. The BOD has 11 Directors: the Fire Chief from each of the nine CAS 7 fire departments plus a CalFire and Marshall Hospital representative. The fire district Chiefs represent both districts that operate ambulances and districts that do not provide ambulance services. A BOD, comprised of fire professionals, a Marshall Hospital representative, and no public participation could be perceived as not responsive. In numerous interviews, the large size of the BOD was described as being unwieldy at times. We heard no definitive option for changing the makeup of the BOD, just that its composition should be reviewed. Any BOD change would require BOD approval, which, from a political and practical standpoint, could be difficult.

Funding to provide this service comes from CSA 7 property tax, CSA 7 special tax and ambulance billing. The revenues from the property and special tax varies, however, it is a

reasonably predictable and consistent amount. Ambulance billing amounts can vary widely depending on service calls and collection success.

To do ambulance billing the County receives ambulance call information digitally from the ambulance staff. After reviewing the information, it is passed on to an outside billing service under contract with the County. The billing service in turn bills the appropriate entity, such as the patient, Medicare, MediCal or other insurance providers. The ambulance charge rates are determined by the Board of Supervisors (BOS) and base rates have not been changed since 2016. The rates are adjusted each year per the Medicare Ambulance Inflation Factor. If there is a payment problem the County has contracted with another private firm to do collections. Each year the BOS approves the write off of fees the collection company has deemed uncollectable. The net fees and taxes collected less the contract cost with the JPA and County CSA 7 administration activities has produced an annual surplus, which has grown from \$6,527,030 as of June 30, 2016 to \$9,530,499 as of June 30, 2020.

The Grand Jury believes that the surplus is consistent enough that the BOS and JPA should explore ways to allocate more of these funds to improve Advanced Life Support (ALS) service for CSA 7. Some ideas we heard in interviews include additional part time ambulance service, adding new technically advanced equipment, and increasing funding to improve ALS fire engine service. There are limitations on how the funds can be spent per the CAS 7 and JPA's charters. Significantly changing the charters is a time-consuming and costly procedure that could require voter approval.

OPERATIONS

All interviewees advised the Grand Jury that the ambulance service provided by the JPA is a professional and excellent operation. The ambulances are staffed by firefighters, providing enhanced service to the public. An ambulance staff can assist in rescues and are available for other firefighter duties. When ambulance service is provided by private companies, as is the case in many parts of California, these enhanced capabilities are lost.

The JPA is responsible for providing ambulances 24 hours a day and seven days a week (24/7), in order to provide adequate service to CSA 7. The eight ambulances are ALS certified and staffed with one Emergency Medical Technician-1 and one Emergency Medical Technician-Paramedic per ambulance. Ambulance purchase and operation costs, as well as medical equipment and supplies are the responsibility of the JPA. The County has loaned the JPA a limited amount of equipment. Staffing and operation of the ambulances is provided under contract with the JPA by five fire districts in CSA 7. Ambulances operated include: El Dorado County FD - four, Diamond Springs/Eldorado FD - one, Georgetown FD - one, CPCSD - one, and El Dorado Hills FD - one. The length of these contracts is the same as the County/JPA contract. The JPA compensation to each fire department is a fixed fee of \$1,150,000 annually for each ambulance.

CPCSD has contracted its fire protection services with CalFire. CalFire operates one ambulance in CPCSD, however, CalFire receives a reimbursement of direct costs, not a fixed rate like the other operating fire departments. Reimbursed fees for CPCSD have been less than the fixed fee rate.

Under the fixed rate fees, fire districts can keep any fee amount that is above their direct operating expenses. The Grand Jury's investigation found that at least some of the fire departments had a surplus in the initial years of the latest contract.

Medical calls make up over 50% of fire district dispatches in CSA 7. In many cases, a fire engine is the first to arrive at a call location, arriving before an ambulance. This is especially true in more rural areas of CSA 7. Fire engines can be ALS certified with the proper equipment and appropriate staff qualifications. When an ALS fire engine arrives, first medical treatment can commence immediately. El Dorado County FD, El Dorado Hills FD, Diamond Springs/Eldorado FD, Garden Valley FD, Rescue FD and CPCSD are the only FDs that have 24/7 ALS fire engines. Garden Valley FD is financially challenged, and may not be able to maintain ALS certification. Currently, ALS fire engines can get medical supplies from the JPA, however, this is not always easily accomplished, and can cause financial hardship for the fire districts. Staging of ambulances requires vigilant monitoring by the ECC to ensure adequate coverage when ambulances are on runs. Having more ALS fire engines in CSA 7 would improve response time for medical treatment.

The JPA owns 16 ambulances. Eight remain on duty while eight stand by in ready backup mode or under maintenance. When an ambulance is at end of life, the JPA has saved money by installing the old ambulance box onto a new chassis/engine/drivetrain. It is very expensive to equip an ambulance, and the cost continues to rise. New medical equipment is continuing to be developed that brings better care to the patient at the response location. Advanced medical equipment is not inexpensive, however, especially when needing to outfit eight, to sixteen ambulances. The funds available to the JPA for repair and replacement of capital assets is \$1,500,000 in their current five-year contract with the County.

CONCLUSIONS

Emergency medical response in CSA 7 is a system of which the County can be proud. The firefighters who provide these services are true professionals. The nine FDs in CSA 7 work well together as one entity to serve the public. However, the disparity in FDs (see Grand Jury fire protection reports from 2017-2018, 2018-2019 and 2019-2020) can cause a varying level of initial response. The current ambulance service is producing an annual financial surplus. The County and JPA can make a good service even better.

Findings

F1. Ambulance service in CSA 7 is contracted by the County to the JPA who, in turn, contracts with five fire districts to operate the ambulances.

F2. The current contracts that the JPA has entered into with the fire districts operating ambulances are fixed rate contracts except for the CPCSD agreement, which is for reimbursement of direct costs. Some of the fire districts that receive reimbursements on a fixed rate have had a surplus, as their direct costs have been lower than their contracted fees.

F3. The CSA 7 fund has a \$9,530,499 fund balance as of June 30, 2020. This fund has grown by \$3,003,469 since June 30, 2016.

F4. The BOD of the JPA has eleven members. Numerous interviewees indicated that they believed this large Board makes the Board unwieldy.

F5. The ambulance service is highly professional. Ambulances staffed with firefighters provide enhanced flexibility in the services provided.

F6 Medical calls make up over 50% of fire district dispatches. ALS fire engines provide additional medical service to the public. The limited funding of some districts within the JPA may reduce the number of ALS engines in CSA 7 in the near future.

Recommendations

R1. The County should consider changing the contract with the JPA from fixed price to direct cost reimbursement for the next contract period.

R2 The County and JPA should explore ways to use the CSA 7 fund surplus to increase ambulance and medical services. Maintaining or improving ALS fire engine service should be a priority.

R3. The JPA should explore ways to reconstitute the Board of Directors to make the Board more effective.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

This Grand Jury report is an account of an investigation or review. It contains findings and recommendations, and names those who should respond to each finding and each recommendation pertaining to matters under the respondent's control.

Please review *How to Respond to an El Dorado County Grand Jury Report*, a separate document included with this report.

Responses are requested in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.

- **Responses to R1 and R2 are requested from the Board of Supervisors.**
- **Responses to F4, R2 and R3 are requested from the JPA Board.**