



**National Transportation Safety Board**  
Washington, DC 20594

**Safety Recommendation Report**

**Addressing 911 Communication Problems in the Area of  
Cooper Township, Michigan**

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<b>Accident Number:</b>	HWY16MH014
<b>Location:</b>	Cooper Township, Michigan
<b>Date:</b>	June 7, 2016
<b>Recommendation Numbers:</b>	H-17-16 and -17
<b>Adopted:</b>	April 11, 2017

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**Background**

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant accidents in other modes of transportation—railroad, highway, marine, and pipeline. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents or lessening their severity.

The NTSB is investigating a collision between a Chevrolet pickup truck and nine cyclists that occurred in Cooper Township, Kalamazoo County, Michigan, on June 7, 2016. In the course of our investigation, we have identified a serious problem with communication among the agencies that received 911 notifications concerning precrash actions by the driver involved in the crash. Consequently, the NTSB is issuing urgent safety recommendations to the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners, the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety (DPS), the Kalamazoo County Sheriff’s Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department. The NTSB is providing the following information in support of its recommendations.

**Cooper Township Accident**

About 6:29 p.m. (local time) on Tuesday, June 7, 2016, a 1996 Chevrolet pickup truck operated by a 50-year-old male was traveling northbound on North Westnedge Avenue in Cooper Township, Michigan.<sup>1</sup> While in the 5300 block of North Westnedge Avenue, the truck approached a northbound group of nine cyclists traveling in a single file line on the 4-foot-wide shoulder adjacent to the travel lane. The cyclists were part of a private bicycle group that was participating in a 28.5-mile recreational ride. The truck driver departed the travel lane and drove onto the shoulder, striking all nine cyclists in succession. The truck continued northbound for a short

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<sup>1</sup> All times in this document are eastern daylight time.

distance before coming to final rest across a drainage ditch. The driver fled the scene but was later apprehended by responding officers. As a result of the collision, five cyclists sustained fatal injuries. The remaining four cyclists sustained serious injuries. They were transported and admitted to local trauma centers.

## Communications Deficiencies

The pickup truck was first observed by an eyewitness about 6:05 p.m. in the City of Kalamazoo. At 6:07 p.m., the City of Kalamazoo DPS dispatcher received a 911 call reporting that a Chevrolet pickup truck was being operated in an erratic manner. The caller advised the dispatcher that the truck was heading toward the boundary between the city's jurisdiction and the county's jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup> The caller provided a detailed description of the pickup truck.<sup>3</sup> At 6:08 p.m., the Kalamazoo DPS dispatcher put out a "Be On the Lookout" (BOL) notice to the DPS prime talk group but did not provide it to any other local law enforcement agency.

At 6:09 p.m., the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Office dispatcher received a separate 911 call reporting that a Chevrolet pickup truck was driving at a high rate of speed on the wrong side of the roadway in the city. The caller said that the truck driver had nearly collided head-on with oncoming traffic and was driving other motorists off the roadway. That 911 caller provided a description of the truck and its direction of travel, which was toward the Township of Kalamazoo. At 6:13 p.m., the Sheriff's Office dispatcher sent an electronic lookout message, via the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) messaging system, to all units of the Sheriff's Office and to the Kalamazoo DPS and Township of Kalamazoo Police Department dispatchers about the erratic driver in the pickup truck.<sup>4</sup> However, the Kalamazoo DPS and Township of Kalamazoo dispatchers did not communicate this information to their patrol officers.

At 6:19 p.m., the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department dispatcher received a 911 call reporting a hit-and-run event that had just occurred at a local high school, which was a short distance from the last reported sighting of the pickup truck in the County of Kalamazoo. This 911 caller provided a detailed description (including the license plate number) of the truck but could not provide a direction of travel for the vehicle. The high school is located within minutes of all the adjoining Kalamazoo jurisdictions (city, county, and township).

At 6:21 p.m., the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department dispatcher dispatched an officer to the high school concerning the hit and run. He advised the officer that the vehicle described was similar to the one identified earlier by the dispatchers for the City of Kalamazoo DPS and the County Sheriff's Office, and he communicated the license plate number. However, he did not share the license plate information with either the City or County Sheriff's Office dispatchers. Also about 6:21 p.m., another township police officer, who had overheard the

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<sup>2</sup> Between 6:05 p.m. and the time of the crash, the pickup truck traveled in and out of three geographic areas represented by different law enforcement agencies: the City of Kalamazoo, the County of Kalamazoo, and the Township of Kalamazoo.

<sup>3</sup> The caller reported the pickup truck make, model, and color, and described the driver's appearance.

<sup>4</sup> All three law enforcement agencies used a CAD system that permitted interagency communications by voice and through mobile messaging.

6:08 p.m. BOL notice from the City of Kalamazoo DPS dispatcher, canvassed the area around the high school for the vehicle.

At 6:29 p.m., the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department dispatcher received the first 911 call reporting the crash involving the cyclists.

All the 911 calls were received at the Kalamazoo integrated dispatch center by dispatchers employed by the City of Kalamazoo DPS, the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department.<sup>5</sup> The integrated dispatch center co-locates the communications activities for all three law enforcement agencies—to the extent that all three dispatch functions take place in the same room—but each agency's dispatcher operates independently within the center, and there is no unified command structure for the dispatchers. Each jurisdiction's dispatch operates on a radio talk group specifically designated for that agency. Moreover, each agency operates according to its own internal policies and procedures. Each agency is responsible for determining the need for and providing its own communications supervisor. None of the agencies provide a supervisor during all hours of operation, which leaves critical decision-making to the individual dispatchers.

In the course of this investigation, the NTSB determined that only limited communication occurred among the dispatchers for these three primary law enforcement agencies as the events leading to the crash unfolded. In total, 22 minutes passed between the initial 911 call (6:07 p.m.) reporting the erratic driver and the crash with the cyclists (6:29 p.m.). During that period, the driver of the pickup truck traveled approximately 14 miles, passing through the three law enforcement agencies' adjoining jurisdictions. The three agencies' dispatchers shared only minimal information with the other dispatchers in the call center about the 911 calls they were receiving concerning the truck's activities, even though its haphazard route took it in and out of all three jurisdictions. Had they shared information more effectively, police officers from adjoining jurisdictions might have had sufficient time to intercept the driver before the collision with the cyclists. The NTSB concludes that the collision might have been prevented had the dispatchers for the Kalamazoo DPS, the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department more effectively shared their 911 call information concerning the erratic behavior and route of the truck driver as the event unfolded.

## **Local Recognition of the Communications Problem**

As early as 2012, the localities had considered consolidating communications. In 2013, the consulting agency L.R. Kimball issued a detailed report on improving dispatch service for this area, which had been commissioned by the City, Township, and County of Kalamazoo; the City of Portage; and Western Michigan University.<sup>6</sup> The report identified key areas of deficiency in the emergency communications system used in the Kalamazoo area, indicated that consolidation of

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<sup>5</sup> Calls placed from Cooper Township are received by the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Office.

<sup>6</sup> See *Report for Dispatch Service Improvement Plan Prepared for City, Township and County of Kalamazoo and City of Portage, Michigan* (L.R. Kimball October 2013) at [L.R. Kimball Dispatch Service Improvement Plan](#), accessed April 10, 2017.

dispatch activities was necessary, and outlined five alternative plans for consolidation. To date, none of these plans have been fully implemented.

Four months before the June 2016 crash, the three law enforcement agencies for the City, Township, and County of Kalamazoo moved forward to consolidate the communications operations under a new Kalamazoo County Consolidated Dispatch Authority. The consolidated authority is intended to replace the Kalamazoo integrated dispatch center currently in operation. As a first step, an executive director was hired to oversee implementation of the new authority. However, the executive director is not empowered to review or make any changes to the current operation of the integrated dispatch center.

The Kalamazoo County Consolidated Dispatch Authority would consolidate communications for 10 law enforcement agencies, 17 fire departments, and 5 governmental agencies. The process will require building a new structure, or refurbishing the current dispatch center, and selecting and purchasing hardware and software. Although the government entities involved have agreed to the consolidation, no plan has been developed for the disposition of personnel from each agency. Current communications personnel may require additional training and assimilation into the consolidated dispatch authority, and additional personnel may have to be hired and trained. Funding has not yet been established.

The executive director of the Kalamazoo County Consolidated Dispatch Authority has indicated that he expects the building to house the new communications center to be completed by January 2018; however, no work has yet begun. Given the uncertainties about the building, equipment, personnel, and funding, the time required for full implementation of the new authority cannot be estimated at this time. The NTSB concludes that, although the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners was aware of the communications deficiency among local law enforcement agencies before this crash and had begun making plans to consolidate communications, those plans are not finalized, creating the risk of a similar crash. Therefore, the NTSB recommends that the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners expedite the establishment of a consolidated dispatch center to incorporate the communications needs of all public safety agencies in Kalamazoo County. While this process is underway, more immediate steps must be taken to improve the existing communications system.

## **State Review**

The Michigan State 911 Committee is a government agency within the Michigan Department of State Police tasked with providing resources and guidelines for all aspects of the state emergency communications system. The committee provides training and guidelines for 911 call takers, dispatchers, and communication supervisors. It performs annual compliance reviews of emergency communications centers and makes recommendations based on industry best practices (including those concerning the 911 plan), staffing, training, supervision, policies, and procedures, as well as appropriate equipment. During its compliance review process, the committee evaluates a number of operational areas.

The events associated with the June 7, 2016, collision in Cooper Township demonstrate significant operational problems with the Kalamazoo integrated dispatch center. A compliance review conducted by the Michigan State 911 Committee would address many of these problems

and provide a practical, unbiased overview of operations, as well as recommendations to facilitate better communications among the adjoining law enforcement agencies, better use of technology assets, and establishment of an interagency agreement to provide an improved response to inter-jurisdictional operations.

The 2013 L.R. Kimball report commissioned by the Kalamazoo localities emphasized that best practices and standards should be followed in establishing a consolidated dispatch and communications system. The report noted several agencies that could provide such best practices, including the National Emergency Number Association (NENA). A NENA member currently serves on the Michigan State 911 Committee.

The Michigan State 911 Committee conducts about eight compliance reviews per year. Agencies are selected for compliance reviews in one of three ways:

- “Random” selection,
- “By request” of an agency, or
- “For cause,” which is usually related to 911 funding or a complaint.

As of September 2016, the Kalamazoo integrated dispatch center has never undergone a state compliance review.

Although the local authorities are aware of the problems associated with dispatch communication and coordination among the law enforcement agencies in Kalamazoo County and have taken steps to develop a consolidated dispatch authority, it may take years for this effort to be fully functional. The NTSB concludes that it is vital to public safety that the sharing of dispatch information among nearby jurisdictions be improved in the interim period until the Kalamazoo County Consolidated Dispatch Authority becomes fully operational. Therefore, the NTSB recommends that the Kalamazoo DPS, the Kalamazoo County Sheriff’s Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department request and undergo a voluntary compliance review by the Michigan State 911 Committee, and immediately implement the recommendations made by that committee.

## **Recommendations**

### **To the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners:**

Expedite the establishment of a consolidated dispatch center to incorporate the communications needs of all public safety agencies in Kalamazoo County.  
(H-17-16) (Urgent)

### **To the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety, the Kalamazoo County Sheriff’s Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department:**

Request and undergo a voluntary compliance review by the Michigan State 911 Committee, and immediately implement the recommendations made by that committee. (H-17-17) (Urgent)

**BY THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD**

**ROBERT L. SUMWALT, III**  
Acting Chairman

**T. BELLA DINH-ZARR**  
Member

**CHRISTOPHER A. HART**  
Member

**Adopted: April 11, 2017**

Member Weener filed the following dissenting statement.

## **Board Member Statement**

**Member Earl F. Weener filed the following dissenting statement on March 23, 2017.**

I commend staff on this investigation and their innovative approach to addressing causes of traffic deaths. Any death caused by an impaired driver is preventable. In this case, multiple lives were lost in a traffic collision. While I agree that law enforcement should act in accordance with best practices and the interest of public safety, I am not convinced in this case that lack of communication by dispatch was a contributing factor. Given the driver's erratic and haphazard driving pattern, his apprehension would have been a challenge. Without information regarding the number of other calls that may have taken priority on the night in question or knowledge regarding the number of officers available or their ability to cover the potential areas in which the driver might have been located, it is very difficult to speculate that had they been given a license plate number, or received any other information minutes earlier, they could have acted in time to prevent this tragedy. In short, I am not certain that staff has provided sufficient information to justify our recommendation that 10 disparate agencies combine.

Even if I could support the recommendation to the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners to consolidate their dispatch center, staff has not provided support for the premise that this recommendation should be issued with an "Urgent" designation as intended by applicable Board rules. In addition, I understand that part of the urgency behind this recommendation is a hope that this recommendation will influence the KCBC and perhaps incite or influence political action on this issue. I am not certain that such an intent is in keeping with the original purpose of the Urgent Recommendation. Moreover, 9 months have elapsed since the event, negating our position that this recommendation should be handled as urgent.

That said, I am in full support of the need for the dispatch capabilities and procedures of these jurisdictions to undergo a review and to receive recommendations to help bring these agencies into compliance with best practices. Could I vote for each recommendation separately, I would certainly have approved the recommendation asking the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety, the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Office, and the Township of Kalamazoo Police Department to participate in a compliance review by the Michigan State 911 Committee and to immediately implement their recommendations. Unfortunately, I do not have the ability under prevailing Board Rules.

I appreciate the opportunity to review this product.