

County whitewash

Bucks County Courier Times

Bucks County officials held a news conference Wednesday trying to explain the unexplainable: why the county's 911 emergency call system failed so miserably two weeks ago and perhaps resulted in a disabled woman's death.

Commissioners Chairman Jim Cawley said a lot of what we already know: A call to 911 that wasn't answered until the sixth ring was wrong; that the caller then being asked to "hold" was wrong; that possible discourtesy by a dispatcher to that same caller was wrong. All of that took place in the minute or so that the late Brenda Orr, stricken by multiple sclerosis and unable to move about, spent trying to get help as her bed went up in flames around her.

Then came the clincher from Cawley. There were 10 dispatchers available to take Brenda Orr's call — and none of them did so. Brent Wiggins, director of emergency communications, said there was no good reason given by any of the dispatchers for not picking up the phone.

And yet, Cawley said, there's no reason for any of this to undermine confidence in 911 — the system works.

Tell that to Brenda Orr's family.

The county's "explanation" should go down in Bucks' annals as a classic example of a whitewash, an exercise in trying to reassure a very skeptical public about the efficacy of the 911 system, when the most recent evidence provides little reason for reassurance.

Wiggins said appropriate disciplinary action was taken against 11 dispatchers and four supervisors. To the county's way of thinking, that means letters placed in their files.

Also, some protocols for how the 911 system is supposed to work have been rewritten. New equipment has been promised that will make the routing of incoming calls more efficient.

That's good to hear. But with a life lost, we don't think there's been anything approaching "appropriate disciplinary action."

What's more, Cawley's defense of 911 as an efficient system wherein professionalism and caring are demonstrated every day glosses over the fact that, on Jan. 29, 2008, the 911 system demonstrated a blatant lack of professionalism and caring and as a result, firefighters may have been denied the opportunity to save a woman's life.

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