



## Fire Districts

### Public Meetings

**Moraga-Orinda Fire District** Board of Directors  
 Wednesday, June 15, 7 p.m.  
 Hacienda Mosaic Room at 2100 Donald Drive, Moraga, CA 94556  
 For meeting times and agendas, visit [www.mofd.org](http://www.mofd.org)

**ConFire** Board of Directors  
 Tuesday, July 19, 1:30 p.m.  
 Board Chamber room 107, Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Martinez  
 For meeting times and agendas, visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

Emergency response information and training:  
 Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)  
[www.lamorindacert.org](http://www.lamorindacert.org).

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# Dispatchers: The Unheralded Heroes of the Fire Departments

By Nick Marnell



Chuck Barker of the ConFire Communications Center dispatches a medical emergency call May 12. Photo Nick Marnell

Public safety dispatchers, like many doctors and lawyers, deal with people at often the worst moment of their lives — and on top of that, have to help the callers sort through it all.

“People just do not realize the amount of stress the dispatchers work under,” said Capt. Vince Matulich of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District operates the Contra Costa Regional Fire Communications Center in Pleasant Hill, and is responsible for dispatching fire, medical, public service and rescue operations for most of the county. MOFD pays ConFire \$170,000 a year as a client of its dispatch service.

The center operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year, and maintains a staff of 18 fire dis-

patchers, with five dispatchers every 24-hour shift. Dispatchers must be CPR-certified and complete emergency medical dispatcher training, offered by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch in Utah. The dispatchers work 24 hours on, 24 off, over five days, then take four days off. With the merger of ConFire with American Medical Response in January, the center also maintains a staff of at least three ambulance dispatchers per shift, but those dispatchers handle only tasks like ambulance deployment. They do not answer 911 emergency calls.

The dispatchers must follow a protocol, asking questions in a proper sequence. Occasionally, there is room for human intercession. “A caller told me that the patient had just vomited,” said Steve Limrite, a ConFire dispatcher for

11 years. “I told the caller to turn the patient on their side. That is out of order, but in this case, it helped.”

In 2015, ConFire responded to more than 5,600 calls in Lamorinda, according to Kiel Lamar, communications center manager. All Lamorinda 911 calls are routed through the Contra Costa County Sheriff Department and if they are fire or medical related, the calls are transferred to the ConFire communications center. Lamar recommends that Lamorindans program 925-933-1313 into their cell phones as their medical and fire emergency number and dial that number instead of 911; the call will go directly to ConFire. “But if law enforcement should still be involved, 911 is the best number,” he said. Lamar also explained that calls from cell phones are transmitted to the nearest cell tower, which

may not be close to your location, so the dispatchers may have to ask a series of questions to locate your address.

Calls handled by ConFire dispatcher can become life-changing in unforeseen ways. Matulich was dispatched on a call and over the radio he sounded to the dispatcher as if he was having a bad day. The dispatcher called the fire station and she asked why that firefighter was so cranky. When Matulich returned to the station, the rest of the crew came down on him and teased him relentlessly.

“I called her up,” Matulich said. “So you’re the one making problems for me? One thing led to another, and we started to date.” Matulich married the dispatcher, now Kelly Matulich, who is still with the communications center after more than 15 years.

Limrite was able to meet a patient whom he helped through a cardiac arrest emergency, one of the only times he has had a chance to put a face to a name. He said that the cooperation of the patient’s son, who engaged Limrite throughout the phone call and patiently answered all of the questions, was key to the positive outcome.

That is the message he stresses to the public. “Know your location,” Limrite said. “And let us be the one to terminate the call. Don’t get frustrated by the list of questions we ask you. We do that for a reason.

We are here to help you.”

## Dramatic Helicopter Rescue in the Lafayette Hills

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Office air patrol assisted the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District in saving the life of a hiker who collapsed on the Lafayette Ridge Trail in Briones Regional Park last month, the result of a joint effort recently undertaken by the two public safety agencies.

It was also the first helicopter rescue for ConFire Captain-Paramedic Matt dePolo.

“The hiker was with a group on a long walk on a very hot day, one of the first hot days of the season, said dePolo, who was on duty with the helicopter crew that day. “He got sick, and dizzy, and collapsed. One of the hikers called 911.”

The dispatchers requested the STARR 3 helicopter, which is parked at Buchanan Field in Concord: A hiker was down, at an unknown location in Lafayette.

Dispatch sent the exact GPS coordinates as the helicopter took off.

“We flew directly there,” dePolo said. “I’m in the back with a search and rescue technician, the pilot and the tactical flight officer in the front. We flew along the trail, 40 to 50 people on the ground pointing us in the right direction. The guy was down, under a bush, about three miles up the trail.”

DePolo and the rescue tech dropped from the copter to the patient, who was unconscious, with no pulse, and determined to be in critical condition. DePolo administered advanced life support and the patient was delivered by air to the ConFire crew at the trailhead in 11 minutes.

“A land rescue would have taken 45 minutes to an hour, and the patient may not have made it,” dePolo said. ConFire transported the



A Rescue tech descends from STARR 3 to an injured hiker in Briones Regional Park. Photo courtesy of the Contra Costa County Sheriff Office

patient to Kaiser Medical Center Walnut Creek, and he survived.

“You train for this, and when you’re called, you don’t really think about it. It’s time to get to

work,” said dePolo, C-Shift captain at Lafayette station 17.

“Firefighters don’t get to do this every day, but we love doing it.”

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### Moraga

## JM to Change Start Time

The school polled the parents, students and teachers and a wide majority supported the change, in spite of concerns. The JM Principal says that teachers and staff were very clear in their desire to do what is best for the kids, but that they had concerns about pushing the school day later overall, as they actually experience a dip in the students’ energy and focus later in the afternoon (a fact that is also supported by research).

“Also, a number of the teachers

and staff are also parents, so they cited concerns with drop-off and pick-up logistics if the schools all started and ended at the same time,” she said. A solution was found by working out a bell schedule where students will have two periods after lunch, which is the same as the current schedule.

One concern was whether the new schedule could have an impact on after-school sports activity and would lead students to drop the optional Z period that will now end at

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3:45 p.m. But Danilson confirmed that after sending out a second survey on Z period participation, the number of students opting for a Z period slightly increased.

The last piece of the puzzle was the bus system. Until now the same buses drove students to JM, then to the elementary schools half an hour later. Superintendent Burns says that the reception he received from the Lamorinda Bus Transportation Agency about a later start at JM exceeded his expectations. There were no negotiations. He reports that director Juliet Hansen and her coordinator, Sue Graves, were very open minded and willing to consider multiple alternatives and had a “let’s see how we make this work” approach.

Danilson met with LBTA a few times to gather current year transportation ridership information and staff met with the LBTA and collectively developed preliminary routes. LBTA brought on a fifth bus that was needed for Campolindo High School that will be used after the Campo drop-off to transport Moraga students to the elementary schools and JM.

Danilson does not anticipate any problem when school starts, but the staff will reach out to parents, students and teachers in the fall, and after everyone has had ample time to experience the change, to ask for input and feedback.

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