

Fire Dept. Consultant: Scrap Response-time Numbers

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by John North

LOS ANGELES (KABC) -- Firefighters pride themselves on responding to emergency calls as fast as possible. But a new report says response times provided by the city fire department can't be trusted.

The fire department has faced criticism over its use of misleading response time stats and problems with its dispatch system.

Ask the Los Angeles Fire Department today what its average response time to fires or medical emergencies is and you couldn't get an accurate answer. The fire department's own consultant admits that department response times cannot be trusted. And it's because of the fire department's own data.

That is the message given to the City of Los Angeles Fire Commission by a statistics expert Jeff Godown.

"As of today, we're not getting the same answers. And that is my concern. Like I said in my report, right now I'm not confident that the numbers are accurate until I take some more time to look at it," said Godown.

It could be a matter of life and death. Where stations are located and how firefighters are stationed is determined in part by how fast they can respond to emergencies.

The commissioners got Godown's preliminary report shortly before the meeting. And they were not happy they didn't get it until after it was given to reporters.

"This is not the report that we would be bringing back to Fire Commission in order for you to look at and to give us your direction on," said L.A. Fire Chief Brian Cummings.

"Here's the problem, Chief Cummings: It's not marked 'draft.' It has been released. Somebody would read this and believe that this is now a fully vetted report," said L.A. Fire Commission President Genethia Hudley-Hayes.

Only two months ago the fire department admitted that the five-minute response times it has been using for years were more like six minutes. It made it seem as if firefighters were responding to emergencies faster than they actually were. The report recommends that all data be revisited and re-run.

Godown says it came to its conclusion the data was inaccurate by looking at the Los Angeles Fire Department's own reports and talking to members of the department.

It's a complicated issue because of the location of fire stations and their staffing. So the consultant's going to be coming back to the Fire Commission with a different look at response times.

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