

# Fire Commissioners Column.....

**Bill Madison**

I read an article recently in the Spokane newspaper about the high costs of false alarms in those agencies providing search and rescue services. Apparently many outdoorsmen and hikers are purchasing those GPS systems that not only give the coordinates of their location while in the wild but also have an alarm to call for rescue in case of an emergency. The problems arise when the alarms are accidentally activated while in a backpack or pocket or when people use the alarm for non-emergency reasons. One incident was cited when an alarm was activated and authorities launched rescue helicopters and called in search parties on horseback only to locate the “victim” who had pushed the alarm because he ran out of water and needed someone to bring him some. Rescue services were refused. In this case, authorities were pursuing criminal charges against the “victim” and attempting to recover thousands of dollars in expenses for the phony rescue call.

We don't have a lot of false rescue calls in our fire district but we do occasionally encounter individuals who call 911 for services that are not really an emergency. Often the caller does not need to go to the hospital and has no intent on going but would just like someone to “check them out”. Sometimes the caller is elderly and may even just be lonely and what someone to talk with about their situation. In a few cases we run into people who call again and again for emergency services they don't require. When this happens they fall into the category we call “system abusers”.

When individuals abuse the EMS system, they are in effect robbing other taxpayers. Not only does the unnecessary response tie up equipment and manpower that might be simultaneously needed for an actual emergency, but it's expensive. If crews are busy on a non-emergency call and an actual emergency occurs in the same area, the response will be delayed. As we all know, response time is extremely critical for fire as well as emergency medical calls. Fuel is expended to answer the call. Wear and tear occurs to equipment. Also remember the fire district pays the Stevens County dispatch center a fee for each 911 call we respond to. Additionally, the private ambulance company in Deer Park sends an ambulance to all 911 EMS calls. Also bear in mind that driving an emergency vehicle with red light and sirens activated exposes personnel to high accident probabilities.

We understand that some situations may be perceived as a real emergency to some individuals and as routine to others who have medical training. We want you to call if you truly think you have any emergency. That's why we train and volunteer. On the other hand, if you have no intention of going to the hospital and just need something “checked out,” it's more efficient to go to your doctor or the local clinic for assistance. Our career and volunteer staffs want to be readily available to respond to your emergency but it's not appropriate to use them as routine caregivers.

