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Anaheim employee recommended niece for a contract reviewing 911 calls



A contract to review 911 calls prompted questions over undisclosed family connections in the bidding process. (Illustration by Felipe Flores)



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A manager who oversees an emergency dispatch center serving several Orange County cities recommended in January that the board of directors hire a contractor to review

recorded 911 calls and educate dispatchers on best practices.

Brenda Carrion, who helms fire dispatch operations for the Anaheim-based Metro Cities Fire Authority, or Metro Net, told the board that the contract with Precision Dispatch Services would ensure “compliance with state regulations” and “high quality” work.

But what she didn’t plainly state in the Jan. 30 public meeting is that Chico-based Precision is run by her niece, Taylor Parker, a former Metro Net intern.

The board, which is comprised of fire chiefs and other officials from member cities that pay into the joint service, approved the contract with Parker, but it’s unclear how many of them knew the person who won the contract was related to the person who brought them the bid.

Carrion, who declined to comment, has been on leave from the city of Anaheim since May but government officials would not say whether her absence is related to the contract award.

Complicating matters is whether an employee asking officials to award a contract to a relative outside of their immediate household — or without public disclosure — is explicitly prohibited by the by Metro Net. Anaheim, however, is more direct in warning employees to avoid appearances of preferential treatment or perceived conflicts.

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Either way, the practice is at best a departure from public sector norms, those familiar with the process say.

“This government procurement did not follow best practices for transparency,” said Jack Pellegrino, a former president of the California Assn. of Public Procurement Officials who has decades of experience in government contracting. “It did not follow best practices in the avoidance of even the appearance of a conflict of interest because there was no [public] disclosure.”

Only three parties bid on the contract, which was shared on a website where government agencies seek qualified vendors.

“We did put the [request for proposals] out on Planet Bids, kept it up for a month and only received three applicants and two of the three withdrew,” Carrion told the board. “To be very honest, there’s not a lot of people that want to listen to that kind of trauma for that hourly rate.”

The job will pay Parker $97,500 the first year, and there is an option to renew the contract for five years, up to $500,000.

Parker did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Metro Net is a joint-powers authority, or JPA, meaning it is managed by member cities — in this case Anaheim, Brea, Fountain Valley, Fullerton, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach and Orange. Anaheim, which employs Carrion, serves as the lead administrative agency.

Every board member who voted on the contract declined to discuss the matter.

“It would be inappropriate for the city to comment on an administrative issue,” said a spokesperson for Huntington Beach Fire Chief Eric McCoy, who sits on the board, when

asked.

Though the relationship between Carrion and Parker wasn't made public, it's unclear how many board members knew they were related in advance of voting.

A sample contract appeared on the publicly available agenda packet without any direct mention of Parker or her company.

Anaheim Fire Chief Patrick Russell, Metro Net's board chair, however, was made aware of Carrion's connection to Parker before he voted, according to three city employees, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Russell declined to comment, so it's unclear whether he indeed knew or told the rest of the board about the aunt-niece relationship.

Mike Lyster, an Anaheim city spokesperson, confirmed Metro Net dispatchers approached Russell more than once between Jan. 17 and Jan. 23 to air unspecified concerns about Carrion.

"He immediately shared those concerns with H.R.," Lyster said. "We take those seriously. That brings us to today, where we do have someone on leave, but that is a normal procedure."

Citing personnel matters, Lyster and others at City Hall did not specify what H.R. is investigating or why Carrion is on leave.

During the Jan. 30 board meeting, questions of whether the authority could approve the contract at all were raised instead.

"Does the contract need to go to [Anaheim] City Council or just the vote of the JPA?" Russell asked.

Carrion was under the impression that the contract required City Council approval.

“We can take the agreement and make Metro Cities as the contracting authority,” Anaheim Deputy City. Atty. Bryn Morley said, citing past contractual practices.

“Revise it with the signature pages?” Carrion interjected. “Excellent.”

The beginnings of the contract date to a July 25, 2024 board meeting, where Carrion first recommended that Metro Net reallocate $94,000 from other functions toward the contract. The contractor would review 911 calls — especially those related to cardiac events, choking and childbirth — and coordinate a quality assurance program.

According to minutes from that meeting, Carrion presented to the board that dispatchers and supervisors already reviewed 911 calls in-house but an educator would be instrumental in “distinguishing between call takers and those reviewing calls,” in an effort to improve the quality of emergency medical instructions.

Board members agreed. Anaheim followed by opening requests for proposals on Aug. 22, 2024 that were due by Sept. 19, 2024. Bidders had to submit a cover letter, work experience, a scope of services and specialized first aid certifications.

Parker and two other parties, Brooke Ryan and Kathleen Semore, rounded out the three proposals — which TimesOC obtained through a public records request — submitted to Carrion.

Ryan — another niece of Carrion’s — and Semore fell short of the required qualifications. Reached by phone, Ryan, whose background is in retail, declined to comment. Semore, a caregiver, did not return calls and emails.

By comparison, Parker listed the required certifications and her Metro Net internship beginning in December 2022. She formed her company two days before the bid was

awarded.

“I am committed to helping our dispatchers improve their skills, ensuring quality leadership and communications to our cities and being an asset to leadership,” Parker wrote in a cover letter addressed to her aunt.

Invoices show that Parker had received payments for 911 call reviews in the months leading up to the vote at the same $62.50-per-hour contract rate.

According to another city employee speaking on the condition of anonymity, Ryan and Semore withdrew their bids less than a month after submitting them — and before a panel could convene to interview them.

None of the bids included non-collusion affidavits the proposal request required, nor did they include copies of requested first aid certifications.

Pellegrino noted the absence of non-collusion affidavits in the contract submissions to be “pretty significant.”



The Anaheim West Tower across from City Hall is the listed headquarters of the Metro Cities Fire Authority. (Don Leach/Staff Photographer)

According to city employees, California birth index records and obituaries, Parker is Carrion's niece. An obituary for Carrion's father-in-law lists Carrion's husband and Parker's mother as siblings. A Taylor Parker is listed, as well.

A Brooke Ryan is also shown to be related to Carrion in an obituary for Carrion's grandmother. Birth index records suggest that Ryan's mother and Carrion are sisters, making Ryan Carrion's niece.

Any relationship between Semore and Carrion could not be determined. Semore is, however, friends with Parker's mother on social media.

The JPA's purchasing policies address conflicts of interest but it's not immediately clear that the contract with Parker is indeed one under that definition.

Metro Net's policies say to be alert for "conflicts of interests as well as noncompetitive practices." It prohibits employees involved in the contract process where an "immediate family member" or business partner has a financial or other interest in the winning firm.

Immediate family commonly defines a household — parents, children and sometimes grandparents and grandchildren. Whether accepting bids from family or friends is a "non-competitive" practice at Metro Net is unclear.

While Anaheim's contracting policies don't spell out conflicts of interests involving family members, the city's overall rules for employees do.

"Immediate family" is defined by that measure to include nephews and nieces through blood or marriage. Family relationships are not allowed to affect decisions by managers and others in hiring and promotions, in part, to "eliminate perceptions of 'special treatment.'"

Lyster said the rules apply to city employees working for Metro Net and are broadly interpreted to including contracting, as well.

“We don’t know all the facts,” he added. “We are still in the process of reviewing this. I want to respect everybody involved, including the employee.”

Pellegrino reviewed Metro Net’s purchasing policy and the proposal request administered by Anaheim.

“Many entities have a more specific certification that asks for any direct family members or related parties to be identified,” he said. “That’s really the issue. Most agencies look for more disclosure, rather than nondisclosure. Best practice is transparency and disclosure.”

To date, Precision Dispatch Services continues to be paid and, as invoices detail, has received nearly $25,000 through July, the most recent month for which Metro Net records were made available.

Records show that Carrion approved payments to her niece through April before going on leave. Russell, the fire chief, has since taken over signing off on invoices.

Lyster added that Metro Net recently approved, based on cost savings, a new contractor that offers an automated call analyzing system, and expects to move forward with it in January.



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