

Elk Grove, CA Police Department: A Community Leader

A new police department and 9-1-1 center, Elk Grove PD encourages their dispatch staff to look outside what would be considered regular duties, by participating in community events and department-wide activities.

BEGINNING OPERATIONS ON AUGUST 28, 2006 at 6 a.m., the Elk Grove (CA) Police Department's (EGPD) 9-1-1 center is a 2,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility serving a population of more than 136,000 across 43.5 square miles. Construction started on January 2, 2006, was completed on April 1, 2006—in just 90 days—and furnishing the facility took an additional eight weeks. Prior to this new facility, the City of Elk Grove contracted with the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department for all law enforcement needs, including dispatch services.

Since September 2006, an average of 17,376 phone calls per month (13,385 incoming and 3,991 outgoing) have been made to or from the center. There are an average of 7,685 CAD events and 2,232 9-1-1 calls per month, of which 405 (18 percent) are wireless 9-1-1 calls. In addition, the center averaged 29 VoIP 9-1-1 calls per month. In September 2007, the center answered 96.6 percent of 9-1-1 calls within 10 seconds. Since the center has been live, 95 percent of 9-1-1 calls have been answered in the first 10 seconds. In August, EGPD began receiving wireless 9-1-1 calls directly from a few wireless service providers (WSPs) and continues to work with other WSPs with the goal of taking all wireless 9-1-1 calls directly as soon as possible.

Developing a New Center

At the time center development began, careful consideration was given to staffing recruitment and retention. APCO Project Retains was one guide that was heavily used in determining workplace design and development of shifts, seniority, time off requests, overtime, etc. The negative environment that is typically associated with communication centers was also evaluated with decisions made to make the center "dispatcher" friendly, light and visually welcoming with state of the art equipment. A core group of experienced dispatchers was hired four months before the rest of the dispatch supervisor and manager in the design and operational considerations. This core team had worked for five different agencies and had an average of more than 10 years of dispatch experience at a variety of sized agencies. Each dispatcher assisted in writing portions of the communications manual, as well as assisting with the



Dispatch Supervisors Sharen Standish (left) and Chris Herren.

Photos courtesy of Elk Grove Police Department.

development of how phone, radio and CAD systems were developed specifically for Elk Grove.

Goals by the "go live" date included: hiring staff of all lateral dispatchers and dispatch supervisors, and selection, design and implementation of all technical systems. The CAD system needed to be totally operational at time of go live. A seven-week training program for lateral dispatchers had to be in place, unit call signs were developed, event types and priority systems decided upon, the communications manual written and department policies formed. Nuances on policy/procedures were of particular problem; for example, the term "code 4" literally means many different things, depending on what agency the staff came from. A decision was made to use "clear text" for radio communication.

One of two dispatch supervisors, Chris Herren says, "During the final two weeks, prior to 'go live' there were daily meetings between project management staff from the police department, city management, Intergraph and key players. Each system had to be 'certified' ready for 'go live' and all dispatch staff spent time testing and using the equipment. It was important that the dispatch supervisors and manager were confident that all systems were operational and that dispatch staff was sufficiently prepared."



Dispatcher Desiree Fralick.

Policies and Procedures

"While we did a very good job in establishing policies and procedures for the center last summer, we continue to constantly evaluate our workflow for maximum efficiency. For example, a policy that is being developed now provides direction about accepting wireless 9-1-1 calls directly," says Herren. "We have done two major reviews of our policies and continually evaluate more effective workflows. Employees are encouraged to evaluate policy and the workflow. Dispatchers have been told that policies/procedures should match the workflow and processes they actually use in the dispatch center. Monthly meetings are held between patrol and dispatch supervisors to evaluate business processes and make any necessary changes.

"Because we are a new center and department, we have no historical reference ... everything is brand new. One of the biggest challenges is making sure that all dispatchers understand the nuances of the workflow and are not relying too heavily on their 'past experience.' The 'code 4' example was used multiple times; often supervisors would find that staff was completing most of the procedures properly but continued to operate based on their past agency experience. There was also the challenge of keeping staff updated on changes in policies and procedures," says Herren. In order to combat this, the department's policies and procedures are available to employees on an Intranet, which is an internal Internet that can only be accessed from department computers. Available since the center went live, this has proven to be an effective way for keeping employees up-to-date because all of the necessary information is right at their fingertips. With PDFs available for easy access, employees do not have to search through binders or e-mail to find a particular procedure. Notifications on the policy updates are sent via e-mail to staff from supervisors and the IT Department posts the updates on the Intranet.

Technology and Equipment

The 9-1-1 center currently uses PlantCML's (Temecula, CA) Vesta Pallas 2.6 phone equipment. Herren says one of the best features of the 9-1-1 system is the ability to program speed dial lists and one button transfers. "ANI/ALI data is transferred to CAD with a single keystroke. The Vesta reporting system, MagIC, allows staff to gather stats and create reports providing key information

which is then used to identify peak call volumes and ring time stats. This data is used to assist in determining effective staffing levels. A priority answer button allows the dispatcher to answer the highest priority, longest ringing call automatically."

Intergraph (Huntsville, AL) is the hub of EGPD's public safety software products. A combination of Intergraph experts and EGPD's own GIS and technical team helped develop and implement the system. "While we have the full suite of Intergraph's products, the mapping product is one of the systems best features. Patrol cars are equipped with AVL, which allows dispatch staff to determine the geographically closest unit. Visiting dispatchers have commented about the detail that is quickly available to the dispatch staff. We've got the property lines for the entire city as well as footprints and suites for all the commercial and office buildings," says Herren.

EGPD uses a trunked 800MHZ Radio system (Motorola, Schaumburg, IL) that is part of a regional consortium. Due to the regional participation, interoperability is at a high level allowing staff to talk directly to other dispatch centers and officers in the region. Dispatchers use Gold Elite Motorola Radio Consoles in the center. Four 50" Plasma flatscreen monitors are displayed in the center allowing all staff to view a screen. Video processor technology allows multiple inputs to display on the monitors including live camera feeds, mapping and CAD status monitors. NICE's (Rutherford, NJ) voice logging system rounds out the technology. The repetitive motion injuries, as well as the overall comfort and the desired pleasant environment were carefully considered when selecting the Watson Synergy (Poulsbo, WA) dispatch furniture. Dispatch staff chose Herman Miller's (Zeeland, MI) Aeron and Mirra chairs.

Personnel

Quality training has been a high priority since staff was hired. All dispatchers attended a seven-week in house training program prior to "go live." In the months that the center has been operational, staff has attended an average of 71 hours of external training. POST training requirements were met by 911 TLC Training and Learning for Communications (Eureka, CA) (www.911tlc.com). This group of POST-Master instructors consists of dispatchers, dispatch supervisors and managers who currently work or have worked in the field. "We brought 9-1-1 TLC in last summer prior to going live to complete 24 hours of training with our staff. One of the classes offered was *20/20 Communications*. We felt that communications and a focus on working relationships were essential in developing a positive work environment. We wanted staff to work together and develop conflict resolution skills; in order to do this, they participated in DISC personality assessments and exercises which identified each employees preferred communication style. Other classes focused on the different ways that adults learn and communicate by encouraging them to interact through icebreakers in a non-traditional setting," says Herren. "In addition, staff has also attended classes hosted at multiple local agencies, Department of Justice and the Department of Motor Vehicles," adds Lynn Bowler, Support Services Manager.

Management and supervisory staff attended the California NENA and APCO regional conferences this year. Next year, EGPD plans to



From left to right: Dispatchers Dawn Lindner, Sheila Herrera, Chris Herren and Shannon Hill.

send a dispatcher as well, stressing that participation of line staff is extremely important. "Dispatch training in general has been historically lacking in our profession; it is often the first thing to get cut from the budget. It is an easy place to cut out the expense and if you have staffing problems, as most centers experience, it is difficult to have more people gone. If you want to send someone to training for a week, that's another 40 hours to cover back in the center and if the dispatch center is already short staffed, it becomes that much more difficult to cover," Herren explains. This creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates morale, performance and burnout issues.

A "seniority neutral" schedule splits the weekend so every dispatcher has a portion

of the weekend off. Also, no dispatcher may work a *day* shift more than two rotations in a row. There are currently 21 budgeted dispatch positions, including two supervisors, working 4/10 and 3/12 shifts on either Sunday through Wednesday or Wednesday through Saturday with six different start times throughout the day. Although the schedule is high maintenance, it does allow for optimal coverage and ability of staff to take time off. The center has been fully staffed since beginning operations, but is currently working to fill a recently approved dispatcher position. This has resulted in limited overtime and almost no mandatory overtime.

The City of Elk Grove also provides a new, innovative structure not common in

city governments, especially police departments. The staff does not receive annual "step raises," instead a "Pay for Performance" model is used whereby employees can earn up to 10 percent annual raises. This is a foreign concept for employees, all of whom came from the more traditional "step raise" structure. Although the City of Elk Grove is still in the process of implementing this structure, in January 2007, they went through one rotation assessing and evaluating everyone at the same time. "I think it went quite well," says Bowler. "When we hired our employees, we sat down with them ahead of time and explained how the pay structure worked and they all embraced it. At the same time every year, every employee is evaluated, salary increases are granted based on the accomplishments of the previous year." Currently, employees will be evaluated every December and also meet with their supervisors quarterly to make sure the goals and objectives are being met. "Everyone is committed to making it work. It's still in transition; there is now a committee meeting to look at how to improve the process from a police agency perspective but we are continuing with the 'Pay for Performance' structure," says Bowler.

As in most agencies across the nation, recruitment and staffing are of major concern. Even though the center has experienced little turnover, recruitment efforts have not been as successful as hoped. "Future vacancies will likely present challenges ... ongoing recruitment strategies are being developed even though we do not anticipate additional new positions over the next fiscal year," says Herren.

Reaching Out

Long term retention is a priority of the department. Bowler says, "We want our dispatchers to feel that they are a valued and vital team member. When the center was established, we felt that dispatchers would benefit by being more actively involved in the activity of the entire department, city and community." Towards this end, "project time" was developed where dispatchers are encouraged to work on a project of their choice. This allows each dispatcher to work outside of the 9-1-1 center eight hours per month. Project time

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is spent outside the communications center, and topics can encompass anything of value to the communications center, department and/or city. Staff is encouraged to schedule project time during their regular shifts. The goal is to get the staff out of the center by including them in other department/city operations. The information gleaned from projects is then shared with the rest of the staff. More importantly, however, is the relationships that are being built outside the center. Officers are no longer hesitant to come into the center, and dispatchers have a better, more complete view of the agency. Dispatch staff attend patrol briefings consistently and are also assigned to ride patrol. Current projects include working with the EPGD Gang Unit, Youth Services, Scared Straight program, Explorer program, Citizen's Academy, 911 for Kids, Senior Citizen Liaison, Neighborhood Watch meetings and any/all community events and festivals. Staff is expected to participate in a community event of their choice once per quarter. "The possibilities of these projects are limited only by the dispatcher's interest and imagination," says Herren.

Goals and Future Plans

Long term goals for the center are to first and foremost maintain adequate staffing levels with a continued focus on opportunities for the employees to be more involved with the department as a whole. Herren explains, "We continue to work hard to avoid the 'dispatch' versus 'patrol' mentality. We are all part of the same team. Dispatchers are valued members of this team and the goal is to provide quality training, adequate staffing levels, equipment that functions well for the task at hand and a work environment that is pleasant. We want to encourage the dispatchers to learn about how other divisions in the city and police department operate, or how a private industry sector operates. We just want to improve their overall knowledge and education to make them better individuals, which in turn makes them better employees." **ENPM**

Angelina Ruiz is the editorial director for Emergency Number Professional Magazine. If you have a suggestion for a

future profile, contact her at (215) 230-9556 x 119 or via e-mail at angelina@ctipublishing.com.

For more information about the Elk Grove Police Department and its 9-1-1 center, contact Dispatch Supervisors Chris Herren at (916) 478-8188 or Sharen Standish at (916) 478-8144.



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