

CURRENT EVENTS

San Diego's Communications Backup

How 2-1-1 Contributed During the Firestorm

In October 2007, wildfires in Southern California forced half a million residents to evacuate and severely damaged neighborhoods. At the front lines of the public outreach and information campaign during the 10-day disaster was 2-1-1, a small non-profit resource that provides information about community volunteer opportunities, social services, health notices and more daily. Written into the San Diego County Office of Emergency Service (OES) disaster plan, 2-1-1 served as a reliable resource for San Diego County residents, providing information on evacuation areas, repopulation, emergency shelters and public health to approximately 120,000 callers in two weeks. (For more about the fire response, read "San Diego Burning," January PSC.)

According to then 2-1-1 Director of Disaster Preparedness and Information Technology Bill Norris, "County media affairs is in charge of all external communications, and they do it well. Once [that information is] filtered, there are always questions. Our role is to provide the one-to-one interactive communications [to the public]."

On the afternoon of Sunday, Oct. 21, 2007, the Harris Fire was burning at full force, and soon 10 other fires would ignite within the county. The county OES notified 2-1-1 that it was opening up the emergency operations center (EOC), and 2-1-1 immediately called in its staff of eight call specialists and activated its emergency plan, which is based on the National Incident Management System. The center becomes an emergency communications center for public information, and the management team's roles change accordingly. 2-1-1 Executive Director John Ohanian set the center's overall priorities for the disaster, worked with the 2-1-1 board of directors to obtain funding and



The influx of phone lines, computers and volunteers forced 2-1-1 to completely re-cable its facilities.

interfaced with county and corporate contacts. Norris acted as the center's emergency manager. When the calls started coming in, two call specialists were on staff, the typical Sunday staffing level.

Strained resources: The center received 6,000 calls that first day and was able to answer only 1,600 due to limited phone lines and staff. Many staffers couldn't get into the center because of road closures. To handle the volume, the center called for volunteers. Approximately 1,200 volunteers were trained to answer disaster related calls.

"We wanted to get through to [the volunteers] to [give out] only information that we had given to them. We have to make sure that we are putting out validated information," says Norris. If callers had difficult questions, volunteers knew to transfer the call to regular staff members.

The organization worked quickly to ramp up its technology and found that companies were willing to help. The San Diego Futures

Foundation provided 2-1-1 with 55 new computers. AT&T had an engineer assess the 2-1-1 system and arrange for the installation of three T1 voice circuits, increasing the number of 2-1-1 lines from 69 to 138. Through INTER-TEL, the internal phone lines and phone capacity was increased from 35 to 85 phone lines. Norris says, "We got those [T1] lines in place and online by 8 p.m. Monday night, and soon after the T1 lines [the telephones were installed]."

The organization's Web site was also strained. Qualcomm built and hosted an emergency site on its network, while Google rebuilt the site's backend.

2-1-1 was also able to implement concepts derived from a previous agreement with the county to create a virtual call center that allowed critical 2-1-1 calls to be forwarded to another location through the carrier. Norris says, "We formed a virtual call center, and when we hit capacity, [the calls] overflowed to a call center at the Department of Child Support Services with 65 additional calltakers."



Top & bottom: More than 1,200 volunteers worked to answer 2-1-1 disaster-related calls and provide San Diego residents with critical information.



Volunteers were quickly trained, but 2-1-1 call specialists and staff members were always available to answer questions and handle difficult calls.

"We got lucky. We [didn't] have the capacity for a big incident," continues Norris. "The big thing that helped us was that we had a solid plan and followed through."

The unexpected: 2-1-1 also became a resource for first responders who couldn't reach the EOC. Staffers wrote down the critical information from responders and relayed it to a 2-1-1 staffer positioned at the EOC or contacted the appropriate comm center. "It's becoming obvious that this is a vital role, though unintentional," says Norris.

2-1-1 uses the county's Web EOC system to receive and exchange validated information. But there is no way to confirm critical information has been seen at either end. He continues, "We are discussing having a liaison from public safety at our center to make the communications loop tighter. Organizations don't coordinate, people do."

In the months since the fires, the organization's local awareness has increased, call volume has gone up 60%, and staff morale has grown. According to Ohanian, "Before the disaster, we were looking at downsizing and were in a difficult situation. Regular call volume has doubled because people know about us [now]. Our goal is to become a model for a statewide or national organization."

He continues, "I think we did incredible. We were talked about as the little engine that could, and we did it because people stepped in and saw what an incredible service [this is]."

Norris is also very proud of the organization and its call specialists. Since 2-1-1

came online in the county, San Diego's dispatch centers claim that inappropriate 9-1-1 call numbers have gone down. "The city's 9-1-1 center says that having 2-1-1 multiplies its capabilities. We can legitimately say that we are a force multiplier for the response system. ... The more information the public has, the better the response."

~NATASHA YETMAN, Assistant Editor

Waivers Required If Rebanding Won't Be Complete

In January, the FCC released procedures for 800-MHz licensees to submit waiver requests if they don't expect to meet the June 26, 2008, 800-MHz rebanding deadline. Licensees in rebanding Waves 1 and 2 must file requests for waiver by March 17. Wave 3 licensees and nonborder Wave 4 licensees must file requests by April 15. The Commission stresses that "requests for extension will be subject to a high level of scrutiny."

The 800-MHz Transition Administrator (TA) has developed a template Request for Waiver form to ensure licensees address all the appropriate information. Download the form at www.800ta.org. Requests may be submitted via e-mail to PSHSB800@fcc.gov or pursuant to guidelines outlined in 47 CFR§1.925.5. Licensees should provide Sprint Nextel and the TA with copies. The FCC will post requests on its Web site and in the licensee's Universal Licensing System (ULS) file. For ULS posting, it's recommended that licensees with multiple call signs designate a lead call sign in the request.

Additionally, the mandatory negotiation period for border area NPSPAC (Stage 2) and non-NPSPAC (Stage 1) licensees in Wave 4 has been extended to April 1, postponing the beginning of mediation until April 2.

The TA has also released information on the channel clearing process. Webinars on implementation planning are available online at www.800ta.org/content/news/webinar_recordings.asp.

In a statement released Feb. 7, APCO President Willis Carter says, "We highly recommend that you read through the Request for Waiver and the Channel Clearing Request information to better

understand the recent guidance from the FCC and to assist in moving forward through these reconfiguration activities. It is increasingly critical to continue our focus and progress at this time."

~FYI: www.800ta.org

Educating Seniors

Almost every telecommunicator has heard it when questioning a caller: Why are you asking me this? Just send help, now! Making sure the public understands the 9-1-1 process is the goal of every public outreach program, and telecommunicators can be good teachers.

On Nov. 26, 2007, Communications Supervisor T.G. Mieure and telecommunicator Vicki Dorjath of the Police and Fire Communications Center in Mundelein, Ill., participated in the local Senior Citizens Police Academy. Not a typical police academy, this community-outreach program is conducted by the Mundelein Police Department designed to educate senior citizens about local public safety issues. The department also holds "academies" for adults and youths. The programs comprise eight to 10 weekly meetings, each of which focuses on a different public safety subject.

The communications session, designed by Mieure and Dorjath, lasted for approximately three hours and covered

"Why can't you send help instead of keeping me on the phone?"



emergency medical dispatching, in-case-of-emergency (ICE) numbers, VoIP and wireless calls, and the local CodeRED mass notification system. During the presentation, seniors saw examples of EMD guidecards and photos of the comm center and participated in a call simulation. They were also given the opportunity to register for the community's mass notification system and were invited for a comm center tour.

"It was a very good group," says Mieure. "We really honed in on EMD, and a big