

## **The Calm During the Storm**

### **The story of NYC's E9-1-1 Operation during and after the World Trade Center attacks**

*By Ari N. Wax*

#### **A Day that Most Will Never Forget**

The morning of September 11, 2001 was not like most other Tuesday mornings at the New York Police Department's E9-1-1 Public Safety Answering Center (PSAC). In fact, it was meant to be a day of celebration, as 9-1-1 Day is an annual milestone used to recognize the dedication, professionalism and accomplishments of the more than 1,200 police communications technicians (PCTs) that make up the NYPD's Communications Section. These calltakers, dispatchers, and supervisors manage the nation's largest E9-1-1 center—an operation that routinely handles more than 30,000 calls per day, more than 11 million emergency calls per year, and generates over 5 million radio dispatch jobs annually.

However, as history will now recount, the morning of September 11 would not be marked by a celebration, but by a seemingly unbelievable act of terrorism that would forever change the way most New Yorkers feel about public safety.

When the first call citing a plane hitting the North Tower, 1 World Trade Center, was received at 8:48 a.m., the NYPD immediately put into action a well-rehearsed disaster plan.

“In just over 10 minutes, we received close to 3,000 calls which were handled by deploying people from the administrative and training units,” recalls Captain Charles Dowd, Commanding Officer of the Communications Section.

In addition to staff present during the normal tour, off-duty personnel and even recently retired PCTs called and offered to mobilize during the disaster. By the end of the day, the center had handled over 55,000 E9-1-1 calls, an unprecedented volume even for a center accustomed to heavy call loads.

Throughout the morning, as the scale of the terrorist attack became apparent, the training and professionalism of the PSAC staff overrode the emotions that continuously churned under the surface as emergency calls were handled.

“I could not have been more proud of them. In the face of this threat, they stayed at their posts and did a fabulous job in unimaginably tough circumstances,” Captain Dowd commented. “They were on the phones with understandably hysterical victims trapped in the burning buildings. The calltakers tried to comfort them while getting as much information as they could to help in the rescue effort.”

While hundreds of conference bridges were established with the FDNY and its Emergency Medical operations, NYPD dispatchers had to deal with the loss of many officers with whom they routinely coordinated in the field. Almost immediately, the Communications Section's Employee Assistance Unit (EAU) was mobilized, ensuring that any personnel showing signs of stress received immediate attention. Over the next two weeks, the EAU and Training Unit, in cooperation with the Department's Medical Division and the District Council 37 labor union, ensured that crisis counselors were on site 24 hours a day. The Training Unit set up a "canteen" in the conference room where PCTs could come to eat and talk informally about how they felt. This was a great way to help identify personnel that were in need of more formal counseling by the EAU.

### **A Flood of Support from Around the Globe**

Another source of tremendous support came in the form of cards, letters, flowers, and gifts from other emergency answering centers and PSAPs located across the country and throughout the world. Hundreds of public safety agencies have sent messages of support from as far away as Canada, the United Kingdom and even Australia. In addition, the NYPD has received visitors from agencies such as the Philadelphia Police Department, bringing food, cards, letters and plaques indicating their support, all of which continue to bolster the morale of the 9-1-1 personnel.

### **Disaster Planning Pays Off**

While the human tragedy and resilience of the NYPD's 9-1-1 operational staff is the real story of September 11, it is worth noting what did *not* happen that day. During, and soon after, the attacks on the World Trade Center, Verizon, the E9-1-1 service provider for the NYPD and FDNY, suffered catastrophic losses to key telephone switching equipment in lower Manhattan. Nevertheless, 9-1-1 service was never lost.

Without careful planning and disaster recovery procedures, the E9-1-1 operations could have been gravely effected by these outages. Instead, the calltaking and dispatch operations were only minimally affected, a significant achievement under such catastrophic conditions. Companies such as iXP Corp., the Department's E9-1-1 system integrator and PSAP software provider, helped set into motion disaster recovery plans that had been established for years and rehearsed, but only rarely implemented. Working 24 hours a day with Verizon and partners like Motorola and iXP, and the Department experienced the indisputable value of Assurance Integration principles as applied in the design of New York City's E9-1-1 infrastructure.

Similarly, the Department's Electronic Section, which operates and maintains the Police Radio Network, saw the benefits of their diligent efforts in recent years. Because of the robust redundancy designed into the Department's radio infrastructure, the NYPD never lost its dispatch and communication capabilities.

The spirit and professionalism of our calltakers and dispatchers, the diligence and ingenuity of our engineers and technicians in the field, and the overwhelming support of

fellow emergency communications workers all across America were inspiring and invaluable in allowing us to maintain essential services. I thank them all.

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