

A firefighter in a yellow shirt and pink helmet is seen from behind, carrying a large log through a forest. The background is filled with tall, thin trees and a hazy atmosphere, suggesting a wildfire environment.

When the Big One HITS...

There's No Substitute for Being Prepared

By Herb Torrens and Cory Friend, ENP, Plant Equipment, Inc.

Readiness is a way of life in public safety. That's because you never know what's going to happen next and the more prepared you are, the better the outcome when the big one hits. Just ask the team at Douglas County Sheriff's Communications, recipients of the Colorado State APCO PSAP and Supervisor of the Year Awards for 2003.

In the spring of 2002, the U.S. Weather Service issued a warning that predicted the worst potential fire season in recorded history. For once, the weatherman was right, but it wasn't a good thing for the people who lived in the western U.S. Luckily, people like Division Chief Mike Coleman at the Douglas County Sheriff's Office took the weather service warning to heart.

"All through the early spring we heard the predictions about the upcoming fire season, so we took a proactive approach," says Coleman. "We conducted extensive wildland fire training for our staff of six supervisors and twenty-six dispatchers. In addition, we made sure that our equipment within the communication center was ready to do the job. This included adding speed dial numbers on our telecommunications system to help speed transfers to specific agencies and groups when needed."

◀ *The Big One*

The Hayman Fire was the largest wildfire in Colorado history consuming more than 60,000 acres in less than 24 hours.

Dispatchers were on 12/12 shifts with no days off for nearly a month.

Coleman also initiated a Douglas County Wildland Fire Plan that established special shifts and a Mobile Command Post Team. On May 21st, the plan was activated when a lightning strike started the first major fire of the season.

“We set up the Mobile Command Post to handle on-scene radio communications and placed everyone on twelve-hour shifts with no days off,” says Coleman. “The Schoonover Fire ran from May 22-28 and gave us a practical experience to fine tune our wildland fire capabilities.”

At 16:55 hours on June 8th, the first reports of the Hayman Fire were received. Douglas County Communications immediately went to the Wildland Fire Plan alerting every available dispatcher. Again, twelve-hour shifts, no days off. In less than twenty-four hours, the fire consumed some sixty thousand acres and dispatchers were busy from the moment they walked in the door. The call-load was fast and furious with 9-1-1 calls prioritized over ten-digit emergency calls and nonemergency calls. Nonemergency calls were transferred to a special group of new dispatchers at the Incident Command Center.

“Our VESTA 9-1-1 system played a significant role in helping our supervisors manage the high number of incoming calls,” says Coleman. “Using the auto dial feature, callers could easily and quickly be transferred, preventing long hold times and allowing dispatchers to complete calls and get onto the next call.”



On the Call
Dispatcher Cari Parkinson relied on her VESTA 9-1-1 system's programmed auto dial to transfer calls to specific groups for dispatch and information processing. Transferring lesser-emergency calls and calls for information to designated groups helped reduce ring and hold times for emergency calls.

Douglas County, CO, is one of the fastest growing counties in the country and the comm-center answers more than 400,000 calls for service a year. It was one of the first PSAPs in the state to implement a full computer telephony integration (CTI)-based system.

Any dispatcher who has ever worked a sustained operation knows the toll it takes on your nerves and sanity. The days without time off turned into weeks. Many of the dispatchers had friends and family whose homes were threatened by the fire. Most of all, the time away from their own families and homes was very stressful. The teamwork demonstrated by the Douglas County dispatches was phenomenal.

“Today, when I ask the dispatchers for their recollection of the fires, the first response is always ‘It was the most dismal time I can remember,’” says Coleman. “Then it is usually followed by a story of someone going the extra mile to help a friend, an act of kindness or even something funny that happened.”

One such humorous story involved an unnamed dispatcher who took a call, handled it with the utmost professionalism, and then almost exploded with laughter after she disconnected. Apparently the caller had suggested that all the staff at Douglas County needed to do to stop the fires was to think positive thoughts and chant “no fire, no fire, no fire.”

The caller suggested the more people who participated, the more effective the chant would be. Of course, the team had to give it a try, just for comic relief. Pretty soon, all the

dispatchers, and even a visiting chief joined in with the chant. In fact, the chief passed on the story in the daily firefighter briefing and, naturally, before long hundreds of firefighters were heard doing the chant.

“It really was a great tension breaker all around,” says Coleman. “Then, we got another call from someone suggesting we drop watermelons on the fire. He was confident that would do the trick.”

The fire raged for more than two weeks and lasted almost two months before it was final-



Ready to Roll
Division Chief Mike Coleman, Lt. Laurie Anderson and Communications Manager Cory Friend are dwarfed by the department's new mobile command center.



*All Smiles
Dispatchers Cari Parkinson and Cherie Abbott share a light moment in the Comm-Center.
During the sustained operation emergency stress levels were diminished by teamwork, acts
of kindness and sharing humorous stories.*

“We have reached out to elected officials, the media, government agencies, private industry and the NENA membership like never before.”



Cindi Dieck
*Supervisor of the Year
Supervisor Cindi Dieck was awarded the 2002 Colorado APCO Supervisor of the Year for leading by example and setting the tone for professionalism and accuracy in the Communications Center. According to her staff, Cindi has that rare ability to be a leader as well as a Manager.*

ly over. Dispatchers worked twelve-hour shifts for weeks without a day off. In the end, the team at Douglas County Sheriff's Communications had successfully handled the largest wildfire in Colorado history. On Friday, April 18, 2003, the center was honored as the Colorado APCO PSAP of the Year Award winner and Cindi Dieck was honored as Supervisor of the Year.

“I am very proud of the great job everyone did last summer. It seemed that each and every one of our people went the extra mile to get the job done,” says Coleman. “Looking back, we are all grateful that we were prepared both physically and mentally for the challenge.”

The comm-center is currently preparing for future challenges by adding a new mapping system (ORION MapStar) and a new digital logging recording system (PYXIS). The center has been designated as the default comm-center for the states wireless 9-1-1 calls,

which means that it may be receiving wireless calls for assistance from all over the state.

“The mapping element will be critical to our ability to forward and dispatch calls for service,” says Coleman. “We look forward to applying it in mapping wireless calls and in helping us better serve the county.”

Douglas County, CO, is one of the fastest growing counties in the country and the comm-center answers more than 400,000 calls for service a year. It was one of the first PSAPs in the state to implement a full computer telephony integration (CTI)-based system. It now deploys VESTA 9-1-1 workstations with ORION MapStar and uses MagIC for MIS and PYXIS for DLR. The entire product suite is from Plant Equipment, Inc. and was provided by Qwest.

“We believe the computer technology that we’ve implemented has had a very positive impact on our operations,” says Coleman. “We’ve streamlined our call processing,

which was evident during last year’s big fires. The reports from MagIC also allowed our management to identify heavy call-load periods and adjust staffing as needed. We firmly believe that implementing technology goes hand-in-hand with staff training and overall preparedness.”

Herb Torrens has served as corporate communications manager for Plant Equipment, Inc. since 1997. He is a former journalist with more than two decades experience writing in public safety and law enforcement.

Cory Friend, ENP, is communications manager with Douglas County Sheriff’s Office and has more than 22 years of PSAP management service. She currently serves as media and public relations specialist.