

Educating 9-1-1 Personnel To Educate the Public

By Bill Stevens, 9-1-1 Coordinator with Sarasota County, Florida

In addition to 9-1-1 coordinators, county and local management, communications center staff, first responders and citizens also need to be educated.

In the past few years, 9-1-1 coordinators have educated themselves on Wireless Phase I and Phase II as a result of the passage of the Wireless Bill in 1996 and the subsequent rulings and state laws.

These rulings have had a great impact on the PSAPs and wireless carriers. They have changed technology, increased expenses, and changed procedures for handling 9-1-1 calls. They also have increased the knowledge needed by the coordinators who need to ensure that all federal and state requirements are met, the correct equipment is available, and the right procedures for handling the calls are in place and that they work with their LECS (Local Exchange Carriers, primary telephone company) and wireless carriers to implement both Phase I and Phase II. However, county and local management, communications center staff, first responders and citizens also should be educated.

Management

County management—including your Board of County Commissioners or County Council—should be aware of what the capabilities of the new system are. They also need to be aware of system limitations and that a majority of their constituents will not be able to utilize the system when it is first implemented. Being aware of the importance of public education also is important.

Public education needs to start long before implementation is complete because in many cases, the public and press contact county management first, especially when something happens that negatively affects the public at large. Make sure that management is prepared with the right knowledge and understands

that, when it comes to replacing agency cellular phones, Phase II-compliant phones are a must.

Communications Center Staff

Communications center staff should understand the system and what it can do. While the basic procedures for handling a 9-1-1 call have not changed, the technology has. Your telecommunications now have to deal with the more varied information that they receive on their ALI screens and understand what type of wireless call they are receiving.

- Will the first screen they receive be Phase II information?
- Will they have to rebid?
- Can they rebid more than once and will they receive updated information each time?
- What are the differences in information received from each wireless carrier?

They also should understand the different solutions the wireless carriers use, if applicable in your area, as well as knowing what to do if the system fails.

- Can they locate a longitude/latitude plot if the automatic mapping fails?
- Can they convert a longitude/latitude if they receive it in the wrong format?

All of the technology in the world

will not solve the wireless 9-1-1 issues if there is no public education.

All of these concerns need to be addressed, so make sure that communications center staff is involved with the testing and implementation. It is strongly suggested that supervisors, training coordinators and trainers take the NENA Introduction to Wireless for PSAPs course.

Public Safety Personnel

Your first responders should be aware of the program's

parameters. Failure to train these personnel will result in unmet expectations by the responders as well as requests for information that you may not be able to furnish. Agency management also should understand how important it will be to replace its cellular phones with Phase II-compliant phones when possible.

This training should start before Phase II implementation and continue throughout the process. Many agencies are hesitant to start their education program early, and some do very little at all. While the initial press releases and other public education programs may result in phone calls from the public, it is better to prepare them for Phase II rather than just announce that your county is compliant and then bear the brunt of all the phone calls or, even worse, the burden of unfulfilled expectations after a tragedy has occurred.

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Citizens

All of the citizens served should be made aware of Phase II—what it will and will not do for them. This education should start before you make the final announcement that your county is fully Phase II-compliant. Let your citizens learn what you are doing and what the projected completion date is for the project. Although this may generate phone calls from the public, it is better that they know what the system will be capable of and what will be expected from the public before you go fully functional.

This is especially important because of what has happened in the last few years in several states: the incident in New York involving four young men who drowned and the two women in Florida who could not be located. Both of these incidents caused increasing coverage of this topic in the national press.

Even when PSAPs are fully Phase II, only a small percentage of citizens will be able to utilize the service when it's first deployed. In most cases, new phones will have to be purchased, and the average turnaround rate for customers to get new phones is two to three years. This, combined with the fact that the wireless carriers are not actively trying to sell the newer Phase II-compliant phones, means that it will be quite some time before most cellular phone users have the new equipment. By educating the public early, they will understand how the system works and what they can expect. Without the needed public education, many citizens will think that when the county or the telephone companies make the announcement that your county is fully Phase II-compliant, they will be covered automatically and can be found when an emergency exists.

NYC Police and Fire Departments Promise to Unite in Disaster Responses

Reversing positions they took in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attack, New York City's police and fire commissioners said last July that they would adopt formal rules for how emergency agencies should work together in responding to major disasters, the New York Times reports. Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly and the fire commissioner, Nicholas Scoppetta, expected to finalize and sign the agreement by summer's end.

According to the Times, many officials said they hoped it would reduce the mistrust and miscommunication that has surfaced at emergency scenes for generations, and that contributed to the flawed response at the World Trade Center in 2001. In addition to clashing at emergency scenes over jurisdiction and ability to perform rescue operations, there was some recent confusion at a terror-attack drill. A motivating factor in adopting these procedures is the fact that the Department of Homeland Security reported that it would not grant money to cities and states "formal command structure for major emergencies," city officials reported.

The system that will be used is one of "unified command" for the handling of disasters, as well as practices and procedures for dealing with even minor rescues. Kelly elaborated, noting that top police and fire commanders would oversee their own forces at emergency scenes, but that there would be specific plans in place for senior officers from both departments to communicate and to coordinate actions through the city's Office of Emergency Management.

The bottom line is that all of the technology in the world will not solve the wireless 9-1-1 issues if there is no public education on the issue.

NENA's Operational Public Education Committee is currently working on a white paper on this subject that should be released by the end of the summer. This paper will identify phases and limitations of wireless implementation, examples of working with the media and special wireless educational efforts.

Bill Stevens has been in the 9-1-1 field since January, 1988. He started out as a telecommunicator/dispatcher with the Volusia County Sheriff's Office in Volusia County, FL. In the next fourteen years, Bill served as a CTO, shift supervisor, communications supervisor and 9-1-1 coordinator. He received ENP certification in 2000. In January of this year, Bill accepted the position of 9-1-1 coordinator with Sarasota County, FL, which has one consolidated dispatch center that receives all 9-1-1 calls and dispatches for two law enforcement agencies and seven fire departments.