

THE TELECOMMUNICATOR'S ROLE IN RESPONDER SAFETY

BY ALICIA IHNKEN

The responsibility for responder safety rests on the shoulders of everyone involved. As telecommunicators, you share a great deal of that responsibility by being tasked with such important duties as information gathering through post dispatch and beyond. For the purposes of this article we will focus on two types of incidents: structure fires for fire rescue responders and disturbance calls for law responders.

STRUCTURE FIRES

Structure fires include public buildings, dwellings, mercantiles, manufacturing and other miscellaneous buildings. Dwellings include both single and multiple family homes, apartments and condominiums, hotels and motels, as well as mobile homes or stationary trailers.

Mercantiles are places of business and can include office buildings, restaurants, warehouses and stores.

Factories provide unique challenges to firefighters. They are classified as manufacturing structures, which include textile or fabric works, metal works, wood works, chemical and flammable liquids, as well as gas works. Generally speaking, most manufacturing structures have some type of hazardous material on site, and most have some flammable materials in or around buildings. (*Note:* Department stores, which would be considered an example of a mercantile, also have the potential to contain hazardous chemicals.)

Examples of miscellaneous structures would be lumberyards, bulk oil or gas storage sites, gas stations and garages not attached to dwellings. These structures normally have their own unique fire plans. Some are required by federal and/or state law to have fire safety equipment in place.

Structure fires offer a much higher loss and casualty potential than any other classification of fire incident. In addition to concerns about hazardous materials that may be on site, there are other safety concerns. Often in the case of a large structure fire, a crowd gathers to watch. Responding personnel need to be concerned for the safety of these bystanders, as well as ensuring that the bystanders don't interfere with the safe performance of their duties.

Once inside the structure, there are several hazards. Structures may become unstable; thus communications between those inside the structure, as well as communications with those outside the structure, are critical. If one area of

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the building begins to collapse, firefighters in other parts of the building need to be made aware of it. Knowing the location of gas shut-off valves and other utilities is also important to responders.

Dehydration is a concern faced by those responding to a structure fire. When involved in a high-intensity activity, such as fighting a large fire, it's easy to lose track of time. Responders should rehydrate every 30 minutes. Failure to do so can have severe health consequences.

As you can see, structure fires have the potential to include many different hazards. These tend to be high-risk calls, with the potential for large property loss and human casualties.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Structure fires are one of the highest risk situations a responder can face, and telecommunicators play an important role in the safety of responders.

The first role the telecommunicator plays is to give responding personnel as much relevant information as possible to aid in the safe performance of their duties. Exact locations are crucial. Street or road addresses are vital if available from the caller. If the incident is occurring at a place of business or commercial property, obtain the name of the business and/or the business type or building name. Dispatching apparatus to a fire at the Chevron gas station at Main St. and Orchard Blvd. is much more helpful than a "structure fire at 1056 Orchard Blvd." The potential for risk is relayed to the responders by the mere fact that the fire is at a gas station.

Not only is city or town important, but so is a cross street. Remembering that we attempt to start with the "big picture" for responding units, a cross street greatly assists them in zeroing in on a location. The caller may be able to provide a cross street or nearby landmark, and most CAD systems reference cross streets by address.

The name of a subdivision can be helpful in getting the responders to a specific address. At times you may have a call at an unnumbered building under construction or a subdivision where street names have not been posted. *Don't assume that every*

building has an address and every street has a name. Remember, too, that your CAD or 9-1-1 system may not have any reference to a building under construction.

Depending on your dispatch configuration, identifying the city or town may be critical information in determining jurisdiction. Fire dispatch centers that serve many municipalities often have towns with



Threats to an officer's safety come from various sources. Sending multiple officers is often key to prevent a situation from escalating.

the same street names and addresses. At times, callers assume they're speaking directly to the fire station down the street and become confused when you ask in what town the fire is occurring.

Many fire reports are made by people who are not on scene, but are calling from another location away from the actual fire. In these cases, verification of the displayed 9-1-1 information becomes vital to locating the fire for response.

We have discussed the importance of obtaining accurate information for locating the report of a fire. We also need to address the importance of a location within a location for an actual fire. Determining what part of a building is burning can help determine the severity of the fire, as well as the chances for escalation. Knowing this information beforehand can help responders prepare and plan.

Structure fires, especially nonresidential structures, should be identified by the calltaker so that knowledge of the building contents and the surrounding area can be determined. If the caller is knowledgeable, the calltaker should ask if there are any materials in or around the building that could be considered hazardous.

Asking about the type of business in the building can indicate the presence of

hazardous materials. Almost every manufacturing plant contains flammable liquids, cleaning fluids, oils and fuels, and other materials. Even retail stores can have hazardous materials on the premises. It's also important to determine what other businesses are located nearby, and what they do there. All of this information must be conveyed to responding units. The caller

should also be directed to meet responders and point out the location and nature of stored hazardous materials. *If there's any question about whether or not materials are hazardous, assume they are.*

When hazardous materials are received at a site, the business is required to fill out a Material Safety Data Sheet. These MSDSs should be placed in a company master file, and each department should be made a copy of the MSDSs

located within that department. Some agencies require that every employer in the county provide a copy of the master file to be entered into the county's database. This information may be accessible to the telecommunicator, or even at the hands of responders via mobile data computers.

Other resources may be available to telecommunicators as you assist responding personnel. There may be a listing of utility shut-off valves and even copies of floor plans for area businesses. Large complexes, such as shopping malls, schools and sports arenas, should have information on file. Be sure to know where it is and how to access it quickly.

Everything discussed this far pertains to giving information to responders. Telecommunicators, however, also play a role in communication once responders are on scene. Occasionally during a structure fire, people inside the building may have difficulty communicating with other people in or outside the building. This is generally due to the equipment or the background noise involved in a situation. The telecommunicator is in a position to aid communication. All communication sent should be acknowledged by the receiver. If the telecommunicator hears a message that goes

unacknowledged, the telecommunicator can relay the message to the intended party. This is a vital role, especially when communication of critical events is taking place.

As a safety precaution, the telecommunicator could also remind responders to rehydrate. Responders should rehydrate every 30 minutes. The incident commander usually takes care of this, but during a large-scale structure fire, this is easily forgotten. Reminding responders is

a courtesy, as well as a safety precaution.

POLICY & PROCEDURE

No agency can have all the resources it will need for every combination of incidents that may occur. For this reason, agencies have agreements that establish professional relationships. These agreements are known as *mutual-aid agreements*.

Mutual-aid agreements are negotiated in advance of major incidents and provide a framework for supplying assistance

when needed. Situations that may require mutual aid include a single, large structure fire or many small incidents that commit most or all of a jurisdiction's response resources.

In the case of a single large incident, mutual aid may include the use of specialized apparatus, such as aerials, hazmat units or specialized pumpers. Agencies agree to share high-cost apparatus and specially trained crews when needed.

If an agency commits most or all of

No Such Thing as TMI

By Frank J. Kiernan

A caller reports a robbery and describes the suspect. We ask about a weapon: gun, knife; displayed or implied. The neighboring jurisdiction radios that it's in pursuit of a suspect wanted for assault and escape and known to fight with police; we get the vehicle description, suspect identity and description, any known weapons, and we give this to our field units. We do this in our sleep. We know what we need to do to protect ourselves and our field units in these situations, but what about in the unexpected or routine events that occur every shift?

Responder safety is one of the most important responsibilities of public safety telecommunicators. I have the unique experience of working both sides of the microphone, and will say that each training program—fire, police and EMS—should include an eight-hour shift in the dispatch center, 4–12 on a Friday or Saturday night would be best, or even 8–4 on Monday or Tuesday after a long weekend, but *any* time “in the cage” would help.

Rule No. 1 for telecommunicators: Don't keep secrets! What we know, they know. If we consistently give out all the information we have, the field units will get used to it, and this will result in less radio traffic repeating information.

I mentioned above the high-risk calls for which we almost automatically ask questions, but what about this scenario? Police pursuit, crash with injury. We're now sending fire rescue and EMS to an MVA with injury. It would be smart to let them know that this was a police pursuit, just as you do when they're responding to an injured party as the result of an assault. Are police on scene? Does EMS need to “Stage”? (*Note:* A word of caution on staging EMS, make sure everyone knows that EMS is to stage and where. I have walked into family violence incidents in which EMS arrived first, and things blew up once the police arrived.) How about the fire department responding to a residence for smoke in the garage? We should ask about exposures. Is the garage attached to the house? Is a car in the garage? Are pool chemicals or fertilizers stored in it? We can help ensure the scene is safe by asking questions and giving out *all* known information.

WEATHER WATCH

Now let's get more mundane. Do you give weather updates to your units? I know this may be difficult if your center was

similar to one I once worked in. We lovingly called it “the cage” because there were no windows to the outside world, but we could be watched by police supervisors and officers in the building. I was reprimanded because I, in my block-walled, no windows center, did not tell the shift, who were outside watching the sky get dark, that a storm was coming. We soon had a television with the Weather Channel installed in the center to correct that problem. (See *Call Center Design*, p. 50, for another option.) I know what you're thinking: “My patch says Communications or Dispatcher, not Weatherman!” But we need to keep our field units safe; we want everyone to go home at the end of tour.

I will tell this story of a friend and police officer in the town I grew up in. I was on the local ambulance corps, and we used to joke about the quiet little hamlet we were serving. In July 1991 a storm came through town, blowing down limbs and trees and causing the general havoc associated with a storm of that size. During the storm, my friend was on routine patrol and came across a downed tree limb blocking a road. He exited his vehicle to clear the roadway, unaware that a power line had also come down. His name is James Martin; end of watch July 24, 1991. Every year I attend a golf tournament in his memory.

TELECOMMUNICATOR SAFETY

Now let me talk about us. We tend to overlook our safety. We are responders also; we are the *first* first responder. We listen, collect information, dispatch the proper agency and move on to the next call without a chance to decompress. Stress is a silent killer that lurks in the background and will sneak up on us without notice. We need to watch ourselves and our crew, and be aware of what assistance is available for stress relief.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefings and Management after a major incident needs to include telecommunicators. If a CISM team for dispatch is not available, start one. If your bosses aren't sure there's a need, check some back issues of this magazine. I'm sure you'll find a number of articles regarding stress in the comm center. If that doesn't work, have them sit in the center for eight hours.

I don't want to go to any more memorial golf tournaments.

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its resources on a particularly active day, mutual-aid agreements may provide for units from adjacent jurisdictions to physically move staff to stations to cover calls. While these arrangements are normally temporary, they provide protection regardless of call volume.

Mutual response is a type of automatic mutual aid. This concept is best explained by an example. City A has a large oil refinery within its jurisdiction. City A Fire Department knows that it must have help when fighting a fire there. Through a written agreement, adjacent City B has agreed to respond with City A to major fire incidents at the refinery. This *mutual response* is planned in advance, so if it happens, both fire departments know what to do. In some cases, there may be agreements with Cities C and D to provide coverage in Cities A and B during mutual response.

Mutual aid and mutual response agreements differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Telecommunicators must be aware of the existence and provisions of these agreements, because they are the ones who will be placing the calls for assistance.

RESPONDING TO DISTURBANCE CALLS

A disturbance call can involve two or 200 people, but several factors are common. Threats to an officer's safety come from a number of different variables. Generally, if an officer is sent to a disturbance call, at least one person is arguing with at least one other person. These combatants pose several threats to responding officers. The combatants may not realize an officer is present, and if the officer steps in to break up the disturbance, one combatant may lash out at the officer thinking the officer is another combatant.

The combatants may believe if they come into contact with an officer, they'll be arrested. This may be due to previous contact with officers, an outstanding warrant for their arrest or confusion about the law or police procedures. They may feel compelled to escape either before the officer is on scene or escape through the officer.

When combatants are fighting, they are fighting with each other. The other



PHOTO WILLIAM GUTH

Telecommunicators should attempt to learn about the presence of potentially hazardous substances at an incident so first responders can be properly equipped for the situation.

person or combatant is the enemy. When the officer arrives, the officer can become the enemy of both combatants. If the officer tries to arrest one of them, the other may either attempt to free the person from the officer or deliberately attack the officer.

This also occurs with onlookers. Crowds that form around disturbances may include family and friends of the combatants. They may be merely watching the fight to ensure it's fair. When an officer steps in, these onlookers may jump in to allow the combatants to finish the fight or to keep the police from taking a friend or relative away. In either case, a friendly crowd can be turned against the officers by only a few instigators.

With disturbances, the possibility of weapons is always present. If the disturbance is in a home, lamps, kitchen utensils, books, tools and many other items can be used as makeshift weapons. These items can be used to strike, slash or puncture a person. In an office setting, staplers, pens, paperweights or chairs can also be used as weapons against a person.

If a disturbance occurs outside, several items can usually be converted to weapons with little thought or skill. Bottles, bricks, trash cans, buckets, fence

posts, rocks and even automobiles can be used as weapons. Such items can be found just about anywhere there are people. While makeshift weapons are usually used by one combatant against another, these same weapons pose a significant threat to the safety of responding officers.

TELECOMMUNICATOR'S ROLE

When a call is received about a disturbance—two people fighting for example—you can take steps to make the scene safer for the responders. If the call comes in after the fighting is over, you can try to reduce the risk of having the fight start again. Ask someone on scene to separate the fighting parties. Tell the caller to have someone take one of the parties outside into the yard, for example, while someone else accompanies the other party into the living room.

If the people who were fighting are together when the police arrive on scene, an "us vs. them" mentality may develop. Prior to police arrival they were fighting with each other. Now, with the police present, they realize that both may be in trouble. They may try to work together to escape the consequences of their actions. Think of it as similar to brothers fighting. They will fight each other like cats and dogs, but if an outsider tries to fight with

either one of the brothers, that outsider now has both brothers to fight against.

To keep this from happening, a key element is to get a number of officers on scene so this does not appear to be an option. A number of officers on scene may also be necessary to disperse a crowd and prevent the crowd of onlookers from becoming a threat to the safety of the officers.

When you are speaking to the caller, try to determine if any weapons are involved or can be put into action. Asking, “What was the person hit with?” or “Are there any

guns in the house?” may provide the officer with key pieces of information that will alter the officer’s response and approach to the location.

POLICY & PROCEDURE

Many calls for law enforcement officers can be handled by a single unit. There are calls where many officers are sent to ensure a safe and swift conclusion to the incident. Knowing in advance the calls that require a multiple officer response will allow you to quickly and decisively

dispatch the proper response to a call.

This knowledge should come from your policy and procedures manual. This manual should state the conditions for dispatching one, two or more officers. This will provide both you and the officers a reference for what types of assistance are available when a particular incident does occur. **||PSC||**

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CDE #26379: BRING THEM HOME

- One threat to officers when responding to disturbance calls is:**
 - The crowd that can form.
 - Traffic encountered en route.
 - Other officers.
 - Parking on scene.
- When officers are responding to disturbance calls, you can aid the officer by:**
 - Directing officers to strategic positions around the structure.
 - Scolding those who caused the problem.
 - Trying to get the fighting parties separated.
 - Requiring other units to remain out of the immediate area.
- Mutual-aid agreements provide assistance when:**
 - A single large incident occurs.
 - Many small incidents require the use of most or all of an agency's resources.
 - Neither A nor B.
 - Both A and B.
- Structure fires include fires in all of the following except:**
 - Houses.
 - Woods.
 - Trailers.
 - Lumberyards.
- The type of fire with the greatest potential for property loss and human casualties is:**
 - An outdoor, miscellaneous fire.
 - A motor vehicle fire.
 - A fire in a vacant lot.
 - A structure fire.
- All the following are roles played by the telecommunicator in a structure fire except:**
 - Determining location of the fire.
 - Asking personnel to describe what's going on.
 - Reminding responders to rehydrate.
 - Aiding communications between personnel on location.
- The telecommunicator can help prevent the "us vs. them" mentality from becoming a problem by:**
 - Treating the caller like family.
 - Trying to mediate.
 - Asking to speak with someone else.
 - Sending a number of officers.
- When a disturbance is in the home, what can be used as a makeshift weapon?**
 - A pen.
 - A stapler.
 - A chair.
 - All of the above.
- An office building is an example of a:**
 - A public building.
 - A dwelling.
 - A mercantile.
 - A manufacturer.
- An example of a miscellaneous structure is:**
 - A warehouse.
 - A detached garage.
 - A department store.
 - A restaurant.

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