



# WHO IS A 'FIRST RESPONDER'?

By Tony Sanders and Rob Martin

In our modern, fast-paced world, we've come to rely on public safety professionals to race to our rescue in times of emergency.

First responders from police, fire and emergency medical services are valued and recognized for their readiness to hasten to the scene to assist in an emergency, something we see reported or re-enacted on television every day.

While it is true that we acknowledge most those public safety representatives who physically arrive first, they are not the only 'first responders'. Other public safety professionals must coordinate and direct them to the scene of an emergency. So how do field personnel know there is an emergency, where that emergency is located and how best to get there? Most of the time they find out from a concerned citizen calling 911. The dispatchers in our 911 emergency communication centers then gather information from the public. They are typically the first of first responders to react to the call for help.

According to the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), 911 centers receive approximately 190 million calls annually, that's more than 500,000 calls per day. In larger communication centers, call-takers generally field the calls by establishing the location of the emergency and the priority, nature and description of the event. Once this information has been established, it is passed on to the dispatcher and the appropriate field resources are sent. Many consolidated communication centers may have 40 or more call-takers, and dispatchers working

simultaneously to coordinate response on anything from a case of domestic battery to an 18-car pile-up on the interstate. Being responsible for human life and property, knowing how to react appropriately in emergency situations and coordinating necessary response logistics are all roles of a first responder. They are, of course, also functions of the emergency dispatcher.

For years, dispatchers have been trained on the job (OJT), learning simply by watching. After a brief introduction to the job description they were told to 'just do the job'. They often work long shifts of 12-24 hours, and thriving in the relentless and potentially stressful environment of the 911 center can be a taxing experience. The strong ones stick with it and tough it out while others find they are in the wrong profession and move on.

911 was first implemented in the US in 1968, the first call originating in Haleyville, Alabama. Since that time, 911 technology has grown significantly. 'Enhanced' or E911 followed, providing call-takers with automatic caller ID including advanced location identification technologies. Trunked radios allowed for 'frequency hopping', giving almost unlimited channels.

Early OJT dispatcher training may have worked fine 20 years ago when departments were smaller and more spread out to accommodate

## BORDER AND TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

the population. Half a dozen telephone lines and three or four radio channels were all that was necessary. Today's work environment is a different story. Modern 911 emergency communication centers are a wonder of technology and information systems, where formal, professional training is both necessary and expected.

911 information today is typically processed through computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems. Phase II wireless networks linked with geographic positioning systems (GPS) and mapping technologies are becoming essential. In 1995, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) announced the undertaking of Project 33, which would establish initial standards for National Public Safety Telecommunicators. Other standards followed and in 1999 the US Congress officially recognized 911 by adopting the Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act.

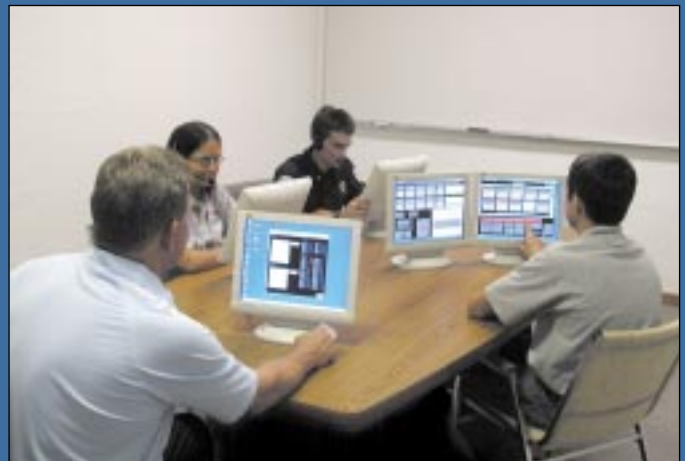
Professionalizing and upgrading our 911 emergency response system is an ongoing task. The National Academies of Emergency Dispatch (NAED) and the industry associations of APCO and NENA have written and implemented standards and guidelines for adopting many of the new 911 technologies. These organizations lobby hard for recognition, training and funding. Standards have now been put in place in several states requiring all 911 dispatchers to be certified as a prerequisite to employment.

Today, a new breed of dispatcher is coming out of our high schools and community colleges; young adults that have grown up with the technology that most baby boomers struggle with. Students coming from a background in computers and that have attended schools specializing in dispatcher training is clearly an advantage for all agencies.

High school and community college criminal justice programs are developing a pool of pre-qualified and certified dispatchers who are ready to go to work. For example, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa, Florida, has six high schools with criminal justice programs, all of which have full 911 communication center simulators set up in classrooms for hands-on call-taker/dispatcher training and certification. Students learn the actual usage of radio, telephone and CAD.

At a recent national workshop in Phoenix, Arizona, promoting in-school, public safety and security career programs that integrate high school and college levels, 10 new emergency telecommunications (ETC) instructors were certified, from Rhode Island to California. This workshop was part of a larger national effort to support students interested in the whole range of public safety and security careers, helping them to learn academic subjects in the context of the career in which they are interested. This, in turn, increases the probability that more students will stay in school and graduate, and go on to continue learning at higher levels.

The instructor certification course and the larger national effort were coordinated through the National Partnership for Careers in Public Safety and Security, part of the National Crime Prevention Council in Washington, DC. These high school and community college instructors



were trained to implement a 40-hour introductory course developed by the NAED, the largest dispatch certification and standards organization in the world with over 33,000 members in 20 countries. To date, over 200 other ETC instructors have been similarly trained to continue to build this new army of first, first responders.

When you think about first responders today, remember our emergency telecommunicators, call-takers and emergency dispatchers. They are the unsung heroes working away at our 911 communication centers. They are your link to help – first to know, first to respond. ■

Tony Sanders is owner of Sanders Audio Visual Equipment, which offers the OMNI-COMM line of simulators first developed in the early 1980s by the Heischman Company. The company also provides audio visual equipment for education and industry. Please contact Tony at [sandersav@ucnsb.net](mailto:sandersav@ucnsb.net) or visit [www.sandersav.com](http://www.sandersav.com)

Robert L. Martin, MPC, is Executive Director of the NAED and Editor of the *National Journal of Emergency Dispatch*. He has been involved with coordinating emergency dispatch training and certification programs for 15 years. He earned his bachelor degree in marketing from the University of Utah and a Master of Professional Communication from Westminster College of Salt Lake City. Please contact Robert at [robert.martin@emergencydispatch.org](mailto:robert.martin@emergencydispatch.org) or visit [www.emergencydispatch.org](http://www.emergencydispatch.org)