

May 2006

\$5.00

9-1-1

MAGAZINE

MANAGING EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS



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Recording Systems: from Archival Records to Quality Assurance

**NEXT GENERATION 9-1-1 CENTERS
INTERNET PROTOCOL & 9-1-1 TELEPHONY**



Red River Regional Dispatch Center

*Innovation For Emergency Communications
And Dispatch*

Article & Photos By John Christopher Fine

The sky darkened. Ominous rain clouds formed overhead as high winds began to blow across the fields and prairies. Moments later driving rain fell in torrents over Fargo and Moorhead.

It is flatland here in the eastern part of North Dakota and western Minnesota. Rich agricultural land where wheat, sunflowers, soy beans, sugar beets, and potatoes are important crops.

When the rain started it was hard to see along the Interstate. Some vehicles pulled over until the heavy rain subsided. The torrential downpour lasted for more than an hour and before the storm passed, the Fargo-Moorhead area was drenched with 2 to 3 inches of rain with 4 to 5 inches in some places.

Inside the Red River Regional Communications Center (RRRDC) located on the second floor of a commercial brick building in downtown Fargo, dispatchers were busy coping with the aftermath of the storm.

“People drove under the underpasses. Water was coming into their cars. All the

The Red River Regional Dispatch Center was formed in 2002 to provide 9-1-1 and public safety dispatch for the cities of Fargo (ND) and Moorhead (MN), two major metropolitan areas connected by a bridge over the Red River.

underpasses are flooded. People are getting stranded,” Mary Phillippi, RRRDC Shift Supervisor, said from her console as one call after another swamped the Center.

“People are getting stranded. One man said water was up to his waist and he didn't know where he was,” Mary said quickly, then turned back to her console to take more calls.

“The phone has been ringing constantly from two to three this afternoon. Lightning struck a moving car in Moorhead and set it on fire. The Fire Department had to respond. The people inside the car were OK,” Mary said when she had a moment free.

Mary, named North Dakota's APCO Supervisor of the Year in 2004, is a team member of the RRRDC, which covers two major cities, two counties, and several rural communities in two states. The center is unique in many ways. The innovation, cooperation and planning that made it possible is a model for consoli-



Assistant RRRDC Director Maureen Nelson (standing) with Dispatcher Jacqueline Buechler. The Comm Center processes approximately 100,000 calls annually.

dation of public safety communications.

“We like to claim we are the first in the nation to consolidate across state lines because of our uniqueness. We are a separate entity with our own funding for operations. We have our own personnel policies, wages and benefits as well.” Kathy Colvin, Director of the Center stated.

“The population for the metro area is 174,000 in four contiguous cities. This means the Center dispatches for 24 rural volunteer first responders, two major fire departments (Fargo with six stations and Moorhead with two), six police departments, two sheriffs departments and six ambulance services including F-M Ambulance, the major metro and rural ambulance,” Cole Carley explained.

In 2004, the RRRDC answered 51,000 emergency and 193,315 non-emergency calls. Kathy stated 46% of the 9-1-1 calls were received from cell phones. There were close to 100,000 calls for service; 79,000 for police, 7,000 fire related and 14,000 for EMS.

Maureen Nelson is the Center's

Assistant Director. Maureen worked for the Fargo Police Department for 27 years with the last assignment as the Communications Supervisor prior to her RRRDC appointment in March 2002. The Center is directed by Kathy Colvin, formerly the Moorhead/Clay County Communications Manager. The Cities of Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota are separated by the Red River.

“You can see Moorhead City Hall looking out this window just over the bridge. Fargo's City Hall and the Police Department are just a block away,” Cole Carley, the region's Convention and Visitor Bureau Director explained.

For all intents and purposes the communities on both sides of the river interact as a whole in a metropolitan region that has seen phenomenal growth and building over the last few years.

“Originally on the ND side, we had four separate dispatch centers located in the Fargo Police and Fire Departments, in the Cass County Sheriff's and the West Fargo Police Department - all within a radius of five miles,” Maureen said.

“The Fargo police and fire combined in 1986, joined in the 90s by Cass County. West Fargo stayed outside. On the MN side, Clay County and the City of Moorhead were always combined for fire, police and EMS dispatch,” Maureen explained.

“In 2000, the Cities of Fargo and Moorhead and Clay and Cass Counties began talking about a combined dispatch center. The Moorhead City Council and Fargo's City Commission signed a joint powers agreement with Cass and Clay Counties to form a consolidated dispatch center,” Maureen explained.

Consolidation Parameters

Funding for the RRRDC's operations is done on a Metro COG (Metropolitan Council of Governments) formula based on population. The City of Fargo and Cass County contribute 53 and 15% respectively; the City of Moorhead and Clay County contribute 22 and 10%.

“The 9-1-1 fees received from wire and wireless telephone surcharges do not come directly to us. The local governments receive these fees and are used in

its proportionate share of payment to the Center,” Maureen added.

Once the Joint Powers Agreement was signed, a Board of Authority was created to include the Police and Fire Chiefs of Fargo and Moorhead, the Clay and Cass County Sheriffs and the director of F-M Ambulance, a private ambulance company that services the metro area.

To get the consolidation going, a nationwide job search was undertaken for a Director and Assistant Director. Talent proved to be in the RRRDC's own backyard as the Board of Authority offered the jobs to Kathy and Maureen.

“As Director and the consolidation project manager, my first and foremost concern was for the employees - where were they going to work, how were they going to get paid, and how were we

“We were innovative, stepping out of the public governmental norm by providing Paid Time Off (PTO) accrued leave and merit pay increases based on job performance.” She added.

In addition to Kathy and Maureen, there are three Shift Supervisors and 25 Communications Operators and 25 Communications Operators work 10 hour shifts with rotating 3/4 days off. Minimum staffing levels vary from six dispatchers on duty down to three depending on call loads. Overlapping shifts cover the busiest periods.

PSAP Upgrade

In 2002, the Board of Authority's original relocation plan was to remodel the dispatch area in the Moorhead-Clay County Law Enforcement Center to

The Center and the police/fire departments all use the same CAD/RMS (a local proprietary database system) which was developed over the past 20 years.

going to cross-train. The biggest change for the transitioned employees was becoming cross-trained so each employee could rotate through the seven dispatch consoles and perform its designated responsibilities. The other most significant change regarded employees who were no longer employed or enjoying benefits from their former city employer. The RRRDC opened for business as a quasi-governmental business; employees were now working for the RRRDC. The RRRDC has its own health/dental insurance and 401(k) plans, for instance,” Kathy stated.

“The Board addressed the consolidation and operational tasks by appointing agency representatives as resources for the Director and Assistant Director. These sub-committees focus on finance, operations and personnel aspects. The Operations Committee standardized the police and fire/EMS call guides. The Personnel Committee provided feedback for the creation of RRRDC personnel policies and its method to transition in existing MN & ND dispatchers.” Kathy stated.

accommodate the ND side of operations.

“Early into the project, it was apparent the needs of the Center were far more than this space could handle. We were fortunate to be offered this independent site for consideration.” Kathy stated.

The RRRDC operates in a 5,240 square foot suite on the second floor of a fully restored 84 year old building formerly used to manufacture farm machinery. It provides redundant internal and external physical security, utilities backup, and fire and chemical suppression precautions. The radio control and telephone systems are housed in an expansive room allowing for separated cabling in wired trays which are routed under the dispatch floor.

The Center's architectural design is an example of reversing past trends to place dispatch centers in windowless cramped environments. Sunlight illuminates the high ceiling loft style administrative offices and dispatch floor.

The Center uses Motorola Centracom Gold Elite radio control, Positron's

Power9-1-1 and PowerMap both with touch-screen features. The Center has ten 9-1-1 trunk lines; eight for ND and MN landlines and two for ND & MN wireless calls. The configuration allows for the monitoring of the trunk lines as the states administer 9-1-1 surcharge fees and trunk line expenses differently.

The Center and the police/fire departments all use the same CAD/RMS (a local proprietary database system) which was developed over the past 20 years. The City of Fargo, owner to the copyright and licensing of the database systems, entered into a joint venture agreement with the other parties to the consolidation. A CAD/RMS Users Group oversees the strategic planning and monitors programming requests.

“The sharing of information from one agency to another has truly been a significant factor to our successful partnership. Mobile data computers (MDC's) were also implemented regionally for consistency sake.” Kathy added.

Another feather in their hat is partnering regionally to be awarded \$8.1M in federal appropriations, Homeland Security and COPS grant funding to address their radio interoperability needs.

Technological Enhancements

The region's officials have recently contracted to use the CodeRED alerting system for hazardous material incidents, weather warnings, and community related events. Citizens are to log on to their city and county government websites to request their cell phone numbers be included in the alerting database.

IDA Trakit (Automatic Vehicle Locator) enables dispatchers to watch the Clay County Sheriffs deputy squads moving on the map. Dispatchers can determine who is closest to an incident.

“Right after the completion of Phase II in the RRRDC area, we experienced firsthand what it means to have state-of-the-art mapping capabilities.” Kathy stated. “It was in January on a cold but bright Wednesday morning when a snowmobiler in a rural area of Cass County (where the prairieland is open and as flat as a piece of plywood) dialed 9-1-1 to request an ambulance. His partner was lying on the ground having developed excruciating back pain. In his excitement, the caller couldn't tell the dispatcher where they were. However,

the dispatcher calmed the caller down reassuring him that she knew where they were because his cell phone provided her with his longitude and latitude. The dispatcher was able to provide driving directions to the ambulance service to get it to the snowmobilers in record time.” Kathy stated.

The National Weather Service (NWS) program is also available on the Center's radio control, important in an area that is subject to tornadoes and hail storms. The Center controls emergency sirens that will provide warning in the event of a tornado alert from NWS.

“NWS calls us on NAWAS radio and we can set off the tornado sirens. We are kind of at the top of Tornado Alley. They can blow up very fast and are horribly destructive. We can also call in rural firefighters using their pagers,” Maureen explained.

“We have to run two different teletype systems. One for North Dakota and one for Minnesota. When we run a car we have to go through Bismarck for North Dakota and go through St. Paul for Minnesota. How you do it is the same but the software is different,” Maureen explained.

The People Factor

The Center also monitors security for the Fargo and Moorhead police departments through video monitors at their stations after business hours. By the click of mouse, a dispatcher can open the department's vestibule doors to provide safe harbor for citizens. A direct telephone line in the vestibule rings into the RRRDC as well.

The Center is updating its Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) policies. Dispatchers are currently going through recertification. Each console is equipped with EMD cards to deal with critical situations.

“Evenings are busier. We get more priority calls,” Jacqueline Buechler said. Jacqueline, who has a degree in social work, began work at the Center at the end of May 2005, and is still in training.

One of her early calls involved a threatened suicide. “A woman called in that her friend was going to commit suicide with a gun. The situation worked out when help arrived and he didn't commit suicide. The woman was afraid that

her friend would be upset with her for calling 9-1-1. I told her she did the right thing,” Jacqueline said, describing a call that gave her a good feeling of helping in a life or death situation.

While not every call to the Center requires emergency dispatch, quick advice is often imperative to prevent disaster.

“One woman called in and wanted help with her rain gutters. She was outside holding onto them. I told her it was not a good idea to be outside in a lightning storm holding on to rain gutters and that she should get inside the house quickly,” Mary Phillippi said of one call that came in during the rain storm.

Mary began dispatching in Moorhead

When asked how she handles stress, Mary replied, “My husband and I don't discuss work things. Some of the calls bother you. When people call 9-1-1 the worst thing in their lives may have happened. A spouse of fifty years may have died. Their baby may have drowned in a swimming pool. How do I handle that? I have a good, healthy life outside of work. Good family and friends.”

The difficulty of shift work is, in large measure, solved by the RRRDC, Mary said, “We don't rotate shifts; that is your shift for the entire year. It gives you stability in your life, especially if you're a dispatcher with young children and day care issues. It is a benefit. We leave the shifts staggered. We may have three

While RRRDC is unique in bridging state and local boundaries for cooperation, its mission, performed by well trained, caring and concerned dispatchers, remains key to effective emergency services in this major metropolitan area.

in 1988. She is the mother of two children. While her brother was in police training school, Mary became interested in dispatching. Her husband is a police officer with the Moorhead force.

“One thing I love about the work is the variety. I like the adrenalin rush. I spent the first twelve years of my working life doing shift work from 5 PM to 2 AM. I work straight days now and love it.

Like the incidents that arose from flooding after the day's torrential rainfall, Mary remembers the flood of 1997. “Dikes broke in Fargo and Moorhead along the Red River. Many people lost their homes and businesses,” Mary said.

“Our dispatch center was in the basement of the Law Enforcement Center in Moorhead. We worked really long shifts. The whole time we had water in the basement of our home. Luckily one of my sisters volunteered to take my kids for the whole week. We had the sheriff, police chief and head of the National Guard all sitting in the communications room in the event a call would come in to raise a dike,” Mary related.

dispatchers leave at 5 PM. We can place people and have experienced people on every shift.”

“With the six of us on today, we have over a hundred years of dispatching experience. It was really important today with the flooding. It was a very busy day,” Mary said.

While RRRDC is unique in bridging state and local boundaries for cooperation, its mission, performed by well trained, caring and concerned dispatchers, remains key to effective emergency services in this major metropolitan area.

John Christopher Fine is a former New York senior Assistant District Attorney, US State Department official and special counsel to the US Senate. Considered a foremost authority on organized crime and political corruption, Fine, a lawyer in private practice, continues to act as a government consultant and author of magazine articles on law enforcement and crime issues.

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