The community dispatch center: An assessment of a neglected component of emergency management

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ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the important role of the community dispatch center (DC) in emergency management. Through a detailed literature search and a survey of professionals in the field, we uncover the problems facing dispatch centers and identify their prospective solutions. We draw upon our experience to discuss the implications of our findings for emergency managers and others involved with dispatch centers. Our hope is that additional attention and resources will be given to dispatch centers to improve their operation in times of disaster.

INTRODUCTION
The responsibilities of an emergency manager grow daily in scope, making the position seem overwhelming at times. Professionals in the field must take on many diverse tasks and ensure that each of the necessary departments are participating in mitigation and preparedness activities. When the emergency manager develops emergency operation plans or conducts exercises, major departments (e.g., police, fire, utilities, etc.) will be automatically included. However, the one department that often initiates the response, provides necessary information to responding agencies, and works to bring many of the important actors together is often neglected. This overlooked department is the community dispatch center (DC).

When an emergency manager fails to recognize the important role of the DC, response may be delayed or otherwise hindered. For instance, by not incorporating the DC in plans and exercises, the dispatch center may not be prepared to relay requests for assistance to first responders or understand what key information these responders need in order to perform their functions most effectively. In addition, the ability of the DC to share information among all responding agencies could be limited. Finally, these difficulties in communication may jeopardize the mobilization and coordination of agencies and resources. Therefore, it is imperative that the DC be prepared for emergencies and incorporated in preparedness measures for the jurisdiction. Otherwise, the response may add to the disaster rather than contributing to its resolution. Because the DC is a vital department during disaster and is generally a neglected aspect of emergency management, the topic undoubtedly deserves academic examination.

With this in mind, this paper addresses the important relationship between the DC and emergency management, particularly as it pertains to a jurisdiction’s preparedness measures or response capability. First, the methodology used for this examination is highlighted. Second, background information about the DC is provided, and the importance of the dispatch center for emergency management is discussed. Third, common difficulties concerning dispatch centers are mentioned. Next, solutions for such problems, from an emergency management perspective, are explored. Finally, the implications of our findings are reviewed.

METHODOLOGY
To obtain information for this paper, the authors applied a broad methodological approach that entailed a literature search and a survey of dispatch professionals...
(see Appendix). The authors also based much of the content of the paper on their personal knowledge, observations, and experience in the field. In addition, the manuscript was reviewed by various practitioners to ensure that their views were likewise taken into account.

The search for academic literature on the topic of the DC in emergency management has proven to be a somewhat futile effort. Very few studies on the role of the dispatch center have emanated from disaster-related journals—a fact that is not surprising considering that most of the journals concentrate on the more obvious aspects of emergency management, such as the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), incident command system, public warning, evacuation, etc. Nonetheless, a small amount of published information on the dispatch center was obtained for this study. This research originates from two sources: (1) reports from the National Emergency Training Center/Learning Resource Center, and (2) articles in professional responder and communications magazines.

Next, the authors constructed a survey, which was sent to approximately 50 dispatch centers across northern Texas. The survey generated information regarding the following topics:

- The supervisory structure of the DC
- Problems experienced in the DC on a day-to-day basis
- Proposed solutions for the problems in the DC
- The use of the DC during a major emergency or disaster
- Issues concerning DC consolidation across jurisdictional boundaries
- How dispatchers view the emergency management DC relationship

Because only a small number of surveys were returned in the first two weeks, the remaining agencies were contacted by phone or via email to increase the response rate for this paper. After approximately six weeks, the authors had acquired approximately 40 of the original surveys. The data obtained were then evaluated and incorporated into the background information presented in the next section of the paper.

Information in this paper is also based on several years of personal experience in the field of emergency management. Combined, the two authors have over 12 years of experience related to emergency response and emergency management. One of the authors for this paper has seven years of experience working within a combined police, fire, and emergency medical service (EMS) dispatch center. The second author worked previously for a nonprofit organization as an after-hours call taker/case worker, has taught emergency management for nearly four years, and has conducted research on disasters in both the United States and other countries.

After completing a draft of this paper, the authors distributed it to numerous practitioners in dispatch centers as well as several local emergency management coordinators. The comments provided were then reviewed and incorporated into subsequent drafts. Thus, findings have been taken from: (1) research at the professional fire academy and articles from professional response magazines, (2) the collection of surveys and personal interviews with those working in dispatch centers, (3) personal experience studying and working in the field of emergency management, and (4) practitioners’ feedback on earlier drafts.

**BACKGROUND**

For every jurisdiction, there is typically some type of community dispatch center (often known as a call center or 911 center). Although there are unique differences among dispatch centers, most DCs perform common functions. The four main functions include: (1) Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), (2) National Crime Information Center (NCIC), (3) police dispatch, and (4) fire dispatch. Because of these functions, the community dispatch center plays an important role in emergency management. Each of these functions will be discussed in turn.

**Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP)**

The PSAP is commonly referred to as the call taker
position. The person in this position is responsible for answering all inbound phone lines. These may include: 911 emergency lines; Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD); nonemergency police and fire department lines; city service lines for issues relating to sewer, water, traffic control, and animal control; and general information lines. The personnel who staff this position take the necessary information from each caller and, when medically necessary, advise them of appropriate actions to take before emergency responders arrive at the scene (e.g., providing Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) instructions for medical emergencies). For this reason, these call takers must have continuous training and maintain a current certification to provide EMD instruction.

Simultaneously, the PSAP must enter a request for service into the computer or generate a manual sheet of paper (referred to as a call sheet) with all the caller’s information. The police and/or fire dispatcher uses this information to determine the appropriate response for each request for service. The call taker may also be responsible for relaying pertinent information to other departments (e.g., water, sewer, animal control, street, and signal departments) that will be required to respond to a scene as a result of citizen requests.

All of the above actions of PSAP must be performed quickly, accurately, and completely to help the affected citizen and ensure that emergency personnel have sufficient information to respond safely and in a timely manner. Call takers must thus be able to perform several tasks concurrently to properly execute the duties required of the position during normal day-to-day operations. This is to say nothing about the need for multitasking in the case of a disaster or mass casualty incident.

National Crime Information Center (NCIC)

The second function in the dispatch center concerns law enforcement issues. The person who handles this position may have different titles depending on the particular agency in charge of this function. Nonetheless, the person in this position is generally referred to as the NCIC operator. The NCIC is “a nationwide computerized information system established as a service to all criminal justice agencies: local, state, and federal.” The NCIC is basically a collection of computerized databases that law enforcement personnel use to obtain information such as criminal history or missing persons files. “The goal of NCIC is to help the criminal justice community perform its duties by providing and maintaining a computerized filing system of accurate and timely documented criminal justice information readily available to all criminal justice agencies.” In some cases, individual states also have their own criminal information systems, which contain files that are separate from national databases. For instance, in Texas, DCs have access to the Texas Crime Information Center (TCIC), which can be used to obtain records that are pertinent for Texas agencies. Together, “the NCIC/TCIC computer operates as members of the National and Texas Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS/TLETS). Access to NCIC/TCIC is available directly to any local law enforcement agency that has a NLETS/TLETS terminal.”

While performing his or her duties, the NCIC operator provides necessary information to police officers who are working in the field. For example, this operator checks property and vehicles to ascertain if they are stolen. Also, he/she verifies whether a subject has outstanding warrants as recorded in this computer database. This information lets police officers make decisions on whether to retain property or arrest subjects. In many cases, the NCIC operator has a dedicated radio channel. At other times, the NCIC operator may have other duties in police dispatch with additional designated radio channels.

Police and fire dispatch

The third and fourth functions in the DC deal with police and fire dispatch and will be discussed together because of their similarities. The personnel in police and fire dispatch positions take incoming calls and perform a variety of duties to assist emergency responders. For instance, the police dispatcher receives any public safety calls requesting police action, while the fire dispatcher will be given any calls pertaining to fires, gas leaks, hazardous materials spills, or emergency medical service (EMS). Upon receiving an incoming call, the police and/or fire dispatcher sends the appropriate units or equipment to each call based on the nature of the incident. Depending on the quantity and quality of the incidents
and the manpower of the jurisdiction, there may be a shortage of response personnel. When this occurs, the call is referred to as a “holding call” because responders are not available.

As multiple calls are put on holding status, the dispatcher must assign a level of importance to decipher response priorities. Although each jurisdiction has its own preferences and policies regarding holding calls and response priorities, each call is typically assigned a priority number. A common holding call system uses the numbers 1-9 (the number one being the most serious and life-threatening, and the number nine referring to a situation that can be delayed as there is no potential that the issue will escalate in severity). Other systems include only 1-5 in their priority system. Regardless of the system used, the call taker reviews every call to verify the actual severity and seriousness of each incident. The dispatcher then assigns the appropriate priority at his or her discretion and decides how many police units and/or fire units will respond to a situation based on the type of call and the priority number. Lower priority calls will hold longer than emergency or higher priority calls. Therefore, calls are not necessarily dispatched in the order they are received in the DC. Instead, it is the responsibility of the dispatcher to ensure that calls are sent to response personnel in the order of importance.

As calls are received and acted upon, the dispatcher must check for pertinent prior callout information on each address to which responders are sent and continuously monitor radio channels. These actions may generate pertinent medical information (e.g., medical history and required medications) to responding paramedics or may help keep police officers safe from those individuals who have criminal records or are considered dangerous. The dispatcher’s involvement in responder performance and safety also includes, but is not limited to:

- Ensuring that the locations of police and fire units are correct in the Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system
- Keeping track of response personnel activity during a work shift
- Documenting all changes in location and unit status on each individual active call (e.g., enroute to scene, on scene, left scene, or enroute to second location such as hospital)

Importance of the DC in emergency management

Keeping the above functions in mind, it becomes apparent that the DC plays a crucial role in emergency management. Communications operators (call takers or dispatchers) are usually the first individuals to receive information about an emergency. In fact, Craig Fugate, Chief of the Bureau of Preparedness and Response for the Florida Division of Emergency Management, points out that “911 centers are often the first indication a disaster is unfolding.” In addition, the dispatch center plays a major role in how the jurisdiction will respond to an incident as it assigns priorities and dispatches personnel. The dispatch center also provides valuable information to responding departments, which facilitates effectiveness and encourages safety. What is more, this department is “key” during major incidents because it is, by its very nature, the coordination point between many departments. Also, the DC deals with the public daily so its personnel can help disseminate appropriate information regarding mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery activities. It is easy to see, therefore, why the DC is a crucial component of emergency management.

PROBLEMS CONFRONTING DISPATCH CENTERS

In spite of its importance, the dispatch center is plagued by several challenges that may hinder the performance of emergency management functions. These problems include: inadequate staffing, excessive workload, insufficient training, ineffective administration, lack of established policies, centralization of dispatch centers, over-reliance on technology, and an uneducated public. This list represents an overview of the most prevalent problem areas based on the authors’ personal
experience and information provided by responders to the surveys and interviews. It is in no way expected to be all-inclusive, as there are likely to be distinct problems in various centers. Nonetheless, the list is comprehensive in that it covers those difficulties facing most community call centers. Each of these challenges will be discussed in turn.

**Inadequate staffing**

Staffing can be considered a major problem in dispatch centers. Dispatch centers often lack qualified applicants to fill open positions and have extremely high turnover rates. These problems are caused by many issues and are not the same for every dispatch center. Some general reasons for the low number of applicants and high turnover rate may include: high stress of the position, work overload from excessively long hours on the job, working holidays and weekends, mundane shift work, low pay, lack of recognition for a job well done, etc. Whatever the reason, the DC is usually short at least one operator, if not several. This shortage often results in a recurrent situation where new employees are being trained. This training, in turn, further complicates staffing as the DC is now short two experienced operators: the one who left the position and the one who trains the new employee.

A related staffing problem occurs when standards for applicants are set too low. When the manpower of the dispatch center is too low, administrators may choose to lower hiring standards for the position. Certainly, this type of policy will produce more applicants. Unfortunately, the applicants this produces may not be suitable to fill the position. Thus, the department wastes a very large amount of money to train such a person only to lose him/her once the person realizes the demands or stress of the job are too much to handle. Therefore, the department is no better off in the long run by lower hiring standards.

These shortages in staffing pose a major challenge for emergency management. Without adequate manpower, a dispatch center will be handicapped during routine operations. These problems will be exacerbated in a major emergency or disaster, as communications are typically among the functions to experience problems and/or breakdowns in large-scale events. Thus, staffing issues may augment the vulnerability of any local jurisdiction in terms of its ability to relay important information.

**Excessive work load**

As noted above, an excessive amount of work may be a significant challenge for most dispatch personnel. If the jurisdiction is smaller, there will be even fewer individuals to staff the DC. Therefore, in instances where only one, two, or three individuals staff the DC at a time, a communications operator will be responsible for two to four of the main functions simultaneously. For instance, an operator who works in a smaller DC may be responsible for taking a 911 call, dispatching police and/or fire units to the call, giving the caller pre-arrival instructions, updating the responding units, and juggling between the 911 “priority” call and putting other non-emergency callers on hold. Moreover, all of these functions must be performed while ensuring that the CAD is kept updated and no radio traffic is missed in the process. Along with these major functions, there exist many other “housekeeping” tasks that must be performed for the DC to function. DC personnel may be assigned tasks that include, but are not limited to, taking care of walk-in traffic (citizens who walk into the department needing information of various types), maintaining vehicle impound records, typing and filing police records, transcribing police records, searching prisoners, and feeding prisoners. These tasks are time consuming for DC personnel, although some of them may be put on hold during peak busy times. However, some of the tasks must be performed regardless of the work load in the DC. If additional calls come in from a major emergency or disaster, it becomes clear that the employees in the dispatch center will be completely overwhelmed. Thus, a major problem in the dispatch center is excessive workload.

**Insufficient training**

Emergency dispatch personnel deal with stressful situations on a daily basis and must be prepared to handle such events at any given moment. For example, a mother may frantically call the dispatch center stating that her newborn baby appears to be lifeless; she may expect the call taker to give instructions on how to perform CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation). At other times, a dispatch employee will learn from radio
communications that an officer has just been shot and is requesting assistance. In spite of the nature of dispatch work, many of the personnel receive little training. Most dispatch personnel receive some type of training at the onset of their career with an agency. However, many communications operators are not provided with continuing education classes or supplemental training (even though such classes and training are available). This is because dispatch centers cannot be “closed down” while dispatch personnel attend a training class. In addition, many agencies do not have the personnel available to fill in for operators who are taking refresher courses. Thus, the lack of training is another weakness of many dispatch centers.

**Ineffective administration**

The administration of dispatch centers may also create problems for those fulfilling important dispatch functions. First, many of the managers who supervise call centers or are responsible for the DC have never actually worked in a DC. Instead, these managers are high-ranking officers in a police or fire department who are only assigned to supervise the dispatch center. Thus, the administrators may understand only part of the functions that have to be performed on a daily basis. This type of leadership causes problems because the administrator may never fully comprehend the scope and complexity of the dispatch position. A second administration problem occurs during a crisis situation or disaster. In the attempt to gain information about an incident, a manager will enter the call center and expect the undivided attention from the dispatch personnel. Other department leaders and even the emergency manager may likewise seek information from the employees in the dispatch center. Of course, it is imperative that these administrators know what is going on so that they can make important decisions about response priorities and operations. However, these extra people in the dispatch center add to the chaos and place impossible demands on an already overburdened call taker.

**Lack of established policies**

An additional problem concerns the lack of well-devised and publicized policies for dispatch operations

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### The Federal Response Plan (FRP):
What it does, and how it should coordinate with state and local EOCs

Most disasters and emergencies are handled by state and local responders. However, the federal government steps in to provide supplemental assistance when the consequences of a disaster exceed local and state capabilities. If needed, the federal government can mobilize an array of resources to support state and local efforts. Various emergency teams, support personnel, specialized equipment, operating facilities, assistance programs, and access to private-sector resources constitute the overall federal disaster operations system. The FRP describes the major components of the system, as well as the structure for coordinating federal response and recovery actions necessary to address state- and locally-identified requirements and priorities.

The FRP has a multiagency operational structure that uses the principles of the Incident Command System (ICS), based on a model adopted by the fire and rescue community. The ICS can be applied to any size or type of disaster to control response personnel, facilities, and equipment. ICS principles include use of common terminology, modular organization, integrated communications, unified command structure, action planning, manageable span-of-control, pre-designated facilities, and comprehensive resource management. Ideally, the basic functional modules of ICS (e.g., operations, logistics) can be expanded or contracted to meet requirements as an event progresses.

Consistent with ICS principles, the FRP can be partially or fully implemented, in anticipation of a significant event or in response to an actual event. Selective implementation through the activation of one or more of the system’s components allows maximum flexibility in meeting the unique operational requirements of the situation and interacting with differing state and local systems and capabilities.

Details of the FRP and how it can and should work with your community’s EOC are available on the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Web site at [http://www.fema.gov/rrr/frp/frpconc.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/rrr/frp/frpconc.shtm).
and personnel. On the one hand, there may be a scarcity of policies that guide dispatch activities. Personnel may rely on a “common sense” approach when dealing with calls or attempting to deal with crisis situations, which may delay the response or possibly lead to incorrect decisions during an emergency. Furthermore, this common sense type of policy results in training problems because every trainer will rely on his or her own experience or version of “common sense.” Therefore, every trainee will start with a different set of standards by which to work. The difference in standards causes operational confusion, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness.4 On the other hand, personnel may not be fully aware of the dispatch policies. Linstrom notes that “in most systems, the field employees have never been made aware of these conditions nor do they understand the activities that must be carried out during the preparedness [or recovery] period.”5 Policy issues may therefore have a significant negative impact upon dispatch functions.

Centralization of dispatch centers

A major concern about dispatch centers currently deals with the topic of organizational structure. There is a great deal of discussion today about the creation of dispatch centers that serve multiple jurisdictions. In looking at research by the National Fire Academy,6 8 eight studies suggest that the consolidated dispatch center is a good idea. Departments and jurisdictions looking at center consolidation are usually interested in saving money. Of course, having one DC for multiple jurisdictions may limit the amount of resources that any single jurisdiction needs to spend. For instance, jurisdictions may find it less expensive to purchase new equipment or build a better facility together. However, it is important to note that, while consolidation was frequently recommended by fire chiefs, captains, and lieutenants, the dispatch personnel surveyed or interviewed felt the move was undesirable.

First, there is a great chance that there will be fewer personnel to perform the same work load. For example, if there is a small community that uses three dispatchers per shift and it joins with three other communities in a similar situation, it stands to reason that you will need 12 dispatchers per shift to deal with the call load in the centralized DC. Nonetheless, studies assert that the necessary staffing requirement of the centralized DC will be that of the original number of one jurisdiction or only slightly higher. However, it is doubtful that dispatch personnel will be able to deal with the number of routine daily calls. This is to say nothing about the number of calls that will come in if more than one jurisdiction is experiencing disaster.

Another concern is that the centralized dispatch center may be damaged or destroyed by a disaster. If, for instance, a tornado strikes a DC that serves five jurisdictions, there will be five jurisdictions without an operational DC instead of one. It is true that there is a low probability that any particular DC will be struck directly by a tornado or other disaster agent. However, the possibility still exists. Moreover, the DC could be affected by something as small as the failure of the phone system. Again, this more likely event would leave five jurisdictions unable to perform important dispatch functions. While there may be a backup facility for the centralized dispatch center, it may prove difficult to link up communications for more than a single jurisdiction. Therefore, a centralized dispatch center may inhibit the sharing of information among multiple communities should a disaster occur.

Politics is another potential problem resulting from consolidating the DC. Traditionally, even in single jurisdictional centers, there has been a debate on whether the police or the fire department should control the DC. This debate can prove even more difficult to resolve when three, four, or even five jurisdictions, with differing opinions regarding who should control the DC, are involved. Disagreement about other dispatch issues is also more likely to occur. For example, officials from different jurisdictions may not agree on the type of equipment or software to be used in the DC. This may hinder effective and efficient response operations as each jurisdiction has unique needs and demands.

It is certainly correct to point out that a centralized dispatch center could facilitate the implementation of mutual aid agreements if sufficient planning has taken place among the jurisdictions. However, it should be recognized that it is easier to plan and implement mutual aid with one jurisdiction than with five jurisdictions. This is a crucial point because “the overall success or failure . . . could very well depend on how well your agency
communicates with the mutual aid organizations. Therefore, even a reported strength of a centralized dispatch center could become problematic.

**Over-reliance on technology**

Technology, such as new computer and radio systems, may ironically be a growing problem within dispatch centers. With the development of CAD systems came great advantages. Call sheets became computerized. The distribution of information from call taker to dispatcher and from dispatcher to responding units became less distorted. Computers also helped to record information about unit response times and activities. What is more, the transference of such information was faster and more complete than with manual systems. So, the CAD became a “dream come true” for most departments.

Unfortunately, some jurisdictions failed to anticipate potential difficulties associated with this type of technology. Computer systems will inevitably have problems that must be fixed, and unplanned outages may result in a temporary loss of the DC computer system. Although this seems like common knowledge, many call center training programs do not provide basic instructions on how to do the job without the CAD. Dispatchers are mainly trained on the CAD system, and no one usually bothers to teach the new employees the manual system because departments are so dependent on the CAD and do not plan for system downtime.

Another source of technological problems arises from radio systems. Most dispatch centers rely on a “trunking” process, which allows them to use a certain number of channels for communications. At times when there is a heavy radio traffic load, the system will not allow all of the radio traffic to go through. Most users who experience this will hear what is referred to as a “busy signal.” This busy signal lets the user know that he/she must wait until a channel is available to transmit over the radio. Unfortunately, this busy signal is not always transmitted, so the users talk over the radio when no one can hear them speaking.

In essence, people have become too dependent on technology. Personnel and administrators alike expect equipment to work properly and have the capability to handle extremely high demands. These expectations can lead to lack of planning for situations when the computers and radios may not work.

**An uneducated public**

Finally, public education is an atrocious problem for every DC. People do not understand the purpose of a community dispatch center. Citizens commonly use emergency lines (i.e., 911 lines) for nonemergency calls when they do not know where else to turn for help or questions. These calls include, but are not limited to, asking for directions, phone numbers, special event information, or jail and prisoner information, and reporting water or sewer problems at the caller’s residence. In essence, many citizens forget that the 911 center is to be used only during times of emergency. If citizens call for general information, the calls tie up lines needed for true emergency situations or can lead to phone overloads and system failures. With and without proper public education, people will use 911 for personal convenience. Thus, citizens need to recognize the purpose of the dispatch center and those times when it is appropriate to call 911.

**SOLUTIONS**

Our experience in the field, survey findings, and interviews generated prospective solutions for the problems mentioned above. These include recommendations for seeking additional staff, recruiting and retaining employees, training DC employees, formulating effective policies, rethinking centralization and creating backup facilities, educating the public, and planning. Although there may be other suggestions on how to improve DC operations, the prospective solutions mentioned here are the most apparent. Each of them will be discussed in order.

**Seeking additional staff**

To improve DCs, it is necessary to ensure that sufficient staff exists to perform the work load required. Therefore, political leaders and city council members should be made aware of the important role of the community dispatch center during daily operations and disaster incidents, as well as the need for adequate personnel. The emergency manager may also want to convey the importance of having sufficient staff.
to various departments such as human resources, police, fire, and the DC itself. As people are hired for the DC, these department officials make decisions based on the functions and the needs of their own departments. If the emergency manager has input, his or her needs are more likely to be met by dispatch administrators and new employees. This is an added benefit of being involved in the hiring process. Of course, it may be difficult for emergency managers to become directly involved in the process because of political factors or scheduling conflicts. However, emergency management is very dependent on interorganizational relationships. Therefore, the emergency manager must attempt to influence decisions about DC staffing.

**Recruiting and retaining employees**

If additional positions are authorized for dispatch centers, this does not necessarily mean that people will apply for the job as a dispatcher. Should this be the case, those managing dispatch centers may want to increase the wages of those working in this position. In recent years, the position of a call taker has become more lucrative. Nevertheless, if the yearly salaries have improved lately and seem to be satisfactory, why are more people not applying and obtaining jobs in dispatch centers? The answer is simple—money is not always an acceptable motivator for people in such a position. As mentioned earlier, the dispatch position is highly stressful, extremely demanding, shift work. Most people do not want to deal with the demands that have been discussed in this paper. Therefore, jurisdictions must advertise creatively to fill their available positions.

One way to develop a recruitment system that can work would be to use a community service technique. In other words, it may be advisable to allow citizens to observe the DC in action. Then, if the person passes certain security requirements, allow them to sit beside a working dispatcher so he/she understands exactly what the job entails. This can serve multiple purposes. First, it generates interest in the DC position. Second, it could allow for more realistic, serious applicants. Finally, it may help members of the community better understand the role of the DC.

Once personnel are hired for the DC, it is necessary to ensure that they will not leave. Employee surveys, interaction with DC managers, and resolution of call taker concerns are ways to retain staff. Recognition for a job well done and the reward of raises may also do much to keep employees happy with their positions. Only through creative recruitment and careful treatment of employees will the DC be able to live up to the expectations that a community has for it.

**Training DC employees**

People are creatures of habit. For this reason, dispatch personnel will be better able to perform their jobs if they have been taught what to do and then have the opportunity to put this knowledge into practice in training sessions. Therefore, it is imperative that dispatch personnel are adequately trained to perform their functions when they are hired.

Unfortunately, many administrators believe that this initial training on such tasks is sufficient. In reality, these tasks need to be refreshed in the minds of DC personnel periodically. Personnel cannot be expected to remember obscure tasks that they receive little training on during hectic and stressful situations. Nevertheless, such tasks are paramount during the response to a disaster, so personnel must be able to adequately perform such functions. For instance, dispatchers are expected to perform many activities during a crisis that they do not normally perform during more routine situations. This may include activities such as mutual aid requests, a radio patch (using a phone line in conjunction with the radio system to connect someone on a phone line to a person on the scene of an incident via a radio channel), and siren activations. These tasks are not difficult when considered individually or under normal circumstances. However, if you are working a fire console and you are asked to do these tasks along with other functions (e.g., dispatch fire and emergency services equipment or help with the overload of incoming calls), simple tasks can become difficult if they are not second nature. Emergency managers can help in this situation by becoming aware of current dispatch training, proposing new topics or methods for dispatch training, and involving the DC in community disaster exercises. Moreover, emergency managers may propose a quality assurance program to help ensure adequate training for employees. With an adequate quality assurance program, "[one] can
learn a great deal about where training needs to occur, what policies may need to be updated, and where technology may be able to help improve the service [dispatch centers] provide.”

**Formulating effective policies**

As mentioned earlier, many DC policies provide guidelines on how to handle day-to-day situations in a standard manner. However, there may be a lack of information on how to handle extreme or disaster situations. Since the DC is usually the department that first knows about a potential problem situation, it makes sense to coordinate with the DC to address such policy issues. The first step in this process should be to ask dispatch personnel what policies they have that work and which policies are lacking. When obtained, this information should be incorporated into plans for the DC. For instance, this could include the policies that deal with the actual “how to” of daily dispatch operations. Also, the plans could include more specific dispatch procedures, such as operating the dispatch function manually if the CAD system were to fail. Thus, managers of the DC should ensure that policies are being written on the tasks to be performed and methods to carry them out in both routine and nonroutine situations.

**Rethinking centralization and creating backup facilities**

During the research conducted for this paper, it was discovered that many jurisdictions are moving towards a centralized dispatch center. Because of the drawbacks already mentioned above, it may be wise to reconsider the advantages of having one DC for multiple jurisdictions. In fact, it is recommended that communities pursue an opposite course of action as many agencies do not have a backup communications center. It is true that jurisdictions feel that they do not have the necessary funding to buy extra equipment, obtain the space, or procure the extra supplies and software necessary to create a backup center. However, research for this paper uncovered numerous situations when DC personnel should have evacuated the dispatch center for safety concerns but did not because there was no other place to perform dispatch functions. These stories included bomb threats, gas leaks, and weather-related emergencies where the entire building, including the jail personnel and prisoners, was evacuated for safety. These situations are unacceptable as they jeopardize the performance of important dispatch functions. In addition, they put city employees at risk and open up the possibility of future lawsuits.

An emergency manager who operates in a jurisdiction without a backup DC has the enormous challenge of improving his/her emergency management program by working with DC administrators to convince the political leaders and decision makers of the necessity and the importance of such a backup site. Once a backup site is approved and developed, an evacuation plan and “switch-over” procedures must be written, and employees must be trained on the new policies. Only by stopping decentralization of DCs and creating backup facilities can communities ensure that important routine and nonroutine functions will be performed by dispatch personnel.

**Educating the public**

The emergency manager can assist the community DC in an even broader scope than mentioned above. Emergency management personnel can help to educate the public so citizens use the community DC in an appropriate manner. For instance, the emergency manager can help the public understand the purpose of the 911 system. This may include: helping the public understand when to call 911, telling them what information the call takers will need, and informing them of alternate numbers they can use if their needs are not appropriate reasons for calling the DC on 911. To do so, the emergency manager could send a flyer out with the water bills once each year to provide pertinent city extensions and a brief explanation of the service that personnel at each extension can provide. The local emergency manager could also use the flyer as an opportunity to provide a brief description of his/her function as it relates to public safety and list the department phone number so citizens can inquire about individual and family disaster mitigation and preparedness measures. Only by educating the public will the DC be able to perform its functions effectively in both routine and nonroutine situations.

**Planning**

Finally, and most importantly, the emergency manager can include the DC in the community’s emergency
management operations planning. After all, in most situations, the DC is the first department to be made aware of a major situation within a jurisdiction. In addition, the DC plays a vital role in communicating important information to decision makers from various departments. For this reason, emergency managers may want to consider several planning issues pertaining to the DC. As an example, Linstrom notes that “Federal guidelines require each Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) to have a ‘Readiness Condition’ procedure.” The DC should be included in this planning as it plays such an important role in escalating preimpact activities based on watches, warnings, advisories, or alerts. The emergency manager needs to ensure that the DC notifies him/her and other department leaders when a mass emergency occurs. Plans need to be created to facilitate how the DC exchanges information to improve coordination among the responding agencies and the EOC. Community EOPs must also address the activation of backup dispatch centers. Finally, the DC should be included in emergency management training and exercises to improve the overall capability of the community to deal with major incidents.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has provided background information about the DC and discussed common difficulties concerning its operations. Possible solutions for such difficulties have been identified from the perspective of the emergency manager. With this in mind, it is apparent that the DC plays a vital role in the community’s response to a major emergency or disaster.

Nevertheless, emergency managers continually face higher and higher demands in their profession, which makes it likely that the role of the dispatch center may be overlooked in the future. Emergency managers who choose to neglect the DC are unintentionally jeopardizing the community’s level of preparedness. The DC often initiates the jurisdiction’s response, obtains the “big picture” of what is taking place, relays important information to first responders, and helps coordinate many different departments. For these reasons, the emergency manager can and should play an important role in seeking additional staff, recruiting and retaining employees, training DC employees, formulating effective policies, rethinking centralization and creating backup facilities, educating the public, and planning for disaster.

It is hoped that this paper has offered suggestions on how to improve the capacity of community dispatch centers for handling the disasters that will inevitably arise. To the extent that other problems and solutions have not been addressed, the authors encourage more discussion about how to improve dispatch operations and emergency management.

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REFERENCES

Appendix. Community Dispatch Center Survey

This survey is intended to generate practical knowledge regarding the role of the community dispatch center in a community during a major incident or disaster. The Emergency Administration and Planning Program at the University of North Texas will use the responses you give as part of a research project.

1. Please indicate the background of the community dispatch center supervisor for your department (i.e., civilian, police, fire).

2. List the top 5 issues that you see as problems facing the efficient and effective accomplishment of dispatch duties and operation; rank them in order of importance, “A” being the most significant.
   
   A. 
   B. 
   C. 
   D. 
   E. 

3. For each problem listed in number 2, provide one example and explain why it is a problem for the dispatch center, the dispatch center’s community, the dispatch center’s agency, and/or the administration who lead the particular dispatch center.
   
   A. 
   B. 
   C. 
   D. 
   E. 

4. For each example provided in number 3, give solutions that may have helped in your particular experience.
   
   A. 
   B. 
   C. 
   D. 
   E.
5. What is your opinion of how the dispatch center is used by other personnel (i.e., police, fire, administration) during a major event or disaster? (Example: Are dispatch personnel adequately notified by appropriate personnel of necessary information when a major event takes place?)

6. What is your opinion regarding the consolidation of community dispatch centers across jurisdictional boundaries?

7. List any drawbacks you see in the consolidation of dispatch centers and explain why the items listed should be considered drawbacks.

8. Is consolidation good for each individual community?

9. Who benefits from consolidation of community dispatch centers?

10. Is consolidation a good idea if it is based on a manpower shortage or budget restrictions?

11. In your opinion, what role should the dispatch center have in the response phase of a disaster (excluding the general functions of collecting necessary information and response initiation)?