

▶ CURRENT EVENTS

Silent Emergency: When Cell, Landlines, 9-1-1 and the Internet Go Down

“It’s a dispatcher’s worst nightmare: The phones don’t work,” says Santa Clara County (Calif.) Chief Communications Dispatcher Curtis Darnell. “This was outside of our playbooks. It [was] the opposite of what we are used to; it [was] silent.”

Around 1 a.m. on April 9, four fiber-optic cables were cut in two different locations in San Jose, Calif., knocking out cell and landlines, Internet and 9-1-1 in southern Santa Clara County and parts of Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. Tens of thousands of residents and businesses were affected, and approximately 250,200 contact points were out.

According to Gilroy Police Department 9-1-1 Communications Supervisor Steve Yzunza, “I was notified [of the outage] a little bit after 1:20 a.m. From the dispatch perspective, 9-1-1 had been down, and we were dealing with a phone issue. But it was a progressive outage. It got to the point where we didn’t have Internet and cell phone usage.”

For Morgan Hill, the first indication that something was wrong came about an hour after the actual cut occurred, when police officers were unable to communicate via their Nextels. Morgan Hill PD Support Services Manager Patti Yinger says, “I couldn’t tell you 100% what was working and what was not. It was not consistent. Sometimes cell phones would work, but we couldn’t tell someone that something *would* work.”

“I think it took us all a while to recognize the gravity of the situation,” says Darnell, “the absence of traffic.”

County officials activated the emergency operations center (EOC) (located outside the affected area), increased public safety presence at critical locations



▶ 75 YEARS & COUNTING

An Enduring Legacy

APCO Past President Wanda McCarley is nearly as enthusiastic about APCO as she is proud of being a sixth generation Texan. “I believe APCO has one of the greatest missions to serve public safety practitioners that there is—what an opportunity!” McCarley says.

A member of APCO “since Moby Dick was a minnow,” McCarley says belonging to the professional organization has been a huge boost for her career.

“I didn’t intend to get involved in public safety,” she says. As the assistant city secretary for the town of Midlothian, Texas, she was rather unceremoniously appointed dispatcher in 1969. “The police brought in a radio and plunked it down on my desk,” she says.

McCarley knew she had to get up to speed fast. That’s when she found APCO. She joined the Texas Chapter in 1974 and eventually became involved at the national level, serving as president from January 2006 to August 2007.

Through APCO, she has found mentors and friends. “APCO single-handedly helped me build a career,” she says. “APCO put me in touch with the people I needed to know.”

According to McCarley, networking with other professionals who shared her interest added to her continued excitement about being a public safety communications professional.

Today, McCarley is the operations group manager for the Tarrant County 9-1-1 District, Fort Worth, Texas. The special use district provides service to more than 50 9-1-1 PSAPs and approximately 800 telecommunicators. Services provided by the operations group include equipment deployment and maintenance, network services, data base, MSAG, quality assurance, testing, training, PSAP support and GIS mapping to help locate wireless callers.

“Public safety has become the love of my life. I get to make a difference and contribute to the welfare of my community,” she says.

McCarley encourages others who are beginning their careers in public safety communications to get involved in APCO. “It’s one of the best investments you can make,” she says. What’s more, she says this is such an exciting time for the profession. “[APCO is] a great opportunity to dig in and make lasting contributions to the industry,” she says.

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Wanda McCarley

Communication Trends & Intelligence

inside the affected areas and activated amateur radio resources. Santa Clara County Office of Emergency Services Director Kirstin Hofmann says, “The biggest emergency from our perspective was access to the 9-1-1 system. We worked quickly to increase sheriff’s office and fire personnel in parts of the county and got information out to residents [via the media]. ... We called in our EOC section leaders.”

Temporary solutions: Initially, 9-1-1 calls from the cities were rerouted to the county comm center, which serves as the backup PSAP. Yinger says, “Even though [county communications] had thrown the switch, those calls were going nowhere. You got a fast busy.”

Early on, officials realized that analog landlines could actually call within each city’s own limits, allowing the public to access 9-1-1 via local seven-digit emergency numbers. So county and city officials began working with Verizon to reroute the 9-1-1 calls for each city to the cities’ seven-digit emergency lines. In the meantime, city and county dispatchers used radio to bridge the communications gap, relaying call information and dispatching units when necessary. Call rerouting was established by late morning.

According to Yinger, “The radio worked flawlessly.” Many agencies used the California Law Enforcement Mutual-Aid Radio System in the 150-MHz band to connect in the field.

Staffing: In Morgan Hill and Gilroy, key city and public safety personnel needed to be “knocked-in” for duty—staff members were contacted in person at their homes. But as the media picked up news of the outage, many communications personnel self-reported.

“I had two dispatchers on duty [initially]. One of the things that impressed me the most [was that] I had dispatchers that just showed up,” says Yinger. “Ironically, I didn’t have anything for them to do. They did do support roles and deliver messages to the EOC. I actually sent a couple of them home because they needed to work graveyard shift that night. ... I was very proud of my group.”

Private problem: The damaged cables

are privately owned infrastructure. According to Darnell and Santa Clara County Communications Director Bert Hildebrand, around 9 a.m. Verizon determined that the outage resulted from a fiber-optic cut to leased cables owned by AT&T, putting the agencies at the mercy of another outside provider.

Hofmann says, “At first it was tough, because was it Verizon or AT&T? It was very confusing trying to get the information. We had a contact for each company to ask for updates on repairs, service and who was impacted. We realized quickly that we needed to get [more] assistance to Morgan Hill and Gilroy.”

Additional radio support from the local amateur radio volunteers used both mutual-aid frequencies and their own. Ham operators were stationed at the cities’ EOCs to relay important information, as well as in the field with public safety personnel at critical locations.

Affected residents were told through media outlets to go to their nearest fire station, hospital or police department if they were experiencing an emergency. Other critical locations staffed with public safety resources and radio access were established at local shopping malls, community centers, near busy intersections, etc., providing increased visibility.

By noon, high-tech emergency communications vehicles were made available to the Morgan Hill and Gilroy EOCs. Cisco sent its Network Emergency Response Vehicle (NERV) to Morgan Hill, while the Red Cross sent its communications vehicle to Gilroy. Both vehicles established phone and Internet usage via satellite.

Yinger says, “The advantage of having the OES share [in the response] is that they have access to the more creative resources. Cisco actually contacted the county. ... NERV was a large van/semi, and they just backed it [up to] the police department and ran cables into the dispatch center. They used non-affected area codes from South Carolina [via satellite] to call out. It was so impressive.”

“We were fortunate the [vehicles were] close,” says Hofmann. “Our established

relationships and partnerships were critical [during this event].”

Public outreach: To avoid a panic, in the early hours of the event, Darnell contacted the local media to inform the public about the outage. “It was the only way to get information to the public,” says Darnell. “It was early enough, before the morning commute. I figured [we could minimize problems] if we could saturate [the public with the information], and the media fed on it. Every single station got involved.”

Other resources, such as the AMBER Alert system, could not be used to inform the public because the systems ultimately rely on the fiber-optic cable systems.

Not only did the media help spread the news of the incident, it also widely published the local seven-digit emergency numbers for the cities. Hofmann says, “The media can be really helpful when we need to get critical information out to people. In this case, TV was working. They became an incredible resource for us.”

In addition to media attention, the county and cities issued press releases, which were distributed by hand or sent home with school children. In Gilroy, officials also distributed public updates and announcements via its local radio station.

For residents in affected areas, the response went smoothly. Hildebrand says, “The public felt comfortable; they knew we were there.” Many local businesses and banks were closed for the day or went cash only. The county search-and-rescue teams were also activated and directed the public to the right people and EMS when necessary. And for Southern Santa Clara County’s high-risk populations, public safety worked with Social Services throughout the day, conducting checks on local seniors, and boarding and care facilities.

According to Morgan Hill OES Coordinator Jennifer Ponce, there has been no indication that residents who needed assistance did not receive it. “We didn’t hear of anyone who was unable to get information in,” she says.

"It was very successful."

Ynzunza says, "In a dispatch center, you hate to use the word 'quiet,' but it was pretty routine throughout that day. Actually, it was pretty slow. We had a few calls but it was mostly people asking why they couldn't use their [cell] phones."

Although initial estimates reported the outage could last for two days or more, AT&T had completed repairs on the fiber-optic cables, restoring the 9-1-1 system, by 8 p.m. that same day. The county EOC was deactivated around 11 p.m.

"I think that the public safety agencies all stepped up and meshed really well in a timely manner," says Darnell. "Everybody helped each other out, and people got creative. It was a superb effort."

Hofmann says, "We train for all hazards and all incidents. We have the communications backup in place and were prepared to use those. We test and train on our radios and satellite phone use regularly. ... This incident was a great way to use all those different backup communications systems."

"Emergencies happen," continues Hofmann. "They range from [outages] to pandemic influenza. They are very different situations, but we have the systems and plans in place to support them."

Lessons learned: Although agencies in Santa Clara County conducted a smooth response, officials are examining ways to improve the response to any similar future incident. Yinger describes the events as a "wake-up call." For her and many of the agencies and public safety officials involved, the outage raises serious questions about public safety's reliance on technology, the ability to contact key personnel and administrators and have the most updated information on hand, establishing relationships with private organizations and preparedness.

Ponce says, "We rely so much on technology for communications. ... It becomes important that we have a phone book [and resources] not only in our CAD system, but [also an updated] hard copy binder."

Ynzunza has already contacted Verizon and AT&T to develop better working relationships with Gilroy. "We

are looking to sit down [with the companies] to look at solutions for how we can work better as partners. They are very open."

Hofmann says it all boils down to preparedness. "I can't stress enough that emergencies happen," she says. "They can be anything, and people need to be prepared. Have supplies at home and backup plans for communications. Talk about it in school, at work and home. Learn where your closest police or fire station is. ... We have to go old school and think about how to communicate without [cell phones and pagers] and turning on the radio with a battery. A lot of people may not have done that before or know what radio station to tune to."

"I think [the outage] was handled really well. It was an incredible collaboration of a lot of different groups. Fire, law enforcement, we are overall very pleased."

~NATASHA YETMAN, Assistant Editor

INDUSTRY NEWS

Harris Corp. Buys Tyco's Wireless Systems Division

On April 16, Harris Corp. announced its acquisition of the Tyco Electronics Wireless Systems business (formerly known as M/A-COM) for \$675 million subject to post-closing agreement. Tyco Electronics Wireless Systems will be combined with the Harris RF Communications business segment. The transaction excludes the State of New York wireless network contract awarded to Tyco Electronics Wireless Systems in December 2004.

Wireless Systems is headquartered in Lowell, Mass., with product development and manufacturing facilities in Lynchburg, Va. It will operate as a business unit under the Harris RF Communications segment, which is headquartered in Rochester, N.Y. Chuck Dougherty will continue to serve as president of Wireless Systems and will report to Dana Mehnert, president of RF Communications.

~FYI: www.harris.com

Celebrating Telecommunicators in 2009



More than 300 attendees honored telecommunicators during CPRA's annual awards dinner.



Western-themed bulletin boards at the dispatcher appreciation awards banquet of the Organization of Public Safety Telecommunicators.

From April 12–18, public safety communications agencies all over the U.S. celebrated National Public Safety Telecommunications Week (NPSTW) by hosting awards banquets and other activities for their staffs. A few agencies shared their experiences and photos with us.

Northern California: The Organization of Public Safety Telecommunicators (OPST), based in the greater Sacramento region, hosted its 13th Annual Dispatcher Appreciation Awards Banquet April 11th to celebrate NPSTW. Comm centers in the counties of Placer, Sacramento, Yolo, El Dorado and Sutter participated in the Western-themed dinner. More than 370 public safety professionals, corporate sponsors and community members attended. And 24 individuals from 17 agencies were recognized during the event.

Char Wade, a retired dispatcher and 18-year veteran of the Sacramento Sheriff's Department, attended the event to support her family—her work family, John



The Volusia County Sheriff's Office NPSTW honorees and presenters: (top from left) Andy Kelly, District 1; Josh Wagner, District 2; At Large Vice Chair Joie Alexander; County Chair Frank Bruno Jr.; Jack Hayman, District 3; Pat Northey, District 5; (bottom from left) Sheriff Ben Johnson, Volusia County Sheriff's Office; Kimberly Barlow, Regional Communications Center; Gina Evans, Volusia County Sheriff's Office; Fred "Butch" Robidoux, Ponce Inlet Police Department; Chief Dave Faer, Communications Deltona Fire Department; Assistant Commander Debbie Smith, Volusia County Sheriff's Office; and Capt. Chico Mandzha, commander communications Volusia County Sheriff's Office.



Michelle Clerkin (second from left) receives Fairfax County DPSC Police Dispatcher of the Year Award from Director Steve Souder (far left), Acting Deputy Director Cyndi Bird-Shrout and Acting 9-1-1 Operations Division Chief Sally Fitzpatrick.



Steve McMurrer (right) receives the Fairfax County DPSC Calltaker of the Year Award.



Folsom PD Chief Sam Spiegel honored Jennie Her (Dispatcher of the Year), Sherri Furniss (Technical Services Manager) and Maria Always (Customer Service Award) during the banquet.



Angel Soria of Riverside PD (left) received CPRA's Dispatcher of the Year Award.



The Fairfax County DPSC honor guard (from left) Chris Frederick, Erik Daniel, Liza Nicholas and Leslie Schmitt presents colors during the awards ceremony.

Robinson and Becki Rodriguez who were recognized for outstanding duty. Tami Caldera, an eight-year veteran dispatcher with California Highway Patrol, discussed how the best part of her job is helping people. The ability to type fast, know when to be serious and learning to "not let things get to you" was a common theme expressed by those honored, including Jennifer Smith, a Sacramento PD dispatcher. Sharen Standish, with 21 years' experience as a dispatcher and supervisor from Elk Grove PD, appreciates that every day is different, that there's no "inbox or outbox" and that every day has its own unique challenges.

OPST President, Sandy Maraviov of the Citrus Heights PD was pleased to donate \$4,000 from the evening's silent auction proceeds to the Elk Grove Food Bank.

CPRA's Winners: On April 16, the California Public Safety Radio Association held its 21st Annual Telecommunicator Award Dinner at the Quiet Cannon Conference Center in Montebello, Calif.

Nearly 300 award winners, co-workers, and invited guests attended. The theme was Mardi Gras: The colorful table decorations helped brighten the atmosphere and the Leisure World Dixieland Jazz Band provided lively pre-dinner entertainment.

Chief Joseph Polisar of the Garden Grove PD presented a keynote address. Returning in his usual role of Master of Ceremonies was Robert Stoffel of Orange County Sheriff Communications. The Dispatcher of the Year Award was presented to Angel Soria of the Riverside PD. Supervisor of the Year was awarded to Eddie Pickett of the Los Angeles Fire Department. The Outstanding Performance by an Individual-Fire/EMS and Outstanding Performance by an Individual-Police/Sheriff went to Cassandra Gutierrez of Riverside Fire and Tavia Rodriguez of Riverside Sheriff respectively.

Florida: In Volusia County, Sheriff Ben Johnson and the Volusia County Council took time out to let telecommunicators know just how much their work is appreciated

and admired, during an annual ceremony before the County Council. Four telecommunicators were specifically honored during the event: Diane Davidson, Deltona Comm Center; Kimberly Barlow, Regional Public Safety Communications Center; Gina Evans, Volusia County Sheriff's Office; and Fred "Butch" Robidoux, Ponce Inlet Police Department.

Fairfax County, Va.: The Fairfax County (Va.) Department of Public Safety Communications prides itself on celebrating and embracing NPSTW. During its annual awards ceremony, Director Steve Souder and members of the agency's Board of Supervisors honored multiple telecommunicators including: Steve McMurrer, Calltaker of the Year; Ellen Pittman, Assistant Supervisor of the Year; Debbie Reubens, Fire Dispatcher of the Year; and Michelle Clerkin, Police Dispatcher of the Year. **||PSC||**

~**OLIVIA GASCA**, NAPCO, & **CHARLES TAYLOR**, CPRA; Special thanks to **DEBBIE SMITH & JOE BUI** for their contributions to this article.