



'Elevate the Position'

Alaska's Al Tamagni Fights for Professional Recognition for Dispatchers

 ~ BY COURTNEY McCAIN

In Alaska, where vast expanses have bred resilience in its residents, one communications officer is bringing people together in different venues. Al Tamagni, communications officer for the Anchorage Fire Department, manages a comm center that handles more than 40,000 annual responses in Anchorage and nearby Chugiak and Girdwood. Anchorage Fire covers nearly 2,000 square miles of territory that includes Cook Inlet and Chugach State Park. The state's burgeoning tourism industry adds regular visitors to the area's population of 350,000.



Al Tamagni

But that's his day job. This state's comparatively smaller population has led to a communications partnership: Alaska's APCO and NENA state chapters merged into a co-op in 2007. Tamagni says, "We operate jointly, but with individual boards. Membership is so small that several people held offices in both organizations."

Any statewide organization in Alaska faces distance-related issues that often transform meetings into teleconferences. "It made sense to pool our resources," he says.

Tamagni, a member of APCO since 1996, has held multiple offices with the Alaska APCO Chapter and currently is legislative co-chair.

"It has been a great resource for training, not only for myself, but for the dispatchers in the center," Tamagni says. Membership in Alaska APCO/NENA has also increased, thanks in part to the consolidation. Tamagni hopes it's a sign of things to come for the state's telecommunications industry and its dispatching profession.

"Elevate the position to where it should be recognized as a profession, and not a clerk's job," says Tamagni. "More times than not, dispatchers are lumped in with

other classifications that do nothing close to a dispatcher's job. It sends the wrong message for the job they really do."

A Nevada native, Tamagni grew up in Reno before his family moved to Anchorage. He attended college in Reno. He began his dispatching career in 1986 with the University of Reno PD, shortly after graduating from high school. He also worked for the Reno PD before returning to Alaska to dispatch for the Alaska State Troopers. In 1994, he began dispatching for Anchorage Fire, where he rose through the ranks to his current post.

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In the center: A minimum of three line personnel staff Anchorage Fire's call center, with callback plans in place if a high-volume incident occurs. The most recent involved the March 2009 reawakening of Mt. Redoubt, a volcano approximately 100 miles southwest of Anchorage and close enough to affect the city.

Anchorage Fire has protocols in place for threats specific to its seismically active region, including earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic ash emergencies. Tamagni responded to the comm center shortly after Mt. Redoubt's first blast, anticipating the usual glut of respiratory distress calls and media inquiries. But this time, prevailing winds carried the ash to a largely unpopulated area, sparing Anchorage.

"We did have some calls from people with anxiety," says Tamagni. "But we didn't really have a spike in call activity. When [an

eruption] happens the first time, there's a big to-do. Then it happens a second time and third time. ... It may be big somewhere, but it's not as big here."

Tamagni and personnel throughout the Anchorage area are bracing for what will likely be a months-long series of volcanic ash alerts. Each time Mt. Redoubt clears its throat, air traffic must be redirected away from the engine-clogging ash. That also affects air medical transports and local Coast Guard helicopters.

In spite of the state's vast distances, Alaska's network of microwave communications has aided the Alaska Land Mobile Radio Program (a P-25 program), a cooperative partnership between local, state and federal agencies to establish and operate a trunked radio system across the state. Alaska's vastness and tough terrain have made fiber-optic technology unfeasible, so much of the state uses a "good microwave system," Tamagni says.

Of the Alaska APCO/NENA Chapter's future goals, Tamagni says, "We want to legislate dispatch standards for the entire state," in addition to hosting the 2012 Western Regional Conference, which will be held in Anchorage. Tamagni hopes the chapter (and communications networks) will have removed logistical roadblocks to those new standards.

Off duty: Tamagni's longtime interest in child advocacy issues has led him to be very involved with education. Tamagni says, "I am a firm believer that we have to help change the system so our kids get a better education. And we need to make sure parents feel they can get involved and not get pushed away." ||PSC||

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