

9-1-1 What happens when a call comes in?

The computer screen at the Monroe County-Rochester 9-1-1 Center looks like any other computer screen, but the screen images list possible serious consequences as they identify time, location and indication of a fire or fire potential. The messages trip a system of responses, some automatic, others requiring a review of the protocol system, which provides a to-do list of actions.

- 5:41 p.m. There's a house fire in the city.
 5:41 p.m. Correction. That's a garage fire. Send an extra fire engine and protectives. (Protectives are the only volunteer firefighters in the City of Rochester. They are sent to protect and salvage property, an automatic action if at least two phone calls are made to 9-1-1 reporting a fire).
 5:45 p.m. We are on location. (Rochester firefighters are on the scene in an average of four minutes after receiving a call).
 5:46 p.m. The porch roof is on fire, not the house.
 5:47 p.m. An automatic fire alarm has been activated in the city.
 5:56 p.m. There's burnt food on the stove; we are airing out the apartment.
 5:52 p.m. There's the smell of natural gas in an apartment in the city (This message was also given, by phone, to RG&E). Send a fire engine.
 6:01 p.m. See end of article.

by Photographer Walter Horylev, on the scene at 9-1-1.

It was fascinating to watch the flow of information as responders and dispatchers interacted, like a TV drama with talk but no human figures on the computer screen. And so it goes, around the clock, at the 9-1-1 Center on West Main Street in Rochester. The recent recipient of the E 9-1-1 Institute's Outstanding Call Center award for 2007 in Washington, D.C. March 13, the center was recognized for being a leader in technology implementation and national model for inter-governmental operations and cooperation. Under a unique agreement between Monroe County and the City of Rochester, the 9-1-1 Center provides dispatching services for 16 police departments, 45 fire departments, and 32 emergency medical services agencies throughout Monroe County. The 9-1-1 Center is located in a building owned and maintained by the city. Monroe County covers the operating costs as well as provides all the radio, telephone, and computer equipment for the center.

In 2006, the 9-1-1 Center received 1,147,294 calls and processed 1,206,530 CAD (Computer-Aided Dispatch) events for the agencies it services.



Greg Wing, former chief of the Brockport Fire Department, sits at a terminal in the County Pod. The County Pod personnel are responsible for communication with the Monroe County sheriffs and the police departments in Ogden, Brockport, East Rochester, Fairport, Brighton, Irondequoit, Webster, Gates and Greece. (A number of active fire department persons work at the 9-1-1 message center).

Inside, there's a tremendous amount of activity using phone lines and computer terminals located behind office dividers in function-separated pods in one large room, surrounding a circular pod where supervisors perform their duties. It's relatively quiet, considering the number of pods and people and the urgent messages to which they react, but the employees are trained to keep a situation calm as they go about helping people with a never-ending list of danger to life and property concerns.

Christopher R. Martin, EMT, A-EMD and Public Safety Dispatcher, and also the Public Information Officer for the Brockport Fire Department, was the guide the day of this tour of the 11 year-old 9-1-1 center. The 9-1-1 system in Rochester actually dates from 1984. Since the service is vital for the liaison between needs and providers, backups to the system are essential. "There are multiple redundant systems in place to provide power to the center in the event of a localized power outage, and generator systems that will power up in the event of a widespread area outage such as the NorthEast Power Outage we all witnessed a couple of years ago," Martin said. 9-1-1 did not lose power nor did the center have to reduce services during that outage.

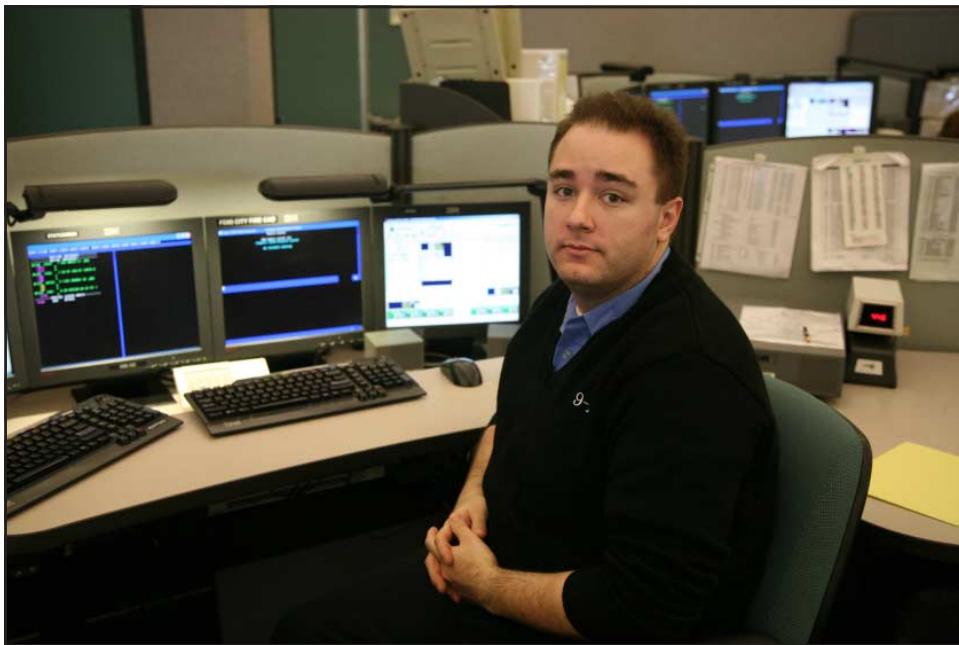
The message board on the wall plays a key roll for all the dispatchers. The top level has to do with response time by the Rochester Police. The policed area in Rochester is split in two by the Genesee River, one set of response teams covers the northwest and southwest, the others cover the northeast and southeast. The numbers indicate the wait time to respond to a caller. On this tour day, the times indicated on the board are zero, indicating police are ready to respond ASAP.

There are instances when the wait times are longer. While that may be true for an incident for which a caller is not at risk, a priority is given when the caller is at risk and police are dispatched to that location ASAP.

The second set of numbers refers to a constantly updated review of incoming calls and responses, giving a quick overview of the level of activity going on in the message center. The bottom board shows the total number of calls in process, the wait (or queue) time, calls that are ringing and waiting to be picked up, calls that are being answered with an operator on the phone, and a hold situation, which rarely occurs.



The message board gives a quick overview of the level of activity going on in the message center. The top area deals with police response time and bottom area deals with the status of incoming calls and response, all these functions are controlled and tallied via computers. Chris Martin said, "Operators are frequently rotated for cross-training purposes." The telecommunicators stay in their area but rotate break schedules and stations. There are four telecommunicator pods with a total of 15 stations.

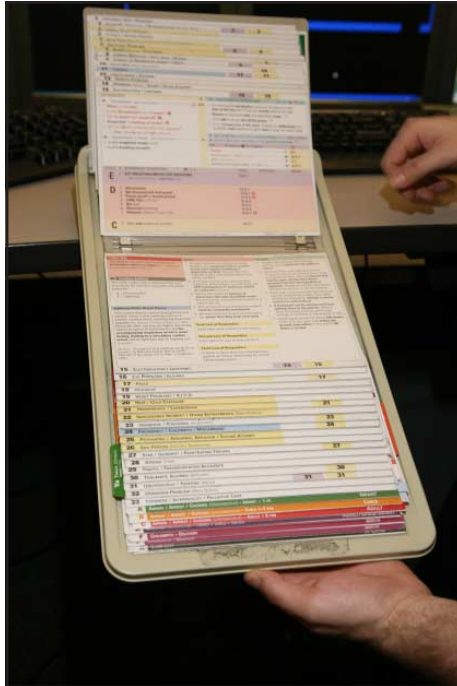


Public Safety Dispatcher 2 **Charles Vitale** takes a momentary break from his computer screen. Vitale explained how he does his job. He indicated the computer screen generally lists the caller's phone number, name and address, which is verified. If a personal injury is indicated, Charles searches his "Bible," the EMD Nationwide Protocol card, which asks a series of questions, to which the operator follows a script to determine what the appropriate response should be. In addition, Pictometry-generated overhead pictures can provide insight as to what responders might encounter on-site. This center was one of the first in the country to use Pictometry technology for tracking wireless telephone calls.

When he is called upon to handle a situation which requires fire or police help, Public Safety Dispatcher Level 2 Charles Vitale follows his training rules and uses common sense in his response. "My priority is life before property!" he said. The screen shows the recommendations for dispatchers, especially for sending the appropriate fire department, based on proximity to the fire, traffic lights and the traffic patterns existing at the time. The Police Department may be asked to send two units, depending on the circumstance.

Once a request for service is received, the screen lists which vehicles are enroute. If additional help is needed, the responders will ask the dispatcher to provide it. Termination occurs when the responder says: "We are back in service."

The action captured on the computer screen generates its own excitement giving a "blow-by-blow" recital of what is happening. "We used lots and lots of paper before computers entered the scene," Vitale said. He enjoys working the 4 p.m. to midnight platoon because there usually is a lot happening and it gives him a lot of job satisfaction to be of help.



The EMD Nationwide Protocol card set sits very close to the operator, allowing him/her to react quickly to personal injury situations.

STATS

- There are 176 city employees at the 9-1-1 Center and three county workers.
- Three platoons of staff cover round the clock -- shifts run from midnight to 8 a.m.; 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 4 p.m. to midnight.
- Two or three people supervise each platoon.

The third platoon utilizes 11 police dispatchers, four fire and EMS dispatchers and 12 telecommunicators.

- About 50 percent of the calls for service come in between 4 p.m. and midnight so there are fewer telecommunicators on the other two platoons than on the third.

TRAINING

There are three training stages for personnel, according to Chris Martin: Telecommunicators spend one month in the classroom and undergo three months of on-the-job training before they answer their first phone call for help on their own.

Dispatchers Level 1, Police and Fire, spend another month in class and have three months of on-the-job training in addition to the Telecommunications training.

Dispatchers Level 2 get another month of training in the classroom and three months of on-the-job training after they have had at least two years experience at Level 1. After spending at least two years as a Dispatcher Level 2, a person could start training to be an acting supervisor.

To get back to the natural gas incident noted on page one of this article:

6:01 p.m. The pilot light was out on the stove. We have aired out the apartment and relit the pilot light.

All's well that ends well.

Photo essay by Walter Horylev

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