Images
How do others see you? A city councilman paid his first visit to the city’s 911 center and what did he see? Most of the dispatchers stopped what they were doing and gawked at the visitor.

The room was eerily quiet, as headsets were in use. Voices were subdued. There was no apparent urgency, nothing stressful was occurring, and the workers gawked.

The councilman left with the erroneous impression that the city’s nerve center was overstaffed, and the people overpaid. They had nothing better to do than watch him.

I recall one comm center manager, years ago, who handled visitors differently. His dispatchers were told what to do during visits: pick up the phone, talk to someone, another dispatcher, another position, to no one, but look busy. Don’t look at the visitors unless they are introduced.

Ah, you might say, but that’s dishonest. Actually, I would say, it is not. Your visitor is forming a lasting opinion of your worth, and won’t be there at six in the evening when your workload peaks, or just after midnight when all hell breaks loose.

It is likely that your visitors won’t be present when you get one of those life-or-death calls: a robbery in progress, a shooting, a medical emergency, a fire in an occupied dwelling. We hope these don’t happen often, and they probably never happen when someone is watching. And I can guarantee you will never have a visitor in the Center when one of your responders is injured, or killed.

First impressions are lasting impressions. Consider your image.

Backup Meds
Some dispatchers take prescribed medication. I’m talking about the sort of things they have to take and can’t get along without. They often carry enough with them for the day or the shift, or perhaps even a double shift.

But what if the double shift becomes several days? What if they cannot go home at the end of the day? What if home isn’t there any more?

With the disasters this country has endured in our recent memory, we need to plan ahead. Suppose your meds were running low and you intended to call the pharmacy the next day or two, and some catastrophe occurred. What would you do? Plan ahead.

(I have a 30-day supply of all my wife’s meds in a locked box. I’m not taking any chances!)

Backup Radios
I can’t begin to tell you the number of agencies that I’ve visited where they have one central radio dispatching system on one tower. Any idea what happens when that tower falls over, or the system becomes inoperable?

Some centers have one or more portable radios, just in case. Some have battery-powered radios in the center, similar to what is in each vehicle. These are good ideas.

At the remote radio or tower sites, some agencies have duplicate or redundant systems. If they need one base station or repeater, they have two, just in case.

If you absolutely positively have to have a particular radio to operate, you better have at least two ways to reach it, and redundancy at the site.

Backup Generator
I haven’t seen any surveys on the subject, but it seems that most dispatch centers have a backup generator. Mildred, on the East Coast, tells me that they have a generator, but it’s none of her business. “Public Works is in charge of it. We don’t have any control over it.” True, but.

Do you know if or when the generator runs, for real or exercise? You should. Do you know when your equipment is operating off the generator? You should. How assured are you that the generator will start if the primary power fails? What will you do if it doesn’t? Do you have a Plan B?

County and state radio systems often have remote stations (some call them towers). These remote sites typically have an emergency generator. The fuel supply may be adequate for a few days.

Mildred claims that there is an indicator light that tells when the remote generator is running, but the light is in the radio shop, seen only by technicians. Unfortunately, if there’s a power failure on Friday evening, no one may see the “trouble” light until the generator runs out of fuel.

There are ways to solve these problems. While dispatchers don’t need another chore, they are usually the only ones who are always available. Yes, that’s how a lot of innocuous but numerous tasks end up with the dispatcher. Even so, keeping the radio system operating should be a welcome task.

Backup Computer
Is there a standard computer configuration? Probably not. And while most comm centers seem to have redundancy, many do not.

A common configuration is a distributed processing mode, with individual PC’s at workstations, all interconnected with servers. I used the plural form of servers, knowing that some distributed

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systems have a single server because that’s all they could afford.

Redundancy is nearly always linked to what you can afford, or what your fiscal managers will allow you. The folks paying your bills may disagree, but I can say (from my patented Code 3 Swivel Chair) that you should have no single point of failure. If any one component can take down your system, it should have a backup.

Some agencies have multiple feeds for their electricity, natural gas, and telephone lines. That is, electric power comes from two or more power substations; gas the same; telephone trunks from two central offices. Many telephone exchange offices have at least two emergency generators. It is why many dispatch centers operate directly from their UPS. And why computer systems are redundant, or should be.

“But,” said my friend on the East Coast, “we have 99% uptime.” Can you hear me laughing? One-percent downtime represents 3.65 days. Can you afford to be down that long?

The Crash
It is not amusing to have your CAD computer crash. When it happens, you need to have some way to know who is who and what is what. How else can you operate?

Who was in service, who was out of service, where, why, and for how long? You also need to know who was talking on the phone if you lost the call, and which calls have or have not been handled. You need to know the status of everything.

Many of the modern systems provide for these types of crashes. Does yours?

Backup Records
In the spirit of homeland security, I would ask where you keep your computer archives, and what would you do if you lost them? (You do have archives, right?)

Many comm center managers believe their “hardened” facilities are designed to withstand the typical disaster. As such, their computer archives are stored next to the computer.

If your computer was destroyed in a fire or other event, what then? How long would it take to rebuild your geographic files and all those others that make your system work? The prospect is daunting.

Yes, you can carry it further. With reel-to-reel logging recorders, it was not practical to duplicate tapes. Today, many recorders have the capability of shipping files to off-site locations, or ship a variety of stored media to other locations.

Identify what you have, what you can’t live without, and plan for backups. Or if you feel you don’t need any of that stuff, why are you collecting it in the first place? (Yes, I know, “There’s a law.”)

Homeland Security
Perhaps you’ve conducted your own survey. What is important to do? What do you absolutely need to operate? What, if it failed, would put you out of business? What single component, if it failed, would take down your system?

Have you considered what I know or can easily find out about your emergency dispatch system? Can I get into your building, and into your equipment rooms? Can I shut off your generator so it won’t start if there’s a power failure? Is your tower accessible so I can disable it or bring it down?

There are so many “things” to think of and consider. Many have financial considerations (they cost money). Some agencies have put together teams of people to look at all these issues. Some have not. I think you should.

Questions
What topics would you like discussed here? E-mail suggestions, comments and questions to burton@alanburton.us. Tell us if you want your name used.

OMJJC POP-UP WIRELESS UN-DAUNTED BY ROCKY MOUNTAINS

The OMJC Pop-Up Wireless began a 5 month deployment in early Sept. ‘04 in Mesa Verde National Park in the remote Four Corners region of Colorado. Overcoming a 1/2 mile range with severe elevation obstructions, rugged terrain, no electric power, and fantastic scenery, the OMJC Pop-Up Wireless continues to work flawlessly. The Pop-Up is NEMA TS-1 equipped, solar powered and vehicle actuated. Both signal and solar masts are hydraulically deployed. Let us build a set of Wireless Pop-Ups for you today!

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