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# EMERGENCY RADIO

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‘LIFELINE’ TO THE RESPONDERS

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## Lifeline to the Responders

# EMERGENCY RADIO

*A police scanner transmits quietly in a café in Anytown America. The Dispatcher's voice comes across the air in a calm drone; Officers answer in codes and short spurts. Unheard on the scanner, a 9-1-1 call comes into the Comm Center. "My mommy is dead and my daddy is dying." Responding Officers, medical units and sirens lend a strange tension to the air. In the child's house is a police scanner; the echo can be heard with each transmission.*

Emergency radio is fascinating to listen to with its mysterious language of its own. Probably the most complex and highly skilled part of the Telecommunicators job is the radio. Police radio, fire communications, or EMS dispatching requires a very high level of knowledge, skill, expertise and training.

In many large agencies, Telecommunicators are carefully screened and trained on the phones for up to one year before they are considered for the radio. Some fire departments offer dispatch as an advancement opportunity with higher pay. In smaller police and fire departments, the Telecommunicator handles phones, the public, paperwork and the radio, with the radio generally a high priority.

Nothing can make a Police Officer, Firefighter, or Paramedic's shift easier to handle than having a good Dispatcher on the radio. There is a lot of attention given to evaluating the merits and attributes of *whoever* is on the radio. It isn't only on the street where the caliber of a Dispatcher shows through. The Comm Center can be chaos or harmony depending upon the skills of the person working the radio. What makes the difference? What qualities does a person have to have to become skillful on the emergency radio? Let's look at this complex work!

**PROBABLY THE MOST  
COMPLEX AND HIGHLY  
SKILLED PART OF THE  
TELECOMMUNICATORS  
JOB IS THE RADIO.**

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## THE EMERGENCY RADIO

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In the old days (let's say twenty years ago), a radio Dispatcher would listen to requests from the field units and dispatch calls from a desk microphone. There was no headset, no computer or even a foot pedal. Generally the Dispatcher was also the Clerk or Jail Matron. The Dispatcher carried additional activities when the radio was quiet. She could move about the room and file reports or answer the front counter. There are still agencies in the United States and Canada that operate in this fashion.

As the cities became larger and the number of field units increased, so did the demands upon the radio. Now, instead of handling phones, radio, and counter work, one person can be assigned to radio exclusively — handling up to four

areas or even fifty responders. Dispatchers control the assignments of requests for public safety response, prioritize and assign units, as well as track units' activities. Some agencies have named the radio Dispatcher "Control." *"King One to Control."*

Currently there are many different emergency radio configurations in use throughout the United States and Canada — in fact globally. Even within a state, one county could have an assortment. There may be one-person offices dispatching police, fire, and medical; or a large PSAP with Call Takers and Dispatcher functions separate.

A radio Dispatcher in Los Angeles will have a variety of frequencies, field units, districts, and codes to work with. He may have touch screen frequency selection and a sophisticated CAD system. This Dispatcher may not answer a phone unless it's an Officer or a command unit. He may dispatch police, sheriff, medics or the fire department.

A Dispatcher in a small town in Montana could possibly have two units, three to five phone lines, the front counter, jail duties, cases to type and file, and a variety of other duties. This person may handle radio for the public works or animal control. He may only work from the old desktop mic or have a state-of-the-art console.

Do the dispatch skills for both have any commonality? The LA Dispatcher may put out 150 calls a shift while the Montana Dispatcher will only handle five. The LA Dispatcher may not have to pick up a phone and has CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch). The Montana Dispatcher may have had five dispatchable calls, 30 phone calls, and 3 people at the counter at the same time, and an Officer wanting to check all states for DOL. Both utilize methods that ensure Officer safety, multiple tasking, split ear skills, and knowledge of resources. Working the radio takes skill no matter what the size or configuration of the department.

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**WORKING THE  
RADIO TAKES SKILL NO  
MATTER WHAT THE SIZE  
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THE DEPARTMENT.**

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## DEVELOPING RADIO TECHNIQUES

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Most agencies start trainees on the phone and “graduate” to radio. Beginners initially are instructed about the steps and methods of gathering information on calls, both emergency and non-emergency. Many times trainees do not understand the full concept of the Call Taker position and requirements until they are introduced to the radio or dispatching end of the job. For example, they may not fully understand the significance of asking if the suspect is still on location, or approximately how many people are involved in a party until they have to send an Officer to that location. Now the task takes on meaning. It only takes a few times of playing Officer “twenty questions” before the trainee becomes more thorough on the phones.

### *Knowledge needed*

- Maps, areas, zones, beats
- Unit designations and specific Officer responsibilities
- Incident cards, status cards, report forms or CAD system
- Codes, expressions, terminology, phrases, jargon
- Procedures and polices
  - Non-emergency requests
  - In-progress or critical calls
  - Responder safety
  - Mutual aid, call in, call back
  - Disaster drills
  - Fire Zones
- Incident Command

Each of these areas is described in depth below.

### MAPS, AREAS, ZONES, AND BEATS

In order to work on the emergency radio, the Dispatcher must learn their geographical area. In a small city the learning process is uncomplicated: learn the boundaries, the surrounding jurisdictions, and all the streets and hundred-blocks in your area. In addition to a simple map, a Dispatcher may participate in a

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**THE DISPATCHER  
MUST LEARN THEIR  
GEOGRAPHICAL AREA**

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**ZONES AND BEATS  
ARE GEOGRAPHICAL  
AREAS WITHIN A CITY  
OR COUNTY.**

ride-along to see the actual locations and boundaries. In a large agency, the instruction may take weeks, dividing the city into zones or beats and breaking each down into sectors or zones.

Zones and beats are geographical areas within a city or county. Beats generally refer to police areas whereas zones are fire or EMS areas. Computer aided dispatch offers the Dispatcher location information; however, it is essential the Dispatcher have an actual working visual of the area. Computers go down, computers make mistakes, computers sometimes cannot make decisions as fast as needed.

When units are busy, the Dispatcher must be keenly aware of each unit's availability to respond to a call (status). The Dispatcher must know when the area car is busy with a DUI since that Officer cannot leave the prisoner until they are booked. If the area unit is in the station, dispatch must know which nearby Officer is available and for what type of call.

Now with the situation with wireless callers coming in from other jurisdictions agencies must provide complete training on surrounding areas, jurisdictions and provide a complete list of emergency number contacts for all other contiguous or proximate public safety responders.

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## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FIRE, EMS AND POLICE RADIO

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Police patrol units sign on at the beginning of their shift and the individual movements are tracked throughout the shift. They require constant attention and occasionally go out at the station for a variety of reasons. Fire and EMS units rarely go out, and generally remain in the station until toned out by dispatch.

A unit always responds to a fire or EMS call — a call is never HELD. A strong mutual aid pact between fire and EMS agencies and/or cities creates a response network. If the entire area is deluged with calls, the units may be coming from a distance; but there is usually some fire or EMS unit to respond. There is also a 'layered' response, which means some type of unit will respond to cover, even if it's a fire pumper to an aid call. Police reports can be held and calling in another city to assist with police overload is rare (but done).

For fire or EMS a response card, or run card, is pulled manually or by the computer to indicate the units to a particular call. The information needed to determine which units to send are the location and type of call. (The classifications of calls are listed under Fire and Medical dispatch.) Police are dispatched by BEAT, although the concept is the same for priority and call type determining the level of response. For example, a domestic will always require two Officers at least to respond.

### UNIT IDENTIFIERS

Unit identifiers vary greatly from city to city, state to state for police, fire and EMS. A unit's assignment number usually breaks down into information that tells the Dispatcher something about the unit. Once the Dispatcher understands the system it isn't difficult to memorize beat assignments or recognize the unit calling. In other words, the unit's number or "name" makes sense — or should.

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**A UNIT ALWAYS  
RESPONDS TO A FIRE  
OR EMS CALL —  
A CALL IS NEVER HELD.**

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Example: 1B1=

1 (Dayshift)

B (Bayshore)

1 (Zone One)

Engine 521=

Engine (type of unit)

5 (City number)

2 (Station number)

1 (#1 Engine)

Ambulance 21

Either a sequence or station

**DISPATCH IS  
RESPONSIBLE  
FOR TIMES.**

Listen to the radio and identify units calling by their numbers. You should learn to relate the unit assignment number to who they are and what they do, as well as where they are working.

#### **PAPERWORK**

All calls for public safety responses have *incident cards*, *call cards*, *event cards*, or whatever else they may be called. This refers to the card (either manual or computerized) that lists the particulars of a call. The address, caller's name, caller's callback number, specifics on the incident, and descriptions are listed on this card by the Call Taker. These are not to be confused with Fire Run Cards — which are areas to send — not call cards.

*Status cards* are the name given to the running catalog of an Officer or unit's activities during a shift. In police communications, an individual Officer might be tracked, whereas in fire or EMS, the Unit's activity might be tracked, regardless of who staffed the vehicle. Dispatch is responsible for times. Become very comfortable working with this card, possibly logging information as it comes in while monitoring a radio.

*Report forms*, again, are not standardized from department to department. Neither are the policies on taking reports. City A may have Officers take phone reports, while City B has Call Takers assigned to that duty. Some common types of forms used are listed in the record keeping and report writing section of the manual.

### COMPUTER AIDED DISPATCH

CAD systems make the dispatch job easier. To use CAD to the fullest new hires must be proficient in keyboarding and knowledgeable and skilled at working through the CAD screen. Many agencies have the trainee work the computer during slow times while the Trainer is dispatching. When the radio traffic is heavy, computer entry should be second nature or the Dispatcher can get behind quickly.

### RADIO TALK

Probably the best way to learn radio talk is to *listen*. Students who come to the job as scanner buffs always have an easier time picking up dispatching. Radio talk is so rapid between field unit and the Dispatcher that the beginner has little chance of understanding what is being said. It is important to allow simulation training, since radio work is very complex and demanding. Generally the basic skills needed are clarity and brevity.

### CLARITY (SAY WHAT?)

The message must be clear to *the receiver*. One mistaken word can change the entire meaning. Certain phrases are mutually understood in dispatch-to-field communications. They carry a certain weight in certain situations; i.e., “Illegal discharge” means someone may be target shooting. “Shots fired” means that the target is human. “Now out” has a particular meaning for Fire Responders.

“Help” on the police radio does *not* mean assistance. It means an Officer is in danger. Use the word “help” only when given to you as such. This is not the same in all areas, and often is not the same in Fire and EMS. Know your terms, and especially know what help is no matter how it is said. Find out if there is an emergency traffic signal, or any codes that may be needed for privacy.

### BREVITY (ENOUGH ALREADY)

It is essential to limit airtime. Brevity creates an atmosphere of professionalism and discipline. The air is the link between the Officer and assistance; the citizen needing help and the source of the help. When the radio traffic is slow, it's easy to relax radio discipline. However, just like any other organized effort, when things are happening fast, using discipline helps things operate smoothly.

Brevity means that when you can say something in five words don't say it in twenty! This is a difficult skill to master without losing content. It takes an experienced communicator to condense information and not lose any necessary content. Again, listening to the radio is a great way to learn *how* things are said in a concise manner.

**BREVITY MEANS  
THAT WHEN YOU  
CAN SAY SOMETHING  
IN FIVE WORDS DON'T  
SAY IT IN TWENTY!**

**Examples:**

*“Adam 12, regarding the theft report you took earlier at 2300 hours could you call the victim by phone and speak to her about some additional items missing from her basement.” [How many words?]*

-or-

*“Adam 12, reference theft case #5600, re-contact the victim by phone.” [Now how many? Any part of the message missing?]*

*“Aid 10, the patient on this call is a 25-year-old woman who states she is having severe stomach pain just below the waist for the last two hours. She stated she has been vomiting and there are traces of blood in the vomit. She has never had any history of this type of medical problem in the past and takes no medication for any type of illness. She is laying down at this time.” [How many words?]*

-or-

*“Aid 10, 25-year-old female, severe abdominal pain for 2 hours, traces of blood in the vomit, no history or meds.” [Now how many? Any part of the message missing?]*

Police units can be switched to Tac frequency for car-to-car or lengthy transmissions. Fire and EMS units are often switched to Tac frequency for large-scale events or other conversation.

**THE MESSAGE  
MUST BE CLEAR  
TO THE RECEIVER.**

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## COMMON RADIO TECHNIQUES

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In past years, agencies procedures were only recorded in the memories of the Dispatchers. Passed on from generation to generation, there was a lot of room for misinterpretation. Clearly written and well-defined policies and procedures are necessary for the proper management of any agency. Most agencies now have procedures and those procedures guide the Dispatchers for the safety of the responders. There are commonly accepted guidelines for designing effective radio procedures.

### *Radio Procedures*

Although radio procedures may vary between agencies, there are standard proven methods that could be used to ensure Officer safety and the proper communication of needed information. When implemented, these basic guidelines will enhance any agency's ability to relay vital information to the field units. Officers, Firefighters, and EMS personnel cannot be effective when responding to a call without all the facts available. If realistic procedures are in place for dispatch to follow, the efficiency of the entire team will increase.

Procedures are written in any agency or company for the purpose of making sure the worker completes the tasks as the employer intended. Procedures are good for the employee as they clearly define what is expected — what needs to be done.

The responding units will mentally prepare to receive information and it helps them to receive the information in the same organized format every time. The exact method may vary: address first, or call type first. It doesn't matter what is first as long as it is *always* first. Imagine the noise and confusion of responding from a fire station. It would be important to know what to expect from dispatch and assign someone to listen and record from the responding company.

### SAMPLE POLICE PROCEDURE:

#### Dispatching Units — Routine Call

Dispatch shall: 1) Call the unit number, and 2) state the purpose of contact on all routine dispatches.

*"Sam three, theft report."*

Upon receipt of unit acknowledgement, dispatch shall: 1) repeat the call type 2) state address information 3) give the contact person's name.

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**IT DOESN'T MATTER  
WHAT IS FIRST AS  
LONG AS IT IS  
ALWAYS FIRST.**

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