BY
Bonnie Maney, Enterprise Client Manager, Mission Critical Partners

Maintaining ECC Operations Remotely During a Public Health Crisis

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED THE WAY MANY ORGANIZATIONS OPERATE, AND THE PUBLIC SAFETY EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTERS (ECCS) HAVE NOT BEEN IMMUNE TO ITS IMPACT.

After all, emergencies do not stop because a crisis exists. While agencies may have basic evacuation or continuity-of-operations plans (COOPs) in place, it is unlikely that they cover a public health crisis as unprecedented and serious as what is occurring. So, in the essential business of emergency response, how does an agency protect its staff members while continuing to serve its field responders and community effectively?

For many agencies, the creative use of technology has enabled them to maintain communications operations—both on-site and remotely. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are options. As some areas of the world begin to slowly return to a new normal, now is the time to revise COOPs and prepare for the future—pandemic or otherwise—including the ability to move to remote operations with little to no service interruption.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REMOTE OPERATIONS

The decision to move operations to a remote environment is not one that is made lightly. Beyond the policy and technological considerations, staff members need to be properly equipped to execute their core job functions. This means ensuring that they have access to necessary computer systems and call-handling equipment (CHE)—hardware and software—voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or private branch exchange (PBX) phones. It also means ensuring that staff members have adequate access to the mission-critical data and systems that support their work, as well as a secure, reliable network connection on which to conduct it.

Where remote work takes place is also important for agencies to understand. For some, it means creating additional separation for staff by leveraging conference rooms, empty offices, and other spaces within the building that may lack a hardwired connection to call-taking and dispatch systems. For others, it may mean moving some staff into a mobile command center or setting up operations in an entirely new building, such as a school or a hotel. It may even mean providing the appropriate methods and technology to enable call-takers, dispatchers, and other staff members to work from home.

There is no single solution. Public safety leaders and ECC managers, in conjunction with technology vendors, must work together to understand the limitations of existing technologies and develop a customized solution to mobilize staff members.

GOING REMOTE IN PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA

During the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, the Palm Beach County, Florida, director of 911 program services, Chuck Spalding, reached out to technology vendor Intrado to develop a solution that would enable call-takers to work remotely.

"I contacted Intrado and told them what I wanted," Spalding said. "Within two weeks, I had a solution, and we've had ECCs using the go bags to support their operations since."

Staff at the county's 14 emergency ECCs with the ability to work remotely were provided with 911 "go bags." These backpacks included a laptop, along with other necessary hardware and software, to support call-taking activities remotely. The bags also contained a mobile hotspot router that connects to the First Responder Network Authority's (FirstNet) nationwide public safety broadband network (NPSBN) to provide priority service for answering emergency calls.

For the ECCs in Palm Beach County, the bags allowed operations to continue seamlessly and gave managers the ability to make the decisions that best protect the health and safety of their staff members.

"Management teams have realized that they can be wireless and still operate successfully," said Dan Koenig, Palm Beach County's 911 planning coordinator.

> *Managers have the flexibility to move staff members where they feel most comfortable. Some are allowing call-takers to work from home. Others are spreading staff members out within the building, into unused offices or conference rooms, to better adhere to social-distancing guidelines. The laptops give them the ability to do what's best for their staff members.*

The call-taking technology and hardware provided in the go bags also enabled the ECC in Riviera Beach, Florida, to move all staff members to a remote location—the city's public library—enabling them to spread out physically while still managing their call loads effectively. "Public safety is all about planning," Spalding said.

> *We write and develop plans and prepare for scenarios that could affect operations. These go bags are just another tool in the toolbox that enables managers to make the best decisions for their teams in a crisis.*

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY FOR REMOTE OPERATIONS IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

In Alexandria, Virginia, which is home to nearly 160,000 residents, staff members and operations are deployed in four types of locations, including the primary and backup ECCs, as well as homes and a local hotel.

Supported by FirstNet's NPSBN, the city's remote staff is equipped with laptops, phones for call-taking, and push-to-talk devices with talkgroups set up to allow call-takers to communicate in a way that mimics an ECC's call floor. Remote dispatchers have the full functionality of the center at their fingertips, including access to computer-aided dispatch (CAD) workstations, in addition to RapidSOS and Smart911 technologies that provide location and other pertinent data about emergency callers.

"We had a lot of the equipment on hand," said Jeff Wobbleton, Alexandria's 911/311 information technology and human resources assistant director. "It had all been tested but not used in real-world situations. We knew now was the time to leverage it, so that's where we started."

With the support of Alexandria City Manager Mark Jinks, the Department of Emergency and Customer Communications (DECC) began the process of splitting shifts between the primary ECC and the backup facility. When officials realized they needed to separate staff even more to maintain social distancing guidelines, they made the decision to deploy some staff members to work from home. A fourth team was deployed to a local hotel, where they worked in an isolated environment for 10-day periods.

"Our primary concern was always protecting our staff members," Wobbleton said.

> *We also needed to make sure that we had plenty of resiliency built into our plan for navigating this crisis to allow us to maintain operations without much interruption so that we could continue serving the community. We worked as a team to develop the solutions that would allow us to do both, and we've been very successful in that.*

After a month of testing remote capabilities and functionality with non-emergency calls, the city's remote workforce began accepting emergency calls in early April. Alexandria's call-takers and dispatchers can continue to work 12-hour shifts and meet the call demand of the community from their remote locations.

"What we've learned through this process is that nothing is impossible," said Bob Bloom, Alexandria's public safety systems administrator. "When you're doing something no one else is doing, there is no playbook. You come up with a plan and you test it. And then you test it again, and, hopefully, when you go live, you're successful."

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

In a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, public safety and law enforcement agencies may be forced to evacuate all or part of an ECC to protect the health and safety of staff members. While many areas around the world have begun to return to a new normal, it is critical that agencies use their experience during this time to prepare for the future.

Agencies should conduct crisis response reviews and after-action reports to analyze their response to COVID-19. What worked? What didn't? How can the agency better prepare for another crisis? The following are a few ways to help answer that last question:

- Establish or revise existing COOPs.
- Begin to look at the agency's technological and operational needs if remote operations become necessary.
- Identify remote workspaces inside and outside of the existing facility.
- Revise policies to allow for remote operations and establish how and when those policies are enacted.
- Incorporate remote operations, training, and exercises into agency training programs.
- Work with technology vendors to identify and procure the hardware and software needed to enable staff members to work somewhere other than a hardwired workstation within an ECC or EOC.

"As things start to slow down, start thinking about what's next," Spalding said. "The technology exists; it's out there. Reach out to your vendors and tell them what you need to support your staff in the worst-case scenario."

Ultimately, the planning and preparation done now will be the key to successfully navigating the next crisis—whatever form it may take.

Companies or products mentioned in this article were the selections of the author and do not imply an endorsement or recommendation by the IACP.