

**Incident Dispatchers
for On-scene Assistance
in Jackson County, Oregon**

Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations
In Emergency Management

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ABSTRACT

California has introduced a concept called 'incident dispatchers'. Some fire agencies in Jackson County, Oregon, expressed interest in the program, however it was not clearly understood by all departments. The problem was that the program itself was not well understood and the level of local interest in the fire service for such a program was unknown. The purpose of this research was to explain what an incident dispatcher program might be able to do and to review the interest of the concept among the fire service agencies within Jackson County, and if there was common interest, to provide a recommended course. A Descriptive Research Methodology was selected to answer the following questions:

1. Is there consensus among the fire agencies in Jackson County regarding the need for Incident Dispatchers?
2. If Incident Dispatchers were desired, what expectations would Incident Commanders have for the position?
3. What levels of training would be necessary for the position?
4. What types of equipment, forms, and costs would be involved to implement Incident Dispatchers?

An initial brainstorming session was held with dispatch supervisors in order to develop the key issues. Fire chiefs and staff members were interviewed to seek the answers. A survey format was developed to accomplish similar outcomes with each interview.

There was strong support among each chief and each department for the incident dispatcher program. The two main expectations were assisting with communications and managing a Resources

Unit. Training would mainly consist of ICS courses already available with the exception of a portion directly related to the specific job duties of the position. Equipment identified in the survey was minimal generally related to PPE and basic forms.

It was recommended that fire agencies within Jackson County adopt the program and develop the necessary training and equipment to establish it.

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INTRODUCTION

It seems that after each post-incident critique, one of the constant problems identified is that of 'communications'. With the multitude of communications techniques available through the age of technology (cellular phones, faxes, computers, electronic mail, multi-channel scanning radios, alpha-numeric pagers, etc.), one would think that this problem would disappear. Since the 'communications problem' is still with emergency service agencies, it would seem that the communications tools are not the problem, but the manner in which they are used.

Gordon Graham (1996), the popular lecturer in the field of risk management for the fire service determined that, "Fire Service Operations is one of the most complex jobs in American society." It is complex in that the sheer volumes of information coming to the initial incident commander (IC) can result in 'information overload' (Thorpe, 1997). In a wildland situation, it was found, "The demands on the fire officer are extreme, the stress is intense, and the adrenaline is pumping. There is a deluge of distracting details..." (p. 29).

Larton (un-dated, On-line) amplified on the same conclusion for structural departments when he stated,

We've recognized that today's Incident Commander has a tremendous amount to manage at the scene of an Incident. He must simultaneously do functions of Operations, Plans, Logistics, Finance, Strategy and Fire Tactics and a host of other functions. This has traditionally been done by the IC alone, often literally on the back of the trunk of his car, with papers spread all over the top. At the same time, he must coordinate and communicate on several different radio frequencies at the same time. Travel frequencies, Logistics and Support Nets, and the working tactical command channels all demand a great amount of his time. In today's incident, the Incident Commander needs help!

Some agencies have recognized the problem and have determined that providing a specific person to deal with the clerical duties of the incident commander was a successful way to help with the communication and information overload. They dealt with this re-occurring problem by assigning a firefighter to the incident commander (Larson, February 1994), but that takes a resource away from the firefighting effort and employs someone for a function that they are not trained to do.

The State of California has developed a formal incident dispatcher position to be used on-scene of incidents. Two dispatch centers within Jackson County, Oregon, (one municipal and one regional) expressed an interest in the concept and attended a Statewide meeting on the topic. As a Statewide concept, the issue failed to materialize or at least was postponed; however, the local dispatch supervisors remained interested.

The problem was that the program itself was not well understood, and the level of local interest in the

fire service for such a program was unknown. More specifically, after educating fire officers about the program, it was unknown if there was enough interest to begin implementation of an incident dispatcher program in Jackson County, and, if developed, what the program should look like.

The purpose of this research was to explain what an incident dispatcher program might be able to do and to review the interest of the concept among the fire service agencies within Jackson County, and if there was common interest, to provide a recommended course. To answer the following questions, a Descriptive Research Methodology was selected.

Research Questions

Specifically, the research sought to determine the answers to the following questions:

- 1. Is there consensus among the fire agencies in Jackson County regarding the need for Incident Dispatchers?**
- 2. If Incident Dispatchers were desired, what expectations would Incident Commanders have for the position?**
- 3. What levels of training would be necessary for the position?**
- 4. What types of equipment, forms, and costs would be involved to implement Incident Dispatchers within Jackson County?**

The answer to question one would provide justification for development of the program and the need for the remaining questions.

The answer to the three subsequent questions would provide the basis for development of a program locally.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Not long ago, it was common practice for an incident commander to arrive at the scene of a critical incident and begin to gather fireground intelligence by asking questions from his staff, visually taking in as much of what he or she could see of the scene, and referring to binders and maps of the area, often spread out on the hood of his command vehicle....The idea of an aide to the incident commander is nothing new. In fact, aides of one sort or another have assisted most elements of the incident command structure at one time or another. A new type of assistant, an Incident Dispatcher, is now being recognized in many states (Larton, 1997, p. 46).

Graham (1993) made a similar observation about the demands on the fire officer in his video on fire service civil liability, "When you show up on-scene, who is the least knowledgeable person on-scene as to what transpired on-scene before you got there? You are! These situations most of the time are highly dynamic situations that change extremely rapidly."

As a result of these conclusions, there needs to be a mechanism to reduce the workload or 'information overload' in an escalating incident before it becomes unmanageable. Failure to do so would result in a variety of risks most notably life safety concerns and liability for decision making.

The incident dispatcher concept as written about by Randall Larson, Dave Larton, and others, appeared to be a mechanism to confront this problem.

By utilizing experienced dispatchers - skilled in the meticulous and exact science of resource status keeping and able to concentrate on several ongoing tasks at once - an incident communications unit can better support the operations and safety of a major event (Larson, February 1994, p. 29-30).

Another problem develops at the communication center responsible for managing these incidents. They become overwhelmed by the communications traffic and can find it difficult to sort out the important messages from the tactical conversations. This level of traffic could jeopardize new incoming emergency calls. Larson (March/April 1996) concluded, "Removing responsibility for the incident from the Comm Center and providing professional telecommunicators to handle support tasks otherwise burdening operations personnel can be a valuable component of an agency's emergency response" p. 44).

The author's agency, the Oregon Department of Forestry, is one of eighteen fire agencies within Jackson County, all part of the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association. The Association strives to maintain a coordinated fire protection program between the agencies while preserving each individual Department's

autonomy and specific mission. To do so, the Association through its Mutual Aid Committee and Communications Committee (among several) have designed systems that are compatible between all agencies and agreed to by consensus.

The Association has a fire prevention cooperative, an arson task force, a resource mobilization plan, a two-county mutual aid agreement, a common radio frequency plan, a hazardous materials response team, and a training association. Resources are shared on a daily basis with no billings between agencies. When common tools are agreed on by consensus, the Association is able to design a mechanism to bring it about so it can be used by all the agencies. Staff officers are commonly shared between jurisdictions on working alarms, so there is a high degree of trust between departments.

The incident dispatcher concept was first brought to the Association through two dispatch supervisors as a result of their statewide contacts. There was interest in providing the service by the dispatching organizations if a consensus was reached from the departments they served. However, work needed to be done to establish the level of interest and determine what the program would look like.

The research applies to the Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management course in the Executive Fire Officer Program in several ways: (1) it is part of the capability assessment, (2) it provides an effective method of documentation, and (3) it mitigates potential communications problems on incidents which are frequently found to be among the problems identified in post-incident critiques.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of literature available on this topic is quite small. There are very few articles contained within fire and emergency medical system journals and dispatching periodicals; the few articles that are available are generally written by the same two authors, Randall Larson and Dave Larton who are actively involved in propelling the issue forward.

The research was used to help design the study questions and to help answer research questions two, three and four. Therefore, the research is divided into four categories. The first category seeks to determine what the literature said about the program and the remaining three categories roughly correspond to research questions two, three and four.

The Incident Dispatcher Program

The California Fire Chief's Association through its Communication Section has implemented a concept called incident dispatchers or Incident Dispatcher Teams (IDTs). The idea is to shift some of the duties from the incident commander to another position called an incident dispatcher, so the incident commander can concentrate on the decision making.

The dispatcher becomes a dedicated communicator for the incident command post - the incident commander (IC) doesn't have to keep an ear to the radio the entire time; he or she can conduct tactical management of the incident while the dispatcher becomes the IC's ears and voice on the radio. (Larson, 1997, September, p. 40).

Larton (1997) found the same thing when he described what role the incident dispatchers can play,

Dispatchers are very detail-oriented, know how to manage multiple resources simultaneously, and are pros at what they do every day: communication. They can bring order to the most crowded of radio frequencies. They are patient, take direction well, and know when to ask for help (p. 46).

“The concept integrates the dispatcher's unique skills of multi-tasking, attention to detail, hearing (and repeating) information accurately, right into the command post” (Larson and Larton, un-dated, On-line).

This type of organization is designed to improve what is considered the current situation in many instances, namely, assign a firefighter or crew, and use them to provide staff support to the IC. Larson (February 1994, p. 32) quoted Richard Aronson, Chief of Fire/Rescue Division of California's State Office of Emergency Services,

In the mutual aid system in the past, we've gotten by using line personnel to staff the command unit because they've always been available on an incident. We never took the time

to say ‘wait a minute, dispatchers are part of the whole program, so why don’t we get them trained to dispatch the operation?’

The system of using line personnel as dispatchers wasted valuable resources including both trained firefighters and expensive apparatus. In the same article, Larson quoted (p. 30) Antoinette Howard, firefighter and former dispatcher who said, “I’ve always been opposed to putting a firefighter into communications on light duty....A firefighter is not trained to do what dispatchers do.” She recognized that not only did using firefighters waste a resource, firefighters were not the best tool for the job that was being asked to be done, namely, communications. Larson (September 1997) quoted San Jose Fire Captain George Bradford,

If I can get dispatchers to come out and set up the dispatch function, that’s another fire company I don’t have to dismantle. In the initial stage of a fast-growing, fast-developing incident, it’s critical. The last thing I need to do is to break up fire companies and put them on administrative duties (p. 44).

Some large municipal fire departments have found success in supporting the initial attack incident commander with aides or drivers. This position fills an important role in the early stages of an escalating incident when staff help is minimal and confusion reigns. The Los Angeles City Fire Department uses a Staff Assistant to the Battalion Chief (also known as ‘drivers’) to fulfill many of these duties. The job description clearly states these roles, “Acts as communication link between the Battalion Chief, superior and subordinate officers, other agencies and the dispatch center” (Job Description-Battalion Staff Assistant, undated, p. 2).

Duties

The responsibilities of the incident dispatchers was found to be a natural transition from what they do every day. Larson stated in his September 1997 article, “IDTs assist the incident management support by completing ICS paperwork for the IC, maintaining status and accountability of units on the scene and relaying pertinent information back to the communications center” (p. 49). Larson and Larton (un-dated) amplified on this on the California Fire Chief’s web page, “In addition to communications support at the Command Post, IDT dispatchers provide resource status (RESTAT) support for extended-attack and major incidents, and assist in the check-in/demobilization phase of the incident” (On-line). The City of Mountain View lists two primary areas of support offered by the incident dispatcher, namely the ICS functions of communications and resources (Fire Incident Dispatcher Team Program Summary, un-dated). Palo Alto Fire Department limited their duties to assisting “the IC by maintaining the necessary Incident Command System (ICS) forms ... [and handling] all communications between the Command Post (CP) and the Emergency Dispatch Center (EDC). IDT can also

assist the IC with on scene communications as directed by the IC” (Palo Alto Fire Department GENERAL ORDER, un-dated, p. 1).

During a six alarm lumber yard fire, two incident dispatchers were deployed. Larson reported (March 1996)

Sysum was assigned to resource status (ReStat), maintaining accountability of all units at the incident via a T-card system. This gave the IC an accurate, up-to-date picture of his resources....Polczynski assumed incident communications, handling all radio traffic between the incident and the MVFD comm center. In addition he monitored Mountain View’s primary dispatch channel, as well as White-1, the statewide mutual aid channel. The two dispatchers also completed numerous ICS forms for the incident commander, including an incident sketch and briefing form (p. 39).

Training needed by Incident Dispatchers

Many dispatcher training programs include some sort of field familiarization, yet it was not found prevalent in the literature. On the contrary, of many training plans reviewed for 9-1-1 dispatchers, little reference was made to on-scene training. The exception was that many plans include ‘ride-alongs’ (Philadelphia Takes Steps to Improve Training and Halberstadt, 1996) or training received directly from firefighters (Holt, 1997). Perhaps there was the notion that dispatchers do not leave the communications console so they do not need field experience.

Clearly the position of an incident dispatcher would be different and include different training in addition to that required to be certified to work the 9-1-1 console. All of the incident dispatcher programs reviewed have a clear requirement for additional training which was generally sponsored by the California Fire Chief’s Association, Communication Section. Its stated objective is to train those, “who respond to the incident scene and assist the Incident Command Staff with Command Communications and Resource Status (RESTAT) functions” (Larton, un-dated, On-line). The advertised course was scheduled for 24 classroom hours (three days).

San Jose’s Training Flowchart (un-dated) has prerequisites of three hours in orientation and the Basic ICS class (ICS-200). After completion of the California Chief’s class, incident dispatcher candidates continue with a class on RESTAT and T-cards (Note, RESTAT was also referred to as “Status/Check-in Recorder” elsewhere.) The hours for these classes were not listed.

Mountain View Fire Department’s Fire - Incident Dispatcher Team Program Summary (un-dated) had a similar requirement, “Training must consist of ICS-220 [sic] and Incident Dispatcher 1E classes with an

optional check-in recorder class highly desired” (p. 3).

The California Fire Chief’s Association Communications Section, Northern Division Newsletter (1998) highlighted a plan to expand the program and certifications.

We are currently developing standards so that we can expand the classification of an Incident Dispatcher Team to IDT-1, IDT-2 and IDT-3; each increased level would enhance the training of the dispatcher and increase their functionality as an Incident Dispatcher at an incident scene (p.3).

Their web page provided further detail for each level or position (Larton, un-dated).

The opportunity to take advantage of drills and exercises to enhance classroom training was mentioned in several articles by both Larson (February 1994 and September 1997) and Larton (un-dated).

Equipment needed for the program

The equipment needs identified by the various authors are minimal. The literature pointed out that a command post is usually in a safe area, so full bunker gear is not usually required. The San Jose Fire Department’s Official Action Guide 360 (1995) dictated that IDT members would be issued, “safety clothing, ICS vest and a city pager” (p. 3). This was further identified as “wildland jacket and pants, boots, helmet, goggles, gloves, fire shelter, and ICS vest, city pager, portable radio and vehicle identification” (p. 9). Response in their own vehicle was directed on page 11 of the same document. This coincides with Larson and Larton’s (un-dated, On-line) conclusion that, “Once trained, IDT dispatchers are outfitted with wildland gear provided by their departments for safety and identification.”

Larson found, “IDT personnel carry pagers and, in San Jose, portable radios and respond from home in their own vehicles” (Larson, March/April 1996, p. 46).

At least two articles alluded to staffing a communications van (Larson, February 1994 and Larson, March/April 1997). Since a communications van may not always be available, additional administrative items usually contained within the van would need to be obligated.

PROCEDURES

Definitions:

I-200: Training class identified as Basic Incident Command System.

Incident Command System (ICS): Used by firefighting agencies to provide the basic organizational structure, job titles and duties for the variety of positions in emergency operations.

Incident Commander (IC or I.C.): The ICS position that has authority over a specific incident and is ultimately in charge of all personnel and resources.

Incident Dispatchers: On-scene personnel handling the dispatching function for the Incident Commander (I.C.) to minimize the potential overload on the I.C.

Incident Dispatcher Teams (IDTs): A group of more than one incident dispatcher that would share specific duties at an incident command post.

RESTAT (or ReStat): The ICS position of Resources Unit responsible for maintaining the current status of all resources assigned to an incident at any time.

Status/Check-in Recorder: Part of the Resources Unit (RESTAT) that prepares, posts and maintains resource status cards (T-cards).

T-cards: Small cards used to represent a resource that are filed into a slotted sorter to provide a visual portrayal of the commitment or availability of resources at an incident.

Research Methodology

The answers to the research questions would help the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association determine the interest for an incident dispatcher program and frame an action plan to begin one. To answer the questions a Descriptive Research Methodology was selected. After reviewing current literature on the subject, a survey of local fire departments was taken to ascertain their potential use of incident dispatchers

The research began with a discussion between two dispatch supervisors of separate dispatch centers who had shown an interest in an incident dispatcher program. A brainstorming session was held to determine what issues needed addressing. Afterwards, a series of questions was developed on which a survey form was based. (Two additional dispatch supervisors were included during the interviews with their department.)

Personal Interviews with agency representatives

A letter was sent to the Fire Chief of departments within Jackson County describing the concept.

Shortly thereafter, appointments were made to interview their command staff. All interviews occurred during July and August of 1998, and each took approximately one hour.

A personal interview was selected rather than a mailed survey in order to develop a discussion rather than a fill-in-the-blank questionnaire. It was felt this technique would allow for issues that came up to be explored in greater detail. In addition, one-on-one contact was selected as a method to make certain each individual gave his or her specific feedback. It also guaranteed 100% response of the agencies selected. A complete listing of the fire agencies is included in Appendix A.

Five agencies were excluded due to the size of their staff, limited previous participation with the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association, and physical distance to the dispatch centers. It was resolved that these agencies would not be likely to use incident dispatchers in the early stages of an alarm due to the long travel times involved for a dispatcher to arrive on-scene. None of these departments have any full time staff. Additionally, in the event of a major incident which would be a candidate for incident dispatchers, it is likely that these Departments would be requesting command staff assistance through the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association Mutual Aid Plan or the Oregon Fire Service Plan which could include incident dispatching assistance. Therefore, the survey will continue to be referred to as a 100 percent sample because it refers to the active participants in local agreements.

The small number of the population allowed for direct contact with each agency and assured a 100 percent return. A form was developed to make sure each agency was asked the same questions and to provide a place to document the answers. A copy of the form is included in Appendix B. The questions were tested with the first interviewees and found to be appropriate. Most interviews were conducted in person. One interview was discussed in person and then the interviewee returned written comments on the survey form.

Project limitations

The research only included fire service agencies within Jackson County, Oregon. The region does a lot of close coordination with Josephine County to the west and is related to it closely via transportation, economy and the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association. Although not included in the sample size, it is likely that the results would be similar to the agencies and dispatch centers there as well.

Additionally, police agencies or ambulance companies were not included in the sample size. The dispatch centers typically service the law enforcement agencies as well as the fire service. It is likely that the

conclusions here could be used for police incidents in the region as well. Larson (March/April 1996) found the City of Mountain View had developed a SWAT dispatcher as the law enforcement equivalent to their fire department's IDT. One local dispatcher supervisor felt in the interview that police may potentially become a bigger user of the position than the fire service.

RESULTS

Answer to research question 1: Is there consensus among the fire agencies in Jackson County regarding the need for Incident Dispatchers?

There was consensus as to the value of having the incident dispatcher as a tool or resource that incident commanders could call upon when desired. In fact, 100 percent of the chief officers surveyed felt that this was an important addition to the tools available to the fire service although some qualified with 'I think I would be interested'. It was interesting to find out that many of those surveyed noted that they had used someone in this position during past major incidents. All of these indicated that using someone in this position were positive experiences.

Answer to research question 2: If Incident Dispatchers were desired, what expectations would Incident Commanders have for the position?

This question resulted in very similar answers for the most part, although some respondents had 'bigger' ideas for the position. There were two key areas that chiefs thought incident dispatchers could fulfill needed roles: communications and resource status recording. It is interesting to note that these are the same functions that the literature identified for the position. Generally, fire officers wanted on-scene dispatchers to do the same things they normally did which included documenting key events, keeping a radio log of important traffic, and to fulfill the ICS position of Resources Unit Leader, tracking resources deployed, staged and available, enroute, and ordered. This matched comparably with what the literature recommended for the position.

There was common thinking that this position could be used to handle the more routine communications on-scene both over the radio and on cellular phones, particularly when the incident commander was occupied. Finally, it was assumed by many that the incident dispatcher would provide the obvious link to the various dispatch centers to give frequent up-dates on the status of the incident.

Additional comments mentioned less frequently will be covered in greater detail under the Discussion section.

Answer to research question 3: What levels of training would be necessary for the position?

There was agreement that there were three essential areas of training required. The first was a basic

ICS class (I-200) to familiarize incident dispatchers with the more common situations and positions on the fire ground. Second, was a program specific block that clearly described the expectations of the position so incident dispatchers could anticipate what their role would be and would be prepared by training, experience and mental readiness. The third area of training was specific background to fulfill the role of Situation Status/Resource Status.

Although these training needs are not difficult, they all have some very specific information and job aids to pass on to potential incident dispatchers in order for them to fully function at the desired levels.

Several chiefs stated that the current agenda of exercises and drills would be appropriate training opportunities for both incident commanders and incident dispatchers to, together, get comfortable with the concept.

Answer to research question 4: What types of equipment, forms, and costs would be involved to implement Incident Dispatchers within Jackson County?

Although the concept of incident dispatchers is not free, it would be relatively inexpensive. All agencies agreed that there would be certain costs associated with the program including equipment: personal protective equipment, pagers, cellular phones. In addition, there would be increased personnel costs in the form of overtime.

Forms, although relatively inexpensive, may have some developments costs so that the same forms could be used across all organizations rather than agency-specific ones. T-card sets for each incident dispatcher were suggested by several respondents.

DISCUSSION

The results of the survey of fire chiefs were analogous to what the literature suggested. After an explanation of the program, all the chiefs wanted this resource available. As pointed out by Larson (February 1994 and September 1997), many had used fire fighters in this capacity before. They realized that incident dispatchers would be a better option.

When promoting the incident dispatcher concept, Larson discovered (September 1997, p. 54) that, “It was initially a hard sell. The dispatchers literally had to sell the program one chief at a time.” That was accomplished with the 100 percent survey of the Rogue Valley Fire Chief’s, and each chief was essentially in favor of the concept. Larson found that use of incident dispatchers increases the exposure and confidence so fire officers are more interested in ordering them.

Since April, 1995, when the San Jose and Mountain View teams went on-line, dispatchers responded to more than a dozen incidents in Mountain View, while San Jose’s IDT responded to more than 80 emergencies, everything from a single alarm hazmat incident to a 6-alarm conflagration (1998, p.2).

Many surveyed indicated that they had used a person in the incident dispatcher position in the past on major incidents. Of these events, many were forced to use a fire fighter or another staff officer or administrative staff. The incident dispatcher concept keeps from using a trained fire fighting resource in an administrative position. Too much is invested in training and equipping firefighters and in financing expensive apparatus to have them working on jobs they are not trained for. This would even be true if the apparatus and fire fighters were staged or deployed elsewhere in the city or district rather than committed doing a job for which others are trained.

The use of trained dispatchers on-scene as incident dispatchers allows for these people to do what they are already good at. In addition, it gives them a greater understanding of their job in the dispatch center by better understanding fire ground operations. Many of the chiefs recognized that this would be a great training enhancement for dispatchers.

There was a concern about driving time due to distances of some of the rural districts. However, it was found that some of the potential incident dispatchers actually live in the rural areas of the county so that responding from home would be much closer than from the dispatch centers.

Also, there was some concern about the depth of the pool of potential candidates. One suggestion that

deserves consideration is to include certain administrative staff in the pool of potential incident dispatchers. Although these personnel may not be specifically experienced in communications duties, it would seem that after training, they could easily fulfill the role in the Resources Unit.

These results suggest a powerful desire and need to establish an incident dispatcher program in the area.

Other roles:

Other uses on-scene were brought up for consideration included tracking patients during a mass casualty incident, regulating access to the incident commander and helping wildland operation branches during a wildland incident.

The expectation for incident dispatchers could include greater issues such as fulfilling the Logistics role on short term incidents. For instance, the incident dispatcher could order simple supplies such as food and drinks for an extended incident.

An added bonus to the program could very well be the additional opportunity provided to dispatchers whose career ladder is frequently limited. Dispatch supervisors believed that there would be a strong interest by their employees in participating in a manner such as this. Bartholdy (1997) herself an IDT member, discovered after a week long assignment, "After almost 10 years as a dispatcher, part of me was losing faith in people. Seeing everyone work so hard for a common goal against what seemed like insurmountable obstacles has restored my faith in the basic goodness of people" (p. 45).

Training

One of the organizational requirements would be providing training. Of the training identified in the results, at least two are courses already identified as ICS course work: Basic ICS (I-100 or I-200) and Status/Check-in Recorder (S-248). These would be quite easy to schedule and affect locally by staff in the area. The courses are already on the shelf and would require only slight modification in order to fit the position of incident dispatcher. The point is to pass on key terminology, ICS typing, and specific procedures so instructions do not have to be explained or translated during an incident.

Other suggestions included 'Structure/Wildland: S/W-195', a segment of 'ICS for Agency Executives: I-401', fireground safety, and 'HAZMAT Awareness'.

It appears that much of the training could be accomplished in less than three total days which is commensurate with the training required in California's program.

Training for fire chiefs and incident commanders would be required so they have a clear idea of the program and what job duties the incident dispatchers come prepared to do. Failure to do this could result in the downfall of the program if expectations for incident commanders and incident dispatchers were different.

Costs:

Another organizational implication are the costs involved. The primary cost involved with incident dispatchers is that of personnel. There would be training costs that may require overtime to fill in behind. Additionally there would be costs associated with responding that would also be related to overtime. San Jose Fire Department's procedures stated, "Initial response will be from any IDT member(s) currently on duty at the Communications Center, as long as adequate staffing will remain in their absence" (Communications Procedure Manual, 1996, p. 3). A more reasonable alternative for Jackson County may be to page off-duty personnel.

Equipment needs would generally cost less than \$250 per person for the personal protective equipment. T-card sets could be assigned to each incident dispatcher and those costs are less than \$20 per set (NWCG National Fire Equipment, 1998). Additionally there would be monthly pager of less \$10 per month.

There is a strong desire by some for the incident dispatcher to come with their own cellular phone and spare battery, and a handheld radio and spare batteries. Others suggested that this need should be provided by the requesting district. Monthly costs for cellular phones would be around \$15 per month plus airtime on larger events; costs for the handheld radio would be in excess of \$500. Consensus on this issue is not clear at this stage.

The costs could be paid for out of the budget of the dispatch centers and then included within the operating costs apportioned to the individual districts in the case of the regional center. Another alternative would be to have the member fire agencies provide the equipment and then be billed for additional personnel time when used. The individual dispatch centers could make this decision autonomously or develop a common system.

Although currently there is a communications van available through the HAZMAT response team, it is unlikely that it could be used for an extended period. Additionally, it is not set up specifically for a communications command post and would not provide the most efficient configuration for this type of duty. However, it could be used if desired as long as it was made available for its primary HAZMAT mission on short notice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A good summation of the conclusions could be put as one of the surveyed fire chiefs stated, "I'm not looking for someone to do my job for me, but a resource to help me." The Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association should adopt an incident dispatcher position and direct its Communications Committee and Mutual Aid Committee to develop a policy outlining its use. The policy should become part of the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Association's Resource Directory.

Call out should be pre-programmed in at the desired level for each department such as third alarm, staff pages, and also be available on request. HAZMAT incidents when a full team is activated, mass casualty incidents, Oregon Department of Forestry "Increased Resource Availability" days, and other non-routine incidents such as floods and windstorms should receive incident dispatchers as well. One chief suggested it was needed whenever a situation turns into "single resource dispatching" where multiple incidents are related to the same event. It may be useful to stress the importance of ordering an incident dispatcher early in the event. Larson (May 1994) noted that in the instance of a 12-alarm high-rise exercise in Milpitas, California from the time of call out, "It took about two hours for the IDT to get its system in place, to retrieve all the existing data and to get ReStat updated and current" (p. 84-85).

The duties should concentrate on two areas. The first area which needs little or no training for telecommunications specialists is communication and documentation. The second is filling the RESTAT position. Busy incidents may require two incident dispatchers with these separate functions assigned distinctly. Dispatchers and incident commanders must know the job description yet remain flexible.

Training

Training should be done on a regional basis including both Jackson and Josephine Counties. The training should include three areas: Basic ICS (I-200), RESTAT (Status/Check-in Recorder) and Program Specifics. The Program Specifics class would need to be developed and include expectations, procedures, and policy. Eligibility for the training should require the prerequisite of at least one year of satisfactory performance at the certified telecommunications specialist level (a different prerequisite would be determined for administrative staff). Final preparation should include participation in a local drill or exercise as an incident dispatcher. Future drills by any agency should include the use of incident dispatchers.

It was noted that all dispatching personnel may not be physically capable of meeting the physical

demands of on-scene work since incident sites, for example, are not wheelchair accessible, among other constraints.

Administrative support staff should be considered for the RESTAT position. These should be recruited from the larger fire agencies and trained along with the telecommunications specialists for this role.

Additionally, a short training course should be developed for incident commanders and be required prior to use of an incident dispatcher.

Dispatch centers should share incident dispatchers through a mutual aid agreement.

Equipment

Equipment should be provided for each qualifying incident dispatcher that would include personal protective equipment (wildland fire shirt with reflective tape, wildland pants, hard hat), ICS identification vest labeled 'DISPATCHER' or 'COMMUNICATIONS', picture identification, and pager. A small portable table and chair would be useful.

Weather specific clothes such as rain gear, sunglasses or sturdy shoes shall be provided by the individual. A fire shelter and appropriate training would be required when incident dispatchers are deployed in the field with Operations Section Chiefs on wildland incidents.

Each incident dispatcher should arrive with a kit that includes T-cards and sorter, notepads and pencils/pens, Jackson County Map Book or a common map book agreed upon between all agencies, the Rogue Valley Fire Chief's Resource Directory, and phone book. To minimize costs, in the short term, one or two kits could be kept at the communications centers that includes cellular phone and spare battery, and handheld radio and spare battery. This kit could go when an incident dispatcher is sent directly from one of the communications centers.

When used on an alarm, incident dispatchers should be a part of any and all post-incident critiques. Finally, determination should be made to insure that the use of incident dispatchers is reimbursable through the State's Conflagration Act.

The future

If the program becomes popular it would seem that a logical step would be to assemble a communications van that would include radios, phones, computers, modems, fax machines, work space, forms, GIS capability, building plans databases, etc. This should be developed by the regional dispatch center so the

dispatchers can take ownership in the development, tools and their operations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Fire Agencies and Participants

Appendix B: Survey Form

Appendix A - List of Fire Agencies and Participants

Agencies Interviewed

Airport Fire Department

- ✓ Chief Terry Craine
- ✓ Captain Brian Gebhard

Applegate Fire District #9

- ✓ Chief Brett Fillis

Ashland Fire and Rescue:

- ✓ Chief Keith Woodley
- ✓ Asst. Chief Don Paul
- ✓ Dispatch Supervisor Barbara Brown

Evans Valley Rural Fire District:

- ✓ Chief Mark Moran

Jackson County Fire District #3:

- ✓ Division Chief Barry Hoffman

Jackson County Fire District #4

- ✓ Chief Bob Miller

Jackson County Fire District #5

- ✓ Chief Dan Marshall
- ✓ Division Chief Darin Welburn

Jacksonville Fire Dept.:

- ✓ Chief Tracy Shaw

Medford Fire and Rescue:

- ✓ Chief Dave Bierwiler
- ✓ Battalion Chief Mark Burns (Operations)
- ✓ Battalion Chief Dan Petersen
- ✓ Battalion Chief Jim McKee
- ✓ Battalion Chief Ken Goodson
- ✓ Battalion Chief Larry Anderson (Planning)
- ✓ Battalion Chief Phil Kessler (Administration)
- ✓ Battalion Chief Brian Fish (Training)
- ✓ Fire Marshall John Pierce
- ✓ CAD Administrator Dennis Matson
- ✓ Office Manager Terry Jones

Oregon Department of Forestry-Medford Unit:

- ✓ Protection Supervisor Greg Alexander
- ✓ Protection Supervisor Orville Eary
- ✓ Dispatch Supervisor Margueritte Root

Phoenix Fire Department:

- ✓ Chief Scott Goff

Rogue River Rural Fire District:

- ✓ Chief Greg Winfrey

USDA Forest Service (Rogue River N.F.):

- ✓ Zone Fire Mgt. Officer John Robinson
- ✓ Zone Fire Mgt. Officer Tom Dorigan

Agencies not Interviewed

Butte Falls Fire Department

- ◇ Chief Hugh Simpson

Colestin Fire Department

- ◇ Chief Steve Avgeris

Eagle Point Fire Department:

- ◇ Chief Dennis Jordan

Lakecreek Rural Fire District:

- ◇ Chief Jim Ledford

Prospect Rural Fire District:

- ◇ Chief John Burns

Appendix B - Survey Form

District: _____ Date: _____

Attending: _____

i. Incident Dispatcher Concept:

- from SORC, Med., or Ash.
- Requested by Command (automatic at a certain level)
- Work for Command doing classic “dispatch” functions: communications, documentation, liaison with dispatch center, etc.
- SORC and Med. are interested
- Dispatcher Centers would have to cover OT; ultimately there is a costs to Districts
- Research is Jackson Co. only.

1. Would you be interested?

2. What would be the best activation time (2nd or 3rd alarm, extended attack, on request)?

3. What would be your expectations of the position?

4. What training would be needed?

- ◇ Map experience and training
- ◇ Basic ICS
- ◇ Program specific details (expectations, evaluation)

5. What equipment would be needed?

- ◇ Attire or PPE
- ◇ pager/cell phone

6. What things would they need in a kit?

- ◇ Types of forms
- ◇ writing materials
- ◇ phone numbers