

Coatesville, PA Arson Fire TERT deployment

Since January 2008, the City of Coatesville, population 10,838 (2000 census), and the surrounding area of Chester County have experienced over 85 arson fires. A row home fire on January 24/25, 2009 resulted in 15 homes being destroyed. As a result of these fires the Chester County Arson Task Force was formed.

The Task Force, comprised up of representatives from the Coatesville City Police Department, the Chester County Detectives, the Pennsylvania State Police, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, began an intensive round the clock investigation and surveillance operation targeting the City and surrounding areas. As part of the initial formation of the task force, it was determined that 24 hour dispatch support would be required to safely monitor and coordinate operations. To maintain confidentiality and adhere to strict security procedures; on-site dispatch support was requested.

The command post was established at an existing secure facility outside of the City. A makeshift dispatch center was co-located and equipped with a Computer-Aided-Dispatch (CAD) terminal, radio, phone and computer. TERT trained dispatchers signed up to staff the command post dispatch station on a voluntary basis with one dispatcher working a minimum of a 4 hour shift. After three weeks and an estimated additional two month deployment it became clear that the Chester County could not maintain staffing and needed assistance.

Montgomery and Lancaster Counties had participated in our TERT curriculum testing in 2008 and were contacted for assistance. Previous trainings had centered on call taking skill sets, with anticipated use inside the communications center. This deployment would require personnel to be trained in dispatch skills, and be prepared to work in a remote location, with assistance being available over the telephone or delayed due to travel time.

Because this was the first dispatch training a lot of effort was put towards identifying the skills that would be required to operate effectively at the command post. The following skill sets were determined to be the minimum required:

- Basic mobile radio use including call signs, talk groups and local idiosyncrasies
- CAD skills limited to the functions that would be performed at the site
- J-NET authorization and familiarization
- Access to and familiarity with the Chester County Roam Secure Alert Network (RSAN), used for paging in the County.

Training consisted of an overview of the CAD commands necessary to dispatch and monitor Task Force units as well as commands for traffic and subject stops as well as pursuits. TERT dispatchers were also instructed on accessing the Commonwealth Law Enforcement Assistance Network (CLEAN) and NCIC through CAD, and as their access was established JNET. An overview of the Chester County Paging system (RSAN) was provided, and all training was accompanied by a detailed instruction manual. TERT and

Chester County Dispatchers were also trained in the specific unit identifiers that were created for this event, as the units participating did not have identities defined in CAD, a specific group and 40 individual unit numbers were created. This allowed the units to remain “assigned” to and controlled by the alternate dispatch terminal but be monitored by the Radio Room. The training program was developed by the Department’s 9-1-1 training coordinators and conducted by the Assistant 9-1-1 Training Coordinator, the Assistant Quality Coordinator and the Department TAC officer. Several discussions were held to determine the length of the training sessions. In the end it was determined that rather than adhere to a particular length of time, the sessions would be based upon a demonstration of proficiency.

In addition to the training involved, several operational issues needed to be addressed. While generic users exist in the CAD system for a TERT event, they had always been intended for a call taker level of operation, not allowing accountability for criminal justice access. This was quickly resolved by our Technical Division, creating familiar logons for the TERT dispatchers, by utilizing their existing home County logons, with a specific identifier so as not to duplicate Chester County logons.

At the completion of each training session the dispatchers were advised of the open time slots on the schedule, and provided with contact information to sign up for additional shifts. All dispatchers provided contact information and were entered into the RSAN system so they could be updated as to command post status and schedule modifications. For each dispatcher’s first shift at the command post, arraignments were made to have a member of the training group or a senior Chester County dispatcher present for the first 20-30 minutes of the TERT dispatcher’s shift, to ensure familiarity with the location, equipment and processes that were in place. This was in addition to the standard relief briefing that occurred at each personnel change. The transitions between the TERT dispatchers and the original group of Chester County dispatchers went largely unnoticed by both the field providers and the command post staff.

All parties involved viewed this TERT deployment as an unqualified success. The level of training, knowledge and abilities of the dispatchers was noticed on all levels and commented on by the various agencies involved. While the investigations continue, five arrests have been made and, as important, the number of fires has returned to the pre 2008 level.

The TERT program has provided the ability to ensure that highly trained telecommunicators are available to meet the needs of the public and first responders. The cooperation and support received from Montgomery and Lancaster Counties including their selection of outstanding telecommunicators is the most important component leading to the success of this deployment.