

FROM A Plan TO Reality



*Bucks County's Incident
Dispatch Team*

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In the summer of 2003 we attended a basic Incident Dispatch Team (IDT) course, in Florida, taught by Bonnie Maney and Dan Koenig. This program was based upon the California IDT model with local enhancements. Without exaggeration it was 40 packed hours of training with homework each evening and well worth the investment.

Time went by and the IDT idea surfaced periodically but did not catch on or bear fruit. In March of 2004, the search began for a mobile command vehicle that quickly became a reality in July of that year. A program would be needed to properly operate this unit. Again we set off for a Tactical Dispatch training course in New Jersey. We were hoping to expose ourselves to the law



PHOTOS: BUCKS COUNTY COMM

The new Bucks County (PA) Command Unit, received in 2004 from Farber Specialty Vehicles, escalated the use of Buck's new Incident Dispatch Team (IDT) to staff the unit during deployment. (Above left) Bucks County Communications IDT Leader, Chuck Axt, works on a deployment checklist during a training session.

enforcement side of field communications dispatch, since we had already received the fire service incident dispatch training. This course was well presented by Steven Gerrity, TDT Coordinator for Hopewell Township Police Department. Course objectives were based upon the TDT model originally designed by Tammy Smith of Mountain View, California. The training included several simulations with various Dispatchers from Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. On the final day we participated as Tactical Dispatchers working closely with Jackson Township Police Department during several mock incidents using their Tactical Team. Returning home with a fresh resolve and enthusiasm, our training program was developed and implemented by November 2004.

Initial training involved preparing all of our managers and line supervisors to operate as a team. Once this group understood the concepts we would then train our dispatchers. Training from the top down is a goal we try to practice whenever we implement something new. There were many tasks that needed to be completed for the program to come alive; developing SOP's, job descriptions, checklists and resources, all that the training program must address. We were able to do this just in time for training to begin.

Team Member Training

Training was set up initially as a basic class to get our team started. We developed a 32-hour basic class comprised of:

- IDT / TDT history
- Criteria for deployment
- Standard Operating Procedures
- Roles and Responsibilities for IDT/TDT members
- IDT Job Descriptions, roles, and responsibilities
- EMS, Fire and Law enforcement/SWAT/SERT situations overview
- Documentation & Record Keeping
- Command vehicle operations.
- Problem Solving and scenarios
- Emergency Vehicle Operator training for Class A Motor Coach
- Driver training and deployment sign-off by instructors.

Through all of this we constantly referred back to the instruction we had

received. This program became a reality because of several factors: someone had a dream and shared it, they set the dream to paper and again shared it with a larger group. Each time the idea got better as more people had opportunity to participate. Teamwork was a core element - any plan will fail without it. Maintaining the teamwork approach will help our managers, supervisor, and dispatchers operate successful incident dispatch teams.

Implementation Lessons

1. You do not need to re-invent the wheel. There are excellent programs and resources out there to assist you in learning all you need to know about incident and tactical dispatch teams. Most of these programs or resources are very cost effective in light of current training costs. Also, the courses are developed, set up and presented by dispatchers, which adds relevance and credibility to such training.
2. Network with those in your class or with the class instructors and learn from their pitfalls, mistakes and frustrations. Keep an open line of communication to stay up to date on program enhancements or new standards.
3. Trust in the talents and skills you already have and those of your team. Each person will play a vital part of the development and implementation process. Get their input and expertise, and watch the excitement build as the team comes together.
4. Take care when you are developing your program, train well and practice, practice, practice. Lots of hands-on simulation training is essential.
5. Sell your program doing it well. Network with SWAT/SERTs members or EMS/Fire companies. Invite them to some of your practice sessions as "observers" and "evaluators." Train with them if possible. If done properly the program will sell itself and word of mouth will spread the word of your program

First Response

On Tuesday February 8, 2005 a 6" gas main burst and was leaking with a thunderous roar in Bensalem Twp, Bucks County, PA. This event occurred in the middle of the day at a peak time in a prime location near a residential area, two shopping centers, and an elementary school. The gas line was on a major road

through a busy municipality and the leak was directly over the Pennsylvania Turnpike, one of our major multi-lane highways. Right from the start multiple agencies were involved: Bensalem Township Police, several volunteer fire departments, EMS, and the Pennsylvania State Police. The sergeant on duty made the call early to have the Bucks County Mobile Command Post, "CP-800," respond. With proper notifications made our IDT was deployed with the MCP. Within fifteen minutes, we were headed for Bensalem with one stop to pick up one of our team members.

This incident would be the first "official" deployment of our recently trained IDT in our new command vehicle. Once on scene, a bit of chaos ensued. While we were in the process of setting up the command vehicle the incident command team boarded which made it difficult to properly prepare the unit for occupancy. A lesson learned: it is best to set up the unit *before* allowing commanders to board. With set up taking place, information being exchanged, and directions for who was to sit where and do what, confusion almost set in. After a few minutes order was restored, positions were assigned for each of the parties involved in unified command, and the dispatchers were set up with proper equipment and log sheets.

We divided our duties into 3 sections. One team member handled all police communications; another member handled fire communications while the team leader handled EMS. Throughout the day anxieties raised and lowered but the job was done and information was received, dispatched, and documentation accordingly. Performing these skills without a CAD took some getting used to. The elementary school, shopping centers, and houses for approximately 100 residents were evacuated. The Pennsylvania Turnpike was shut down for approximately 6 hours, the impact of which is immediately felt by thousands of commuters. Several other support agencies were involved such as; American Red Cross, Philadelphia Electric Company, FBI, Bucks County EMA, "canteen" services for food and refreshments for the response teams as well as local lawmakers.

Progress was being made, but that was all to change for a few moments. We received information that a person was

observed running to their car across two lanes of traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike right as the gas main burst earlier that morning. At the time when this information arrived we had utility workers in a bucket truck assessing the gas line, a fire truck on the turnpike with two hand-lines pulled to help protect the

utility workers, and EMS there standing by for any potential injuries. All work had to stop immediately. Information had to be gathered. Someone needed to speak directly with the witness, the concern of secondary devices and possible evacuations had to be addressed, as well as the need for a bomb squad, lastly, was

the command post in a safe zone. Fortunately, the FBI was already on scene, so that was one less phone call to be made. Utility workers were instructed to move away from the rupture point. The workers were already up close to the hole and they reported they could see that the hole was caused from rust and corro-

Six Years of Tactical Dispatch *Heidi Geary, San Jose Police DRT*

Not so many years ago if you talked to your agency about Tactical Dispatchers the response you could expect to receive would range from skepticism to a facial expression similar to someone trying to understand a foreign language.

How far we have come in a short amount of time. It was only six short years ago that the San Jose Police Dispatch Response Team (DRT) was one of the few operational teams in California. The tactical dispatcher concept has come a long way since then. Where there were only a handful of law enforcement agencies that had tactical dispatch teams, there are now teams throughout the United States. There is a national tactical dispatcher website on Yahoo and in California there is an association created specifically by and for dispatchers. The California Tactical Dispatcher Association (www.tacticaldispatch.com) has members from more than 60 agencies.

I look back on when San Jose's team started six years ago and see many changes from where we were. Our team is now a known, welcome, and expected entity not only at our special operations command post but also working with the hostage negotiators and other bureaus within our department. In addition to working with our Special operations team we are called on to work with our Bureau of Field Operations when there are special events like our Mardi Gras and Cinco De Mayo celebrations. We have worked with our detective bureau on a threat to blow up a local junior college and have worked a multi agency combined command post in response to the abduction of a young child from her home by a stranger. We have worked with our Fire Depart-



SAN JOSE PD

Members of the San Jose (CA) Police Dispatch Response Team set up operations in and around a department SWAT van. For more than six years, San Jose's DRT has been a model team for law enforcement tactical incident dispatcher teams, responding to more than 40 call-outs since 1999.

and our communication center? Yes, but my "dog scratch" handwriting is not as easy to read (trust me on this) as a computer-generated log. Improvements in technology have proven to be both a help and a hindrance. Take for instance a barricade situation. It's now much easier to have a hardline phone blocked when dealing with barricaded suspects. Not that long ago blocking the hardline phones would be sufficient to insure that barricaded suspects could communicate only with negotiators.



SAN JOSE PD

San Jose PD's tactical dispatchers set up a workstation on the outside of the SWAT van. The dispatchers provide on-scene communications coordination, accountability of assigned officers, and logging of all pertinent activities on the scene of a barricade or hostage situation.

Today we now have to block not only the hardline phones but also any cell phones the suspect may have. Think you've got it covered? Think again. How about those home computers? Today, with improved and affordable technology, instead of the suspect being able to communicate only with negotiators the suspect can continue to communicate with the same persons who were involved in this volatile situation to begin with.

Times have changed since our start up in 1999. Who could have imagined the changes terrorism has made to all of us? When I began dispatching

sion. Debate continued and the commanders decided to go with the assessment and recommendation of the support team. We would not pull out, and we allowed the workers to continue.

The workers finished their task and final meter readings were taken from the area, all gas and explosive levels were normal. Final preparations for the opening of traffic occurred. The Red Cross arranged for shelter for several evacuees - since the gas line would not be flowing at full capacity for another 12-24

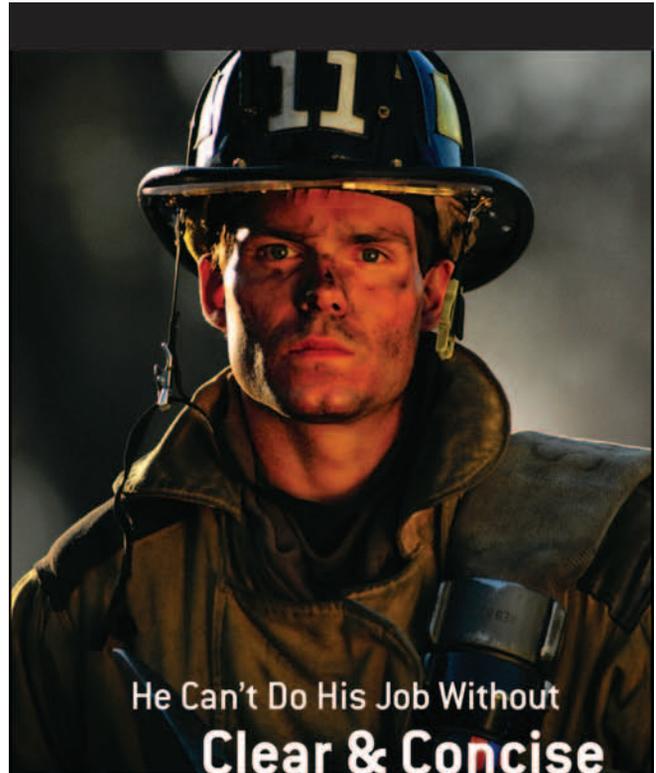
way back in the dark ages our biggest concerns had to do with when the next big earthquake or major fire would occur. I never imagined I would be trained in and supplied with a gas mask or learn things about terrorism and First Responders that still give me nightmares.

Now, in addition to our turbulent world situation, we and many other agencies are facing budget cuts, personnel cuts, mandatory overtime, and the fatigue that accompanies all of that. Government agencies like ours are not the only businesses impacted by economic issues and the stress that results from economic hardship is increasing the number of critical incidents that police departments are responding on. Inevitably, it seems when we are at our lowest staffing with the fewest resources is when we get the inevitable extended callout?

Recently both Marin County and Sacramento PD experienced 32- and 21-hour standoffs, respectively. In these situations the workload at any communication center has undoubtedly increased so any chance of a tactical dispatcher responding from on duty is significantly decreased. So, how do tactical dispatch teams staff these callouts? Many tactical dispatch teams have formed "mutual aid" groups. These teams pull relief from the tactical teams of other agencies to assist in their staffing needs. These teams either train together or have the same operating systems and so can more readily assist in call out situations or both. This mutual interaction is certainly beneficial to the agencies involved, but then who picks up the tab when the operation is over? Once again we come back to budget and personnel issues.

I know how hard many of you have worked on forming teams within your agencies. You did the research, made your presentations, nagged your bosses for approval of the team, did the research on obtaining equipment, nagged your bosses for approval of the team, wrote your policies and procedures, trained your personnel and nagged your bosses for approval of the team. You went out with your team and made yourself an integral part of any critical incident. Now that many police departments are facing cut-backs are tactical dispatch teams at risk of extinction? Who can predict with any accuracy. What I do know is that my department values our team and respects the job my team members do on callouts. I hope we can continue to offer this unique experience to other dispatchers for many years to come. 

Heidi Geary is the Communications Training & Administrative Supervisor for the San Jose Police Department in California, and the Manager of its Dispatch Response Team.



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hours, those without gas would need a place to stay for the night. This incident lasted approximately 7 hours.

When the incident came to a close, we distributed documentation to the proper commanders. At this point the team packed up the command post and headed home. We talked along the way of the experience and how things worked. In receiving feedback from the commanders, they each indicated they were very pleased with the MCP and how well the IDT did.

Here is a list of some of the jobs the IDT performed during this incident:

1. Established a documentation system utilizing our IDT forms for each class of service; police, fire and EMS. We also utilized the white board to display a specific breakdown of apparatus between Operations north and Operations south.
2. Coordinated and relayed all communications to and from units on the street and unified command.
3. Relayed all pertinent information from one class of service to the other via face-to-face communications and radio.



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IDT Leader, Scott Warren, sets up for operations the outside of the mobile command vehicle. Bucks County's Incident Dispatch Team supports both fire and law enforcement, and has been well received by field commanders.

4. Worked in conjunction with the communication center to track resources i.e., obtain a list of active units and apparatus already assigned to the incident before we were set up in the MCP.
5. Worked in conjunction with the com-

munication center to add additional apparatus to the incident as needed.

6. Made outgoing calls.
7. Relayed weather and explosive levels information to commanders and units on the street as required.
8. Broadcast all general updates to units on the street as requested by unified command.
9. We were involved in all update conferences initiated from Philadelphia Electric and Gas Company and documented information accordingly.
10. Updated communication center managers and supervisors as needed.
11. Information and Logs were copied and released to each commander as requested.
12. Retained documentation of the incident including police, fire, and EMS logs. Also retained MCP operations checklist until they are

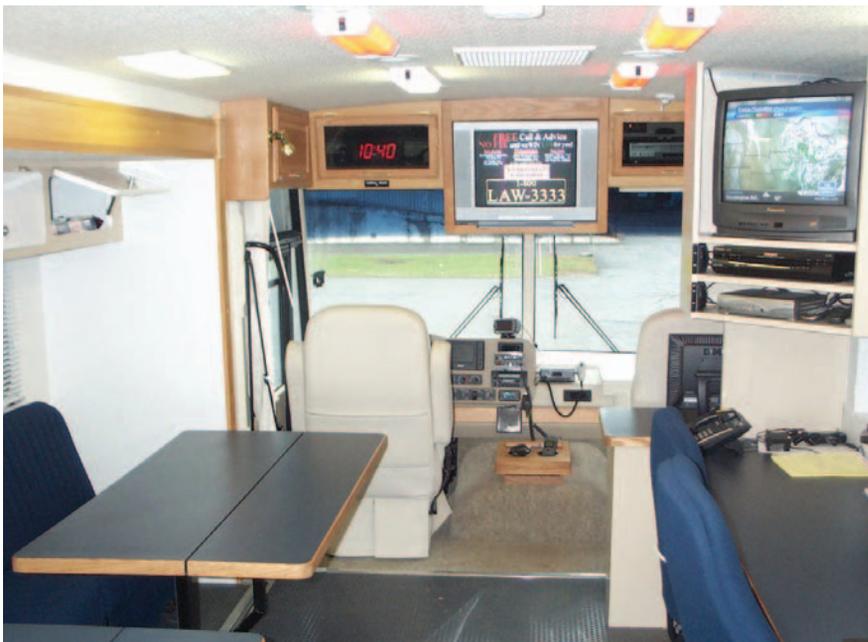
released to the Records Coordinator.

Even after this extremely positive experience there is work still to be done on improving the Bucks County's IDT and improve our command vehicle. We are deeply grateful to the support that we have received from our division managers who supported our efforts with this program. Good luck to each of you who either have established IDT/TDTs or those who endeavor to build one. We are pleased to finally have an excellent program with an exceptional group of people that make up the Bucks County Incident Dispatch Team. **9-11**

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The front section of Bucks County's CP800 command unit includes dispatch workstations as well as a desktop area for incident and tactical commanders. A conference room is provided in the rear section.