

Incident Dispatcher Teams: Bringing the Power of the Dispatcher to the Incident Command Post

Dispatchers used to be heard... but never seen.

This is changing in a number of departments as Incident Dispatcher Teams are being established for rapid deployment to localized major incidents. The Incident Dispatcher Team (IDT) provides an on-scene communications support team, assuming tasks that had been assigned to line fire captains who may now resume tactical operations while the IDT provides command post assistance to the IC. The IDT can also provide resource accountability and status support.

The IDT concept puts the dispatcher's everyday skills of multi-tasking, attention to detail, hearing-and-repeating accurately, right at the Command Post.

Certified as Incident Dispatchers within the Incident Command System (ICS), the dispatcher becomes a dedicated communicator for the Incident Command Post, becoming the ears and voice of the IC on the radio. The program frees up line personnel from working these support tasks and puts them back on the incident scene.

Role of the Incident Dispatcher

Traditionally, an Incident Communications Unit has been staffed with line personnel (who may or may not have been trained in dispatch). Using specially trained Incident Dispatchers places a professional communicator - who specializes in communicating and managing resources every day in the Communications Center - managing similar duties at an incident scene.

The California Fire Chiefs Association, Communications Section, initially developed an Incident Dispatcher training program for the fire service. The intent was to train fire dispatchers to function as an overhead mutual aid resource to the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES), Fire & Rescue Branch

Incident Dispatchers have been utilized on major wildfires, local structure fires, and events as the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001, and the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in February, 2002. Having a field communicator at the command post frees the Incident Commander from the umbilical cord of the radio, allowing him or her to concentrate on managing the incident, on objectives and tactics. IDT handles communications in and out of the Command Post and maintains status accountability of all resources assigned to the incident.

Development of Local IDTs

While the initial concept of the Incident Dispatcher was geared toward supporting major wildland campaign fires, it was soon realized the same concept was equally valid for localized emergencies. A greater alarm fire in town, while not involving the hundreds of responding apparatus and personnel that a campaign fire would, could still benefit from Incident Dispatchers acting as field communicators, providing the same kind of incident-specific communications and resource management support that a multi-day wildfire event would. The IDT program can be utilized for any resource-intensive incident, including fires, hazmat spills, multi-casualty incidents - any situation involving a several-hours-long incident management.

The Incident Communications Unit

IDT responds at a given alarm level based on local agency protocol. Two or three Incident Dispatchers, either responding from off duty in response to an IDT page or released from duty at the dispatch center, will establish a Communications Unit at the Command Post, either utilizing the IC's vehicle or a specialized communications/command vehicle. They assume radio duties for the Incident Commander, and operates his or her cell-phones, cellular faxes, MDTs and other voice and data communications devices at the Command Post.

The IC maintains his or her own radio identity, but the IDT becomes the initial go-between for communication in and out of the scene. IDTs assist in incident management support for the Command Post 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. All IDT operations at the CP are in strict accordance with the Incident Command System.

Setting Up an Incident Dispatcher Team

The concept of civilian dispatchers being called out to work at an Incident Command Post has existed in California since 1995. The city of Palo Alto did so in 1997. Initially, the concept was a hard sell to line personnel unaccustomed to dispatchers having a place at the incident command post. Having a line fire Captain involved in the process was invaluable in validating the concept to operations staff. The dispatchers literally had to sell the program one chief at a time. But they found support in several departments, applied their classroom training to field situations in several local multi-agency aid drills, and as they showed how valuable a dispatcher can be to incident management in the field, more and more firefighters, captains, and chiefs began to embrace the concept. San Jose's IDT has been embraced by field commanders and senior staff throughout Northern California and has become a national model for similar teams starting up across the country.

The IDT program supports field operations by providing an incident-specific dispatcher to assume communications and support tasks right at the incident command post. This reduces traffic load on the Communications Center by redirecting a lot of traffic to the Incident Dispatcher who can handle much of it via cell phone or MDT. It also gives dispatchers a new avenue for career development or enhancement by giving them a chance to get out of the control room and participate in field operations in an important and integral way. Additionally, the on-scene interaction between dispatch and field units during an operation strengthens recognition of the dispatcher as an important part of the public safety team

What is an Incident Dispatcher?

A specially trained fire service dispatcher qualified to operate in a command post or base camp Communications Unit within an ICS organization. Certified through a state mutual aid system for deployment as an Overhead resource through mutual aid protocols.

Capable of staffing ICS positions within the Communications Unit (Incident Communications Center Mgr, Incident Dispatcher "Radio Operator", or Messenger).

Utilizes the dispatcher's everyday skills of multi-tasking, conveying information accurately, and managing resources right at the Incident Command Post.

What is an Incident Dispatcher Team (IDT)?

Team of specially trained dispatchers operating locally.

Established for rapid deployment to localized major incidents.

Provides an on-scene communications support team, releasing incident scene units to resume tactical operations while dispatchers provide command post assistance to the Incident Commander.

Provides Resource Status Support for extended-attack and major incidents.

IDT's Tactical Purpose

Sets up and maintains an on-Scene Communications Unit

Incident Management Support for the Command Post

Check-In Recorder/Resource Status/Resources Unit

Maintains Incident Documentation

***Adapted from the National Incident Dispatcher Association website:
(www.incidentdispatch.net)***