

FIELD COMMUNICATIONS

in the **Wine Country**

Napa City Fire Incident Dispatcher Team IDT

Steve Stuart, Battalion Chief, Napa City FD

Prior to the start of the 2000 Fire season, the formation of an "Incident Dispatch Team" (IDT) was proposed to the Command Staff of the Napa City Fire Department in California. Conceptually this proposal seemed like something that would benefit the citizens of Napa. After all, who could argue that assistance in the Command Post would not be positive. However; no one could have anticipated all the benefits that we have experienced with this program since its inception. Quite often something that sounds good, when field-tested, doesn't work in the streets. In the case of our IDT, we have found no need to "go back to the drawing board." The goal of this article is to share our experiences in hopes that other departments would consider adding this resource to their team.

In August of 2000, after successfully completing the IDT training program through the California Fire Chiefs Association, along with some in-house training, pagers were issued to five of our dispatchers. This marked the beginning of our IDT. Less than 24 hours later, two members of the team found themselves in the Command Post



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Incident Dispatchers for the Napa (CA) Fire Department support incident command by assuming responsibility for communications, resource accountability, and documentation at an incident command post.

Napa's Incident Dispatcher Team is modeled after a number of similar field communication teams that have sprouted up throughout California over the last eight years.



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of a second alarm commercial building fire in the middle of the night. Interestingly enough, the Battalion Chief in command of that fire was one of the key players in the formation of the IDT, and now he was experiencing the fruits of his labor much sooner and to a greater degree than he had anticipated.

Assessing and re-assessing the scene, setting your objectives based on your assessments, and assigning and tracking resources to meet those objectives are all top priorities for the Incident Commander. These priorities must be done quickly and accurately or the safety and efficiency of the firefighters on the scene can be compromised. The command post can be inundated with various forms of interruptions that, even though they are important, can take the Incident Commander away from those top priorities listed above. The IDT is a great resource to help address many important issues so the Incident Commander can stay focused on safely and efficiently mitigating the incident.

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Members of Napa City Fire Department's Incident Dispatcher Team. L-to-R: Tracey Tafel, Battalion Chief Daniel Hall, Sue Dizmang, Gus Ulloth, Vonn Fuqua.

At a recent multi-alarm fire involving a mini-storage facility in which the office and several storage units were involved, several patrons approached the command post inquiring whether or not their storage units were involved. The Incident Commander was concentrating on situation status reports coming in from the Division Supervisors, and could not be interrupted at that moment by the emotional patrons. The two dispatchers that had responded on the IDT request (now automatic on second alarms) were able to address their concerns by consulting diagrams of the facility and identifying for them which units were involved. This greatly alleviated their concerns and provided them with a positive feeling for their fire department. Without IDT on the scene we probably would not have been able to talk to the concerned citizens for at least fifteen minutes, which may have left them with the feeling that their fire department doesn't care about their needs.

Written checklists on the critical tasks that need to be accomplished and other agencies that may need to be contacted are kept on our command vehicle. These lists are a valuable resource for the Incident Commander to consult in order to double check and make sure he or she has not forgotten anything. When the IDT arrives on the scene, they are able to go through the checklists much earlier in the incident and remind the Commander of things that may still need to be done. This makes the incident run much smoother, and the Incident Commander is able stay ahead of the curve, instead of playing catch up.

Not only does the IDT relieve workload at the Command Post, but the level

of impact on the dispatch center is greatly reduced when IDT is on the scene. The IDT is able to contact property owners, utilities, maintenance, construction, insurance, and sprinkler companies directly from the command post. This frees up the dispatch center to concentrate on their normally heavy workload.

The written records at the Command Post are much more accurate and detailed when IDT is on the scene. These written records identify important items such as: times that critical orders were given and accomplished; when resources were ordered and when they arrived; identities of witnesses, involved parties and other important facts. These records are critical for personnel accountability, fire investigation, post incident critiques, and in cases of potential litigation.

Finally, one of the most important values that we have discovered from our IDT, is that we now have dispatchers that are more acquainted with Fire Department emergency operations. This not only makes them better fire dispatchers, but also makes them an advocate for the fire department. When issues arise between dispatch and the fire department, they are able to assess the issue from both a fire department perspective and a dispatch perspective. This perspective enables them to see the issue more clearly and serve as a catalyst towards resolution. At other times, the IDT dispatcher is able to prevent things from ever becoming an issue, due to their unique perspective. Also, by working close with firefighters, the IDT dispatchers are no longer just a voice over a speaker, or on the other end of the phone, but have become faces that we are happy to see, both as dispatchers and friends.

I would encourage any other fire agencies that are considering adding an IDT to their organization, to move forward towards putting it into place. I believe these positive attributes would be experienced in any jurisdiction. Our experiences, as described above, have established the IDT as a valuable resource to our team that we will continue to use on a regular basis. ■

Steve Stuart is a Battalion Chief with the Napa City Fire Department in Northern California.