

Tactical dispatchers are called upon to respond to high-profile situations. Here, a mobile incident command post is utilized by the Montgomery County (Texas) Sheriff's Office to aid in the search for an escaped inmate. AP Photo/The Courier, Jason Fochtman.

Tactical Dispatch

CDE #38939

Understanding what a tactical dispatcher is

by Rhonda Harper

When discussing training and required skillsets, it is often asked just what, exactly, the difference is between a tactical dispatcher and a telecommunicator. The best, though somewhat complicated answer, is that the purpose of the tactical dispatcher is to support specialized teams with accurate, efficient documentation of events during critical incidents. The simpler answer is that the two positions actually do perform many of the same duties and hold the same responsibilities, just on a different level of criticality.

As with most elements of public safety communications, the difference depends on individual circumstances and the agency in which the dispatchers perform. No matter where you go, the tactical dispatcher and the telecommunicator quickly gather information from the caller and a host of other available sources, then disseminate that information to

units in the field.

The profession of public safety telecommunicator is constantly evolving, and there is no such thing as having too much knowledge. There is always some new technology or skill to be learned or shared with colleagues. It is essential for telecommunicators to know every aspect of their jobs, as well as their agency's policies and procedures. The daily practices of the telecommunicator must mirror the policies and procedures the agency has in place in order to minimize liability for the telecommunicator, the agency and any governing entities.

This general standard for all telecommunicators goes hand-in-hand with rising to the specialized skill level of a tactical dispatcher, though how the position of tactical dispatcher is utilized will vary from agency to agency. For example, some agencies have the tactical dispatcher respond with the SWAT team

for hostage situations or barricaded subjects in a specialized mobile command post, while other agencies will have the dispatcher run this position from a console. This decision depends on the individual agency's available equipment, manpower, resources and needs.

There continue to be misconceptions of the 9-1-1 emergency number system by the general public. It is often believed (and the media plays a part in exacerbating this problem) that when an individual calls 9-1-1 for help, they are speaking to a member of the specific profession that is needed. For example, if someone calls for a medical emergency, they assume they are talking to a medically trained professional such as a paramedic or EMT. And when people call 9-1-1 to report a fire, they often believe they are talking to a firefighter. Or if they call to report a crime, they believe they are speaking to a law enforcement officer.

What the general public doesn't realize is that, in

many jurisdictions, they are actually speaking to a civilian who is specially trained to take their calls for service and assign units to help when the caller so desperately seeks assistance. Telecommunicators possess a set of skills and personality traits unique to their profession that aren't always shared by field officers, firefighters or paramedics. Among those skills is an innate ability to multitask—managing multiple incidents and sources of information at the same time, all while listening and accurately repeating complex information in a concise and efficient manner. Having a skilled tactical dispatcher on duty during heightened incidents is critical because it frees up officers to resume tactical field roles.

Duties & Responsibilities

The desire alone to become a tactical dispatcher is unfortunately not enough to pass the skill level or

qualifications necessary to perform this duty. Each agency has its own process in which tactical dispatchers are chosen, however the first step for every agency is to decide what duties and responsibilities will be the domain of the tactical dispatcher. The next step is to look at the qualities and characteristics needed for an individual to become a tactical dispatcher. Again, each agency is different and will have different requirements.

The tactical dispatcher must be proficient not only in their daily duties, but also in the specialized knowl-

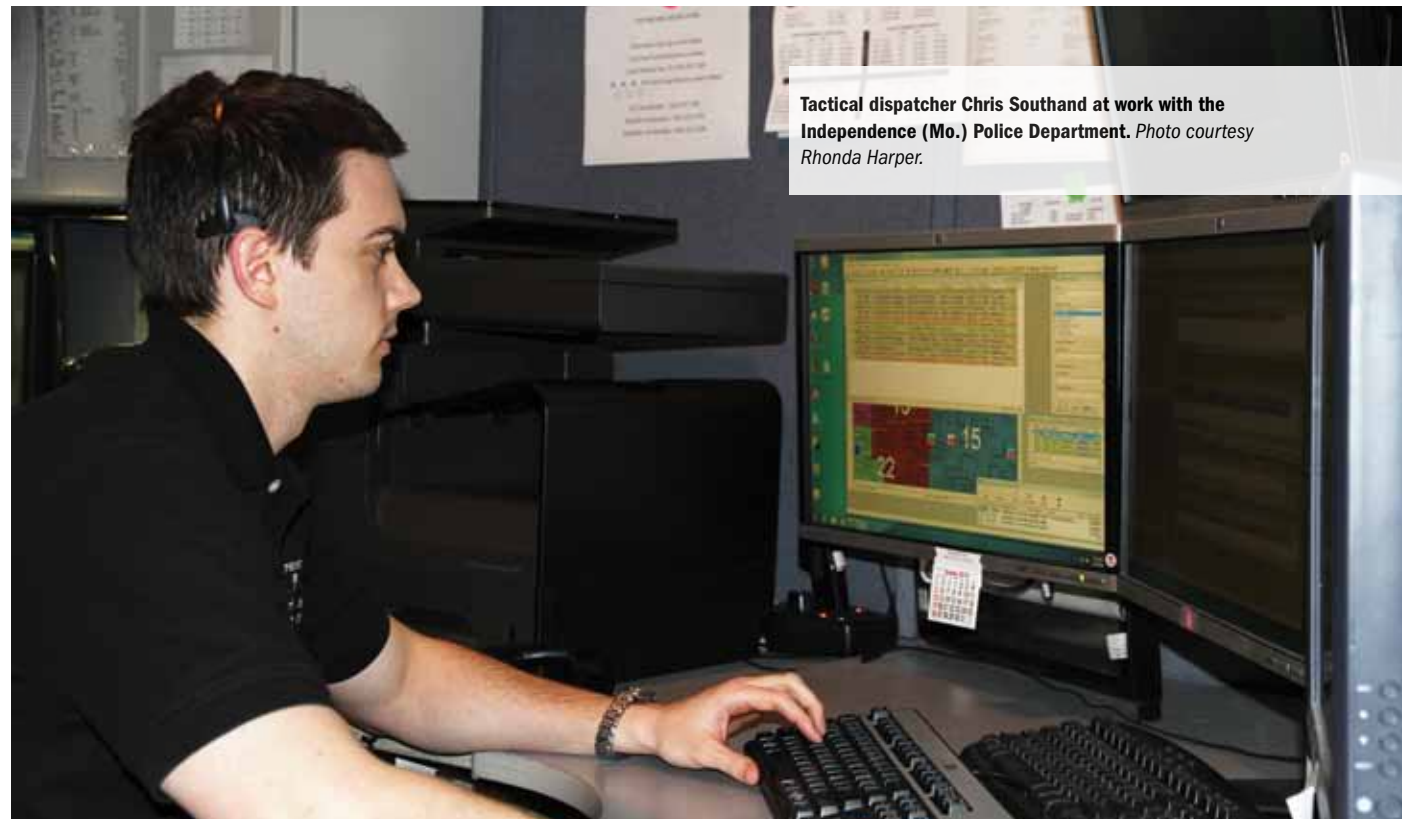
include gathering information, prioritizing needs based on the response level required and resources available, then recording and documenting all communications. This, in a nutshell, is what the telecommunicator does. To expand further, the telecommunicator also completes requests from field responders and runs warrant checks, license plates, articles and vehicles through the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) while keeping responders up to date and disseminating information quickly, efficiently and accurately.

being given the opportunity to apply.

- Must be able to monitor and complete multiple tasks at once without missing any radio traffic or information.
- Must adhere to policies and standard operating procedures as set forth by the agency.
- Must have proficient knowledge of the jurisdiction.
- Must be able to problem-solve as a situation progresses.
- Must be able to document and relay information

our call loads dictate how we plan our days. Depending upon the situation, it can be difficult to even take a short bathroom break, and forget a smoke break if there is no one to relieve you.

The tactical dispatcher is subject to call-outs and must be available when they are needed. There is no rhyme or reason as to when incidents occur, but when situations go downhill they often go in a quick sliding fashion. Therefore it is best to have more than one tactical dispatcher in each agency. Depending upon the size of your agency, you may consider one-eighth of



Tactical dispatcher Chris Southand at work with the Independence (Mo.) Police Department. Photo courtesy Rhonda Harper.



Tactical dispatchers must be prepared to deploy with a mobile command unit, such as this one in use by the Albemarle County (Va.) Sheriff's Department. AP Photo/The Daily Progress, Ryan M. Kelly

edge required by their agency, and they must possess a will to continuously seek out more knowledge. Working in this capacity, the tactical dispatcher must understand the "why" behind the "what" of their jobs. If something goes wrong, the tactical dispatcher must find a work-around. The primary duty of any telecommunicator is to protect their responders and the public. This task is especially crucial during heightened situations when a tactical response is needed.

Not everyone can make it as a dispatcher. There continues to be a shortage of experienced and dedicated telecommunicators in agencies nationwide because of this fact. Failing to pass the training program doesn't necessarily reflect poorly on the person, it simply means it takes a very special type of person to be able to do this job.

The general daily duties of a telecommunicator

These tasks are typically performed within a dispatch center, often with other employees working nearby. Depending on the agency's preferences and resources, the tactical dispatcher may work from within the comm center at a console or on scene, typically from a response unit specially designed for radio capabilities. When the tactical dispatcher is based in a specialized response unit, it is imperative the individual chosen for this position is able to work around any problems or unexpected situations, as there will not be assistance available from a nearby co-worker or supervisor.

Specific qualifications for the tactical dispatcher position will vary depending on the individual agency. Below is a list of common requirements.

- The dispatcher may be required to be on the job for a predetermined number of years prior to

to field units in a timely and accurate manner.

- Must be able to remain calm under intense pressure and for long periods of time.
- Must be able to utilize technological equipment effectively.

Incidents

There is not just one type of incident in which a tactical dispatcher may be needed. This specialized skill can be utilized during several critical incidents such as active shooter situations; hostage or barricaded subject incidents; natural, manmade or terrorist disasters; or even planned events such as parades, holiday festivities or carnival events.

As telecommunicators, we always hope for the best and plan for the worst. Even in our day-to-day professional activities, breaks are considered a luxury and

your staff, with a minimum of two tactical dispatchers. For the smaller agencies, one-third may be considered to account for sickness or vacations.

Considerations

The skills required of a tactical dispatcher should be specifically planned out and tested prior to an incident occurring. It is never optimal to do trial by error, on the fly or under pressure. The dispatchers should be included in the planning process for responding to tactical events. This is especially essential if there is no one else available with a background in dispatch to ensure all needs are adequately met. If those planning out the needs of the tactical dispatcher do not have a background in communications, it can lead to potential issues when a real-life scenario does arise.

Unexpected events, or incidents in which a tactical

dispatcher is needed, can quickly become overwhelming and draining to the dispatcher, especially when they are alone without backup. This is another reason to have more than one telecommunicator trained in tactical dispatch. This is not unlike Incident Command System (ICS) activation or the incident commander position. The role of the tactical dispatcher may change depending on the relief staff available.

Let's face it: the role of the dispatcher has not been around for that long. AT&T enacted 9-1-1 as the national number to be used in an emergency in 1968. It wasn't until 1999 that Congress passed the law making it the nation's number to call in an emergency situation. The term tactical dispatcher is even newer, but an increasing number of telecommunicators have moved to this type of specialized dispatch over the past decade, and the term continues to be defined each day.

Job Description

The primary duty of the tactical dispatcher is to protect responders in the field. The size of the tactical dispatching team needed depends on the size of the department. Too large of a specialized group and the need for each individual to call-out may be rare, while too small of a group could lead to burnout. In the event a tactical incident occurs in your jurisdiction, whether it be a manmade disaster, terrorist event or natural disaster, you may want to consider a group large enough to handle that situation. A contingency plan must be considered in the event members are unable to respond due to power outages or road closures. A good rule of thumb is to have enough members on rotation at least once weekly for every four to six weeks. Again, this is dependent upon the jurisdiction and how large of a community your agency services, as well as the number of average call-outs per month. You want to ensure everyone is able to utilize their skills.

The skills required of a tactical dispatcher should be tested prior to an incident occurring

When considering the selection process you would like to institute for your agency, it is important to consider the attributes you would like your tactical dispatchers to encompass. When we think of SWAT members, we think of them as an elite team. The same goal should be set for tactical dispatchers, as they will be working with those elite members of the SWAT team. The individuals chosen for this specialized duty must be a step above—always taking advantage of available tools and resources, and always striving to learn more information.

Training & Preparation

The need for current and continued training is prevalent throughout the public safety communications field. Telecommunicators at the level of tactical dispatcher have an even greater need for training to ensure they have the skills necessary to perform the functions required of the job. The work of tactical dispatchers differs from standard telecommunicators location of dispatching, proximity to other first responders and, of course, the heightened tensions that often come with those scenarios. Training must be completed with the responding units; when you are needed, you must be ready and prepared to get to work. Each member of the responding unit will have their own jobs to do, there will not be anyone there to help you get your equipment set up or hold your hand. As the team's tactical dispatcher, it is up to you to be prepared and ready to respond for any situation.

Each agency is different from the other, what works for one may not necessarily work for the next. Several variables will play into the types of responses your agency's SWAT team and tactical dispatcher will respond to, however the training you receive and complete with them as their tactical dispatcher will help you understand how they respond to such incidents and anticipate their needs before the request is made. It is not unlike other types of dispatching in which we get to know our officers and begin to collect or search for information prior to them asking for it.

There are several benefits to utilizing a tactical dispatcher rather than utilizing a dispatcher out of the communications unit. When you have a team available, even if they rotate through on call-outs, there is a level of consistency and trust built, as well as a rapport between the team members. In working as a team, one begins to anticipate what the other team members need and the process begins to run like a well-oiled machine. During critical incidents this can become crucial, as each member will have their own jobs to accomplish, making it difficult to stop and assist or answer questions during a learning process.

Just as SWAT teams train together, tactical dispatchers



Tactical dispatcher Amanda Thomas of the Independence (Mo.) PD hones her skills. Photo courtesy Rhonda Harper.

should also train with the SWAT team. This helps the dispatcher to better understand what is going on in the field while under safe training conditions, and it also allows the SWAT members to better understand the role of the tactical dispatcher and become familiar with them as well. This process will assist in identifying any areas of weakness or issues with equipment, technology or other essential items, plus any needs that can be met prior to an actual incident occurring.

There will always be training challenges as well for most agencies. This is especially true during economic downturns, when agencies may need to decrease overtime for budgetary reasons. If an agency does not have the ability to adjust schedules for training purposes, an option may be to offer compensatory time instead to allow for training time.

What the Future Holds

The role of the dispatcher is ever-changing, and the future only holds more advancement and technological changes than ever before. These changing times mean that public safety communications professionals also need to continuously move forward. Just think, 15 years ago cellphones were fairly non-existent, CAD systems didn't give us the capabilities they do now and many still worked off pen and paper within their comm centers. Now, households increasingly are getting rid of their landlines and using cellphones exclusively. The more technology changes, the more our jobs change on a daily basis.

As each year passes, more situations will occur needing the specialized skills of SWAT teams and tactical dispatchers. We are not the only ones who learn from

previous incidents: the next individual wanting to do harm is also doing their homework, creating an essential need for those specialized teams.

The role and implementation of the tactical dispatcher is still relatively new to many agencies throughout the country and, as we all know, change does not come easy. However, if you are interested in implementing a tactical dispatch program at your agency, there are numerous training manuals, books and online resources discussing this profession and specialized positions. These are also beneficial if you are interested in stepping into one of these specialized positions to further your own career. 🛡️

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RESOURCES

1. Massengale, C. Coordinating Crisis Communications. *Public Safety Communications*. 2013;79(12): 26-31.
2. Frederick, S. (Dec. 5, 2012) Tactical Dispatching: Stand-Off in Susquehanna County, Pa. Ends Peacefully. *9-1-1 Magazine*. Retrieved on Dec. 12, 2014, from www.9-1-1magazine.com/Frederick-Tactical-Disp-Susquehanna-Co.
3. Larson, R. The Communications Edge: Tactical Dispatchers Support Critical Incident Management. *The Tactical Edge*. 1998;15(3): 28-30.

CDE EXAM #38939: TACTICAL DISPATCH

1. What is a tactical dispatcher?
 - a. A specially trained dispatcher
 - b. A telecommunicator who deploys with a SWAT unit
 - c. An incident documenter
 - d. All of the Above
2. The primary duty of any telecommunicator is to protect their responders.
 - a. True
 - b. False
3. All qualifications will be the same for the tactical dispatcher.
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. One tactical dispatcher is enough for any agency.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. What qualities/traits make a good tactical dispatcher?
 - a. Multi-tasker
 - b. Documenter
 - c. Calm
 - d. All of the Above
6. The tactical dispatcher can be used for which of the following situations:
 - a. Parades
 - b. Hostage or Barricaded Situations
 - c. Terrorist Strike
 - d. All of the above
7. AT&T provided 9-1-1 as a national number for emergency situations in what year?
 - a. 1972
 - b. 1969
 - c. 1968
 - d. 1999
8. Congress approved 9-1-1 as the national number for emergency situations in what year?
 - a. 1974
 - b. 1986
 - c. 1968
 - d. 1999
9. There is no need for a SWAT team to train with their tactical dispatchers.
 - a. True
 - b. False
10. It is important we become more proactive within our agencies.
 - a. True
 - b. False

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38093	Online	Starts Jan. 28	
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39407	Online	Starts Feb. 04	
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38072	Online	Starts Feb. 04	
38073	Online	Starts Feb. 11	
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