

MOBILE DISP

By Debbie Gailbreath, RPL

Today's successful business world relies heavily on technology and electronic communication. The Internet, automated scheduling, instant messaging, online education, email, voicemail and "apps" are now a part of our everyday lives. The same necessity holds true for public safety communications. Electronic communication between the PSAP and emergency responders in the field is essential, and it is available.

Often referred to as "silent dispatching," the use of mobile data terminals (MDTs) dates back to the early 1980s. Originally used by law enforcement to interface with computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems, this technology is also now frequently used by fire department and EMS responders. More recently referred to as mobile computer terminals (MCTs), or laptops, these devices can also interface with mapping, global positioning systems (GPS), and automatic vehicle location (AVL), in addition to other evolving public safety technologies. Laptops are often equipped with an emergency alert button, which transmits to the telecommunicator and other laptop users when activated by the field unit.

Laptops are used by field units to electronically receive dispatch event information obtained by the communications center for response to the event. CAD information including the event location, caller/reporting party information, incident type, and other pertinent event-related and safety-related specifics is transmitted electronically rather than via radio. Electronically providing this dispatch information reduces radio traffic and provides for a visual receipt and review of the information. Once the information is received, field units can perform their own event status functions such as en-route, on-scene, and cleared from event. Because event assignments are electronic and field units can manage their own status, telecommunicators are provided automated tracking

and status changes of field units, which are reflected on the telecommunicator's CAD unit status monitor. Field units can obtain event case numbers, make commentary notes, and access pertinent information for reports without having to make inquiries to the telecommunicator. Field units can also electronically self-initiate event statuses such as meal breaks, court appearances, and other "out-of-service" conditions.

Laptops enable messaging among field units and between the call taker/

telecommunicator and field units, allowing for non-radio discussions, information-gathering, and the transmitting/receiving of confidential communication. The use of laptops for silent dispatching reduces radio traffic and in turn, can reduce dispatcher-to-field unit ratios and the telecommunicator's workload. Laptops also provide field units with the ability to create electronic incident reports, traffic citations and process vehicle crash investigations.

COMPUTERIZED INFORMATION: AN ELECTRONIC REPOSITORY OF RESOURCES

In addition to electronic dispatching of events and tracking of units, laptops provide emergency responders access to many essential resources. These resources may be used by individual responders, or groups, teams or commanders responding to large-scale



ATCH: What Is It, Why Use It?

events. Rather than having to utilize hard copy manuals, guides, or plans, or having to request information from the communications center, field personnel now have instantaneous access to a wide variety of resources, including:

- patient condition data
- hospital/transport data
- be-on-the-lookout (BOLO) information
- building/school maps and floor plans
- fire hydrant locations
- hazardous material/chemical placard information
- Center for Disease Control bulletins
- fingerprint databases
- access to Criminal Justice Information Systems, allowing instantaneous checks for wanted vehicles and persons, missing persons, stolen property, and driver's license statuses
- photos and videos
- agency policies, standard operating procedures, protocols, manuals, and response plans
- agency record systems
- employee schedules and rosters
- crime trend reports
- civil/court documents
- local Emergency Management/Incident Command plans, resources and documents
- regional radio interoperability plans
- intelligence/terrorism/homeland security bulletins and databases
- agency intranet access capabilities
- agency training programs, courses, and documents
- email and Internet access

RECORDS

It is important to know that just as public safety telephone calls and radio transmissions are public record, so is laptop data. You should review your state's records retention laws and the requirements for maintaining

these records, as well as public access guidelines. While certain crime-related and victim/patient-related information may be excluded, general event information and "messaging" are likely public record. Applicable crime, victim and patient information redactions should be considered. Some agency-specific policies, security-related information, gate access codes, and employee addresses and phone information are examples of information that may be accessible via this technology, but are likely excluded from public record.

MISUSE AND LIABILITY CONCERNS

Agency personnel must be cautious of message conversation content, utilizing this resource for official business use only. Keep in mind these messages could appear as a media headline. It is important to understand that members of the public may have inadvertent visual access to these computer screens. Arrestees, patients or other citizens may see electronic conversations or other information displayed. One such incident involves a female arrestee being transported to a holding facility; the transporting officer received numerous messages from other officers and telecommunicators regarding yelling, which was transmitted over the radio. The arrestee noted that several messages were being received by the officer and upon release from the jail facility, she made a public records request for the electronic messages. An agency investigation found that the messages were inappropriate and derogatory towards the arrestee. Several officers and telecommunicators were subsequently reprimanded. Remember, if it isn't appropriate over the radio, it isn't appropriate electronically!

Precautions should also be considered for the type of websites accessed via the



Internet, as this data is also captured and recorded. "Surfing" inappropriate websites can be career-ending. Unauthorized installation or downloading of additional software should also be prohibited.

Local and national crime information database systems have strict guidelines and rules regarding how information is accessed and utilized. Inappropriate and unlawful use of database information includes obtaining private information for non-official duties. Vehicle registration checks, driver's license information, criminal history and patient records for personal use are strictly prohibited. Recent examples of misuse include using this information in political campaigning, seeking home addresses or phone numbers



to establish personal or sexual relationships, and checking the criminal histories and backgrounds of hired contract workers. Misuse of these crime information databases can result in suspension or revocation of agency database access.

ESTABLISHING PROTOCOLS

It is important to establish protocols for the use of laptops for both the dispatch center and field personnel. Agencies should determine which types of events can be electronically dispatched and which types of events require a voice dispatch. It is important to classify “emergency” and “non-emergency” call types. Examples of emergency classifications may include any event in which a weapon was seen or is possible; crimes that just occurred; events involving bodily injury, or the potential for same; events involving large numbers of persons; fleeing suspects; persons under the influence of alcohol or drugs; domestic situations; types of calls where more than one unit and/or type of emergency responder is needed. Protocols should be established to determine when it is appropriate to access electronic resources and when the communications center should be contacted to obtain this information. Field units involved in events where safety may be of a concern must still have the ability and be permitted to obtain information from the communications center. Such incidents may include traffic stops, treatment of sick/injured patients and active fire scenes. Protocols should also identify appropriate and inappropriate messaging content and Internet access.

OTHER PROTOCOLS TO CONSIDER:

- circumstances and procedures for updating units responding to electronically dispatched events when additional or new

- information changes the status or criticality of the event
- procedures for responding to emergency alert activations
- identification of types of BOLOs and bulletins that can be distributed electronically vs. orally
- field unit responsibilities for acknowledgment of dispatched calls for service; unit status changes: enroute, on scene, with patient/suspect, in-service, out-of-service
- field unit responsibilities for monitoring of events dispatched to other units
- responding to general information/inquiry messages
- determining verbal or electronic acknowledgement requirements
- field supervisor responsibilities, including monitoring unit statuses and viewing of pending calls
- back-up procedures for laptop outage/malfunction
- identification and collection procedures for data, records and reports to be utilized
- security/system access capabilities
- policy for prohibited activities
- policy and procedures for records retention
- training, installation, and implementation planning

COST & FUNDING

Public safety mobile computer systems can be leased or purchased, and generally cost between \$3,500 and \$5,500 per unit, depending upon various capabilities. Agencies may qualify for grant funding to assist with the purchase. Classified as “technology” or “communications,” federal and local grant funding opportunities are available for law enforcement agencies, fire departments, and EMS providers. Websites such as www.policegrantshelp.com/products/mobile-data-terminals-grants/ and www.firegrantshelp.com/products/mobile-data-terminals-grants/ provide information on grant-eligible products.

Several Federal websites are also available to research grant funding opportunities: U.S. Department of Transportation: dot.gov; U.S. Department of Justice Grant Resources: justice.gov/business/grants; Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office): cops.usdoj.gov; Office of Justice Programs (OJP): ojp.gov; Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA): www.bja.gov; Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS): www.bjs.gov; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP): www.ojjdp.gov.

gov; National Institute of Justice (NIJ): www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij; and Office for Victims of Crime (OVC): www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc.

TRAINING

Before authorizing and implementing mobile dispatch, the agency should define the purpose for utilizing this technology, establish appropriate protocols and policies, and provide adequate training to all users — including field units, call takers, dispatchers, records personnel, and information technology personnel. Training should include password, log-on and status key functions, general inquiries (including crime information systems), call/event clearing, messaging, and activation of the emergency button, if applicable. A backup plan on how to continue operations if the mobile system is not functioning should be included in this training. All users should be required to acknowledge understanding of the prohibited activities and consequences of violations.

BENEFITS TO PUBLIC SAFETY

The use of laptops is of great benefit to dispatch personnel as well as field responders. By reducing non-emergency radio traffic, emergency information can be relayed more efficiently and timely. Reducing telecommunicator workload allows more time for critical decision-making and easier, more efficient dissemination of pertinent event and responder information. Electronic dissemination expedites critical information and promotes accuracy, efficiency, and safety.

Field personnel have access to unlimited quantities of resources to assist them, while limiting and reducing the number of inquiries made to the communications center. Electronic communication between field units and telecommunicators facilitates better service to the communities we serve, while fostering the safety of our emergency responders. ●

Debbie Gailbreath, RPL, has 34 years of experience in public safety communications at the Sarasota County, Florida, Sheriff’s Office. The Sheriff’s Office consolidated PSAP provides services to three law enforcement agencies and five fire/rescue agencies. The agency has utilized mobile dispatch for Sheriff’s patrol units since 1980 and for fire/rescue units since 2009.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The use of laptops permits field units to send and receive electronic messages from the dispatch center, but not from other field units.
T or F 2. The use of mobile data terminals originated in the early 1980s and was used by law enforcement to interface with computer aided dispatch systems.
T or F 3. To reduce radio traffic, silent dispatching should be used to dispatch all emergency events.
T or F 4. Laptops equipped with an emergency alert system transmit the alert to: <table border="0" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td>a. The dispatcher</td> <td>b. The media</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c. Other laptop users</td> <td>d. All of the above</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">e. A and C only</td> </tr> </table> 5. Protocols should be established to determine which event types can be dispatched electronically, rather than via the radio.
T or F 6. The use of laptops eliminates the dispatch center's responsibilities for providing assistance to field responders.
T or F | a. The dispatcher | b. The media | c. Other laptop users | d. All of the above | e. A and C only | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Unlike information that is transmitted via radio, electronic information is not captured and is not considered public record.
T or F 8. Silent dispatching: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Is utilized by law enforcement only b. Increases the need for additional staffing c. Reduces radio traffic d. Eliminates the need for radio transmissions 9. Electronic communication between field units and call takers/dispatchers facilitates better service to the communities we serve.
T or F 10. Resources available to first responders via a laptop may include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fire hydrant locations and hazardous materials plans b. Maps of schools and floor plans c. Agency policies, procedures and response plans d. All of the above |
| a. The dispatcher | b. The media | | | | | | |
| c. Other laptop users | d. All of the above | | | | | | |
| e. A and C only | | | | | | | |

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