CDE #77100

INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT



The Atlanta 9-1-1 center spent years preparing for its role as the public safety communications hub in a World Cup host city.

By Desiree Y. Arnold

I remember exactly where I was on June 16, 2022, when Atlanta, Georgia, was named a host city for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The city erupted, social media lit up and strangers were hugging each other on my television screen. It was the kind of pure, electric joy Atlanta hadn't felt since we hosted the 1996 Olympics — a moment that made you proud to call this city home.

While everyone else was celebrating, I already knew what was coming. As executive director of the Atlanta 9-1-1 center, my mind went immediately to the people I'm responsible for — my team, my center and the lives that depend on us getting this right. This wasn't just going to be the biggest event Atlanta had ever hosted; it was going to be the biggest test my career had ever faced.

I've thought a lot about why that moment felt so different from other big event announcements. Most large-scale emergencies have an edge to them — a beginning and an end you can see coming, even if you can't control it. A hurricane has a forecast track. Even a Super Bowl, for all its intensity, has a schedule you can count down on one hand. The FIFA World Cup was different. Atlanta doesn't get a break from its regular 9-1-1 call volume during the World Cup. The car accidents, medical emergencies, fires and everyday tragedies of a major American city continue — except now underneath an international spotlight, alongside hundreds of thousands of visitors who don't know our streets, systems, or, in some cases, the language.

There's a phrase our mayor uses, "whole of government," that sounds bureaucratic and cold on paper, but living it feels different. It means sitting across the table from Atlanta police and fire, public works, transportation, the Mayor's Office of Emergency Preparedness and many others, all of us carrying the same quiet fear: we cannot afford to get this wrong. Safety isn't abstract when you're the one who picks up the phone when someone's world is falling apart. It's personal, and it's a promise.

What people don't see in those meetings is how much trust must be built between departments that don't normally operate in lockstep. Police planning moves at one speed. Fire and EMS operate on different assumptions about risk. Transportation planning has its own universe of concerns — road closures, bus routes, pedestrian flow around stadiums. My job in many early planning meetings was to keep asking the same uncomfortable question: how does this affect the 9-1-1 center? Everyone else could plan around their piece of the puzzle, but we're the piece that absorbs the fallout of everyone else's plans. If a road closes somewhere and nobody advises us, that's a call that comes in confused and delayed.



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Within months of the official announcement, we were already in planning meetings. We attended citywide task forces. We created SMEAC — Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration, Command — plans and presented them to multi-agency groups, refining plans and conducting tabletop exercises. I won't pretend there wasn't fear in those early meetings. This wasn't a one-day event we could brace for and recover from. This was going to last six weeks.

Atlanta has hosted big events before. Our previous large event was the 2019 Super Bowl — a 10-day operational period. The Super Bowl gave us a data set, but also a false sense of what "big" meant. Ten days is a sprint — you can ask almost anyone to push hard for 10 days if there's a clear finish line and a chance to recover. Six weeks is closer to a second job stacked on top of the daily work people are already doing. It presented the challenge of sustaining motivation and energy over a prolonged period. I kept coming back to the same worry: we could plan the operational side perfectly and still fail if we didn't plan for human endurance.

Here's the truth nobody outside this profession really understands: our technology matters, our protocols matter, but none of it means anything without our people. The public safety telecommunicators who answer the worst moments of strangers' lives, shift after shift, are the heartbeat of this operation. And I was terrified of burning them out.

So, we did the math on staffing years in advance — attrition, retirements and hiring timelines — and made the difficult call to extend shifts to 12 hours. Was it the right call? Would our people have the stamina to sustain 12 hours, four days in a row? Staffing numbers became something we checked constantly, almost obsessively, updating as people were hired, retired or needed leave. It was like trying to hold water in your hands.

There were nights I laid awake running scenarios that had nothing to do with spreadsheets. What happens if we lose three veteran dispatchers to retirement in the same month we're supposed to be at full strength? What happens if morale cracks in week four, once the adrenaline of the opening matches has worn off but there are still two weeks left? You can model attrition on paper, but you can't fully model what exhaustion does to a room full of people whose job is to stay calm amidst chaos.

Then there was the technology — this is where I felt the global weight of this event most. We're not just serving Atlanta anymore. We're serving the world. Fans from Brazil,

Japan, Morocco, Germany and beyond — all dialing our center in moments of crisis, maybe not speaking a word of English, terrified and feeling alone in a foreign country.

What if someone calls and we can't understand them? What if a visitor doesn't even know our emergency number will work for them? We couldn't allow language to be the barrier between someone and the help they needed. So, we revamped how we handled interpretation, verified that foreign emergency numbers like 1-1-9 would route straight to us and trained staff to use technology to eliminate any language barriers. We conducted refresher training for location accuracy technology as well because in an emergency, seconds and feet matter more than people realize.

It's strange to think how much of this work is invisible to the very people it's meant to protect. A visitor from Uzbekistan or Morocco will never know how many hours went into making sure that if they dial for help, someone can understand them within seconds, not minutes. That invisibility is the whole point. If we do our job right, no one ever has to think about us at all. They just get help.

Perhaps the most emotionally exhausting part of this process has been contingency planning. What if our technology fails? What if our building itself is compromised? These aren't hypothetical questions when you're responsible for a city's 9-1-1 system during its largest event in decades. We identified a secondary site that could run concurrently with ours, because we refused to accept even the smallest chance that a call for help would go unanswered. That fear — of someone reaching out in their worst moment and getting silence — is the thing that drove every decision we made.

Contingency planning forces you to sit with worst-case scenarios in a way regular operations don't. You have to imagine the building flooding, losing power or a cyberattack taking down our systems mid-match with 80,000 people in the stadium. But it's also, strangely, what lets me sleep at night now — knowing we didn't look away from the hard questions, even when that would have been easier.

In the middle of all these massive, high-stakes plans, there were the small, human details such as making sure our own employees would have transportation and parking during six weeks of possible citywide gridlock. It's easy to forget the small things when you're planning for the world stage, but we never wanted our team to feel forgotten in the process of protecting everyone else. A telecommunicator who can't get to work because of road closures isn't just an inconvenience; it's a gap in coverage during the exact window we can least afford one. Taking care of my team isn't separate from taking care of the city. It's the same job.

This job has taught me that emergency planning isn't just spreadsheets and staffing models — it's love, in its own strange way. It's staying up late because you care about strangers you'll never meet. It's making hard calls about shift lengths because you care about the people who answer those calls. It's chasing down a backup location because you refuse to let anyone fall through the cracks.

It also taught me a kind of humility I didn't expect. No matter how much you plan, you can't control everything. What you can control is whether you showed up prepared, asked the hard questions early and built a team that trusts each other enough to hold the line when things get difficult. That's what years of preparation are really for — not certainty, but for readiness.



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When the whistle blew on that first match in Atlanta, the world saw stadiums, fans and celebration. What they didn't see were the years of sleepless nights, the endless revisions, the quiet fear and fierce determination behind every decision my team and I made. But we were there — steady, prepared and holding the line — because that's what this city, and the world, deserves. ●

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CDE EXAM #77100

1. On what date was Atlanta named a host city for the 2026 FIFA World Cup?
   a. June 16, 2022
   b. May 20, 2022
   c. June 16, 2023
   d. July 4, 2022

2. What position does the author hold at the Atlanta 9-1-1 Center?
   a. Deputy Director
   b. Executive Director
   c. Chief Operating Officer
   d. Communications Manager

3. What does the phrase "whole of government" mean in the context of this article?
   a. A federal program funding the World Cup
   b. A single agency taking sole control of event security
   c. A coordinated effort across multiple city agencies working toward shared safety goals
   d. A budget-cutting initiative for city departments

4. What does the acronym SMEAC stand for?
   a. Safety, Management, Execution, Analysis, Command
   b. Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration, Command
   c. Strategy, Method, Emergency, Action, Coordination
   d. Situation, Method, Evaluation, Action, Communication

5. How does the length of the 2026 World Cup operational period compare to the 2019 Super Bowl?
   a. The World Cup is shorter, at 5 days versus 10
   b. They are roughly the same length
   c. The Super Bowl was 10 days; the World Cup lasted six weeks
   d. The World Cup lasted six months

6. Why did the team decide to extend shifts to 12 hours?
   a. To reduce the number of employees needed on payroll
   b. Based on staffing projections accounting for attrition, retirements, and hiring timelines to cover the six-week event
   c. Eight-hour shifts were prohibited during major events
   d. To match Super Bowl staffing protocols exactly

7. What challenge did the author anticipate regarding international visitors calling 9-1-1?
   a. Visitors might not have access to phones.
   b. Visitors might not speak English or know the U.S. emergency number would work for them.
   c. International visitors were not allowed to call 9-1-1.
   d. Visitors would only be able to text, not call.

8. Why did the team search for a secondary site to operate concurrently with the main center?
   a. To reduce commuting time for staff
   b. As a training facility for new hires
   c. As a contingency in case the primary technology or building was compromised
   d. To handle overflow parking for employees

9. What "small, human detail" does the author highlight as easy to overlook?
   a. Providing free meals during shifts
   b. Ensuring employees had parking and transportation during gridlock
   c. Offering bonus pay for overtime
   d. Scheduling extra vacation days after the event

10. According to the author, what has this job taught them about emergency planning?
    a. That it is purely a technical, data-driven process
    b. That it is an act of care — akin to love — for people you may never meet
    c. That it depends primarily on luck
    d. That it matters less than public perception

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