

WHEN NORMAL IS NOT AN OPTION:

CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS PLANNING

The COOP ensures that public safety telecommunicators can continue essential functions of the emergency communications center during disasters.

By Stephen Martini

Few know better than public safety communications professionals how quickly things can go wrong. It's the reason we don't say "sure is quiet" in the communications center or dare to acknowledge we're bored. In a blink, otherwise calm descends into chaos and disorder, exploding the room into a cacophony of ringing phones, shouted declarations and pointed questions. Restoring order to disorder, calm to chaos, and clarity to confusing situations is our daily normal.

But what do we do when normal operations is not an option? When the phones don't ring? Or the radio won't broadcast? When the facility is compromised by severe weather or an insect infestation? When call volumes surge beyond available call takers?

How do we prepare for that unknown?

APCO recently unveiled a new resource for public safety communications professionals — the *Crisis Preparation Manual* — containing key insights on how to respond to a variety of high-priority/low-frequency events, including creating a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). This document, managed and maintained by the APCO

ProCHRT Committee, is available to all APCO members to improve operations.

The COOP exists to ensure the emergency communications center (ECC) can continue performing essential functions during an incident. Types of incidents include natural disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes or severe weather, and man-made disasters like terrorist incidents, riots or civil unrest.

Having a COOP in place ensures public safety telecommunicators can continue to carry out their functions with minimal interruptions in service to the community and responders.

An effective COOP must include some essential functions intended to keep critical operations functioning, including:

- A list of essential functions
- Delegation of authority
- Alternate facility location(s)
- Continuity in communications
- Management of records
- Staffing contingencies
- Training the COOP/testing equipment
- Guidance for returning to normal operations

For each category, agency management needs to identify a solution using a simple acronym — **P.A.C.E.** — **P**rimary. **A**lternate. **C**ontingent. **E**mergency.

Let's discuss each of these in a little more detail.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

In an unexpected emergency within the ECC, the telecommunicator must know which solutions used inside the center are critical and should be continued. The best way to start this process is simply taking

inventory of the resources available at each console.

Consider the basics.

- **Phones:** We have a duty to answer 9-1-1 and administrative phone lines. But we also know we need to receive ANI/ALI data on 9-1-1 lines so we should identify redundant methods to locate callers. We must be able to place outbound phone calls to return abandoned 9-1-1 calls, call wrecker services, connect with supervisors or call for help to assist with technology failures. While the communications center is often a customer of the larger phone system, it is important to consider failures to the call delivery system in this scenario as well. What do you do if the problem occurs outside the center but still impacts operations within?
P — Call processing equipment (CPE).
A — Handsets located at the console.

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C — Cell phones with active service powered with battery chargers at the console.
E — An alternate facility available to receive both 9-1-1 and administrative phone calls.

- **Radios:** We must be able to transmit and receive. But we must also be able to connect others to shared channels or talk-groups, often at the console, to facilitate

communications between agencies. In some cases, the radio console in the communications center has priority transmission over field radios so losing radio console functionality could impact how you normally operate when transitioning to alternate mobile or portable radios. While the communications center is often a customer of the larger radio network, it is important to consider failures to the radio network in this scenario as well. What do you do if the problem occurs outside the center but still impacts operations within?
P — Radio consoles.

A — Mobile radios mounted at the consoles.
C — Portable radios with batteries available in the communications center.
E — An alternate facility equipped with radios to transmit and receive emergency broadcasts.



- **Teletypes:** Our ECCs have a responsibility to receive and transmit information across NLETS to find missing or wanted persons or stolen items. If we can't do this, critical law enforcement operations grind to a halt.
 - P — NCIC connectivity at the console.
 - A — Redundant IP connections to your state switch.
 - C — An alternate location actively available to monitor your ORIs, if requested.
 - E — An alternate facility equipped with connectivity to the state switch.
- **CAD:** Computer aided dispatch software is how we daily track unit activity and calls for service. This software solution also interfaces with a variety of solutions, including records/report management software, station alerting, paths for incident notification and querying NLETS. When the CAD system goes down it is not just our method of documentation we lose but also our method of notification and recordkeeping! So we need to identify not only solutions for the first issue, but those “downstream” from the failure as well.
 - P — CAD at the console.
 - A — Paper CAD cards for temporary outages.
 - C — An alternate facility equipped with CAD connections.
 - E — Paper ICS-214 Activity Logs or alternate simple incident tracking and documentation solutions.
- **RMS:** Records/report management systems are used by response agencies to track information about a specific incident and those who responded. While this may not be located within the communications center, those agencies using RMS must realize how they will be impacted if interfaces to CAD fail and how they will continue to obtain relevant information to complete reports.
- **Computer Systems:** As NG9-1-1 continues to change the face of the communications center, it is not abnormal to have web-based resources at the console, including license plate readers, additional location and data providers, email, social media outlets or text messaging. Consider what you use in your communications center and plan your P.A.C.E.!
- **Generators and UPS systems:** Generators and uninterrupted power supply (UPS) systems must be considered when planning power to your facility! Power outages,

whether caused by severe storms or terrorist attacks, can be the quickest way to immobilize a communications center.

P — At least one UPS.

A — Bypass switch to allow direct access to the electric grid if the problem is your UPS.

C — A diesel generator on site prepared to power all essential technologies.

E — An alternate facility available to receive both 9-1-1 and administrative phone calls.

For all options listed above, a list of emergency numbers for vendors needs to be on hand, in both digital and paper format, for those who service your systems and software. These need to be accessible to on-duty personnel who can make the call as soon as equipment fails to reduce downtime and quickly enact the COOP.

DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY

At any given moment, you can identify who is in charge in your agency. Identifying the chain of command is simple to do with the typical organizational chart. But who is in charge at 2 a.m.? Or if the boss is out of town? Or if a disaster at the primary facility leaves your typical command staff incapacitated? This COOP needs to identify individuals — by role, not name — who will assume operational responsibility if the normal chain of command is not an option.

ALTERNATE FACILITY LOCATION(S)

Listed as the “Emergency” option in our P.A.C.E. plans earlier in this article, having an alternate location to conduct critical work is common to public safety communications professionals. An alternate location must be geo-diverse, meaning it should be far away from the primary facility that it likely would not be impacted by the same incident impacting the primary facility. A suitable back-up facility needs to be safely away from other hazards as well — outside of a flood plain, away from primary transportation routes, adequately removed from plain sight and lacking any signage identifying it as the alternate nerve-center. Since the alternate facility is intended only to perform critical functions, it can be smaller than the primary and lack some of the creature comforts and amenities often found at the primary site. This site is built for function not fashion and should be solely critical mission-focused. These may be

more than one location. For example, a mobile command vehicle may provide the perfect location to perform radio dispatch functions, while a large conference room in the county library may feature telephone connections able to host an impromptu call center. Ideally, all critical functions can be performed in a single, alternate location far enough from the primary facility to be safe but close enough to allow for quick and easy transition between locations in the event of a quick evacuation.

CONTINUITY IN COMMUNICATIONS

Communications provide responders with the ability to complete their essential job functions. Interoperable communications is critical but there may be situations where phone and radio communications are lost completely, requiring alternative methods for communications. For example, local jurisdictions may devise a system where calls for service are assigned in person at an incident command post that an officer departs from and returns to after completing each assigned response.

MANAGEMENT OF RECORDS

Each ECC has records, reference documents and resources critical to supporting essential functions during an emergency. These must be identified, maintained and accessible when the COOP is activated. Perhaps a USB drive containing all of these documents, or a binder with printed copies kept in a backpack? Many options exist for duplicating essential items for quick access and evacuation.

STAFFING CONTINGENCIES

The incident causing you to activate your COOP may be a long-duration incident, requiring you to change how long staff will work (perhaps adjusting from an 8-hour schedule to a 12-hour schedule to maximize personnel resources). The incident may have a broad impact, meaning some or several of your team may be personally impacted by the disaster and unable to respond. In that situation, you may need to request a Telecommunicator Emergency Response Team (TERT) response from a neighboring county, region or state. Identifying what those situations are, how you will recall personnel, how you will adjust schedules or request personnel through mutual aid agreements when you activate your COOP is critical to stabilizing operations quickly.

TRAINING THE COOP / TESTING EQUIPMENT

Once you identify the components of your plan required to ensure continuous operations, you must train your team regularly to ensure when the time comes they are ready to act. Similarly, technology and the facility must be tested regularly to ensure all critical components can bounce back if impacted by an outage.

RETURN TO NORMAL OPERATIONS

Commonly discussed in incident command system implementation, the time to

start planning for demobilization is at the time we mobilize. The same is true for the COOP. We must think of how to return to normal operations almost immediately. How can we bring the failed service back online? Restore the phone system or radio network? Return staff to adequate numbers and relieve TERT personnel? We must identify what minimum operations must be conducted successfully from the primary facility to determine when it's time to go home and continue normal operations. This may require repairs or restoration, or a complete assessment of the communications system at the primary facility prior to returning, including

a comprehensive review from information technology technicians.

Properly developed and executed, the COOP provides a critical link for emergency communications centers to continue critical services while experiencing any number of unexpected or unplanned service disruptions. ●

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- COOP stands for:
 - Continuity of operations proposal
 - Continual operating procedures
 - Continuity of operations plan
 - Confirmation of operational procedures
- APCO's Crisis Preparation Manual, revealed at APCO 2019, contains a helpful guide to assist with creating a COOP.
 - True
 - False
- Which of the following is not a natural disaster that may impact the ECC?
 - Fire
 - Flood
 - Severe weather
 - Active shooter
- Which of the following is not a man-made disaster that may impact the ECC?
 - Active assailant
 - Terrorist attack
 - Civil unrest
 - Earthquake
- The acronym P.A.C.E. stands for:
 - Problem, assignment, condition, effectiveness
 - Primary, alternate, contingent, emergency
 - Primary, actuary, conditional, eternal
 - Problem, alternate, contingent, effortless
- Which part of the COOP considers phones, radios and CAD?
 - Delegation of authority
 - Staffing contingencies
 - Essential functions
 - Training the COOP/testing equipment
- Emergency communications centers can be impacted by external phone or radio outages.
 - True
 - False
- Delegating authority means identifying who will be in charge in the instance the regular chain of command is:
 - Intact
 - Disrupted
 - Available
 - Unaffected
- Alternate facilities should be _____ and _____.
 - Geo-diverse, critical mission-focused
 - Small, close
 - Mobile, extravagant
 - Complex, expensive
- When should you start planning for a return to normal operations?
 - As soon as you implement the COOP
 - One week after implementing the COOP
 - When the incident commander advises to do so
 - When the agency leadership determines it is necessary

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