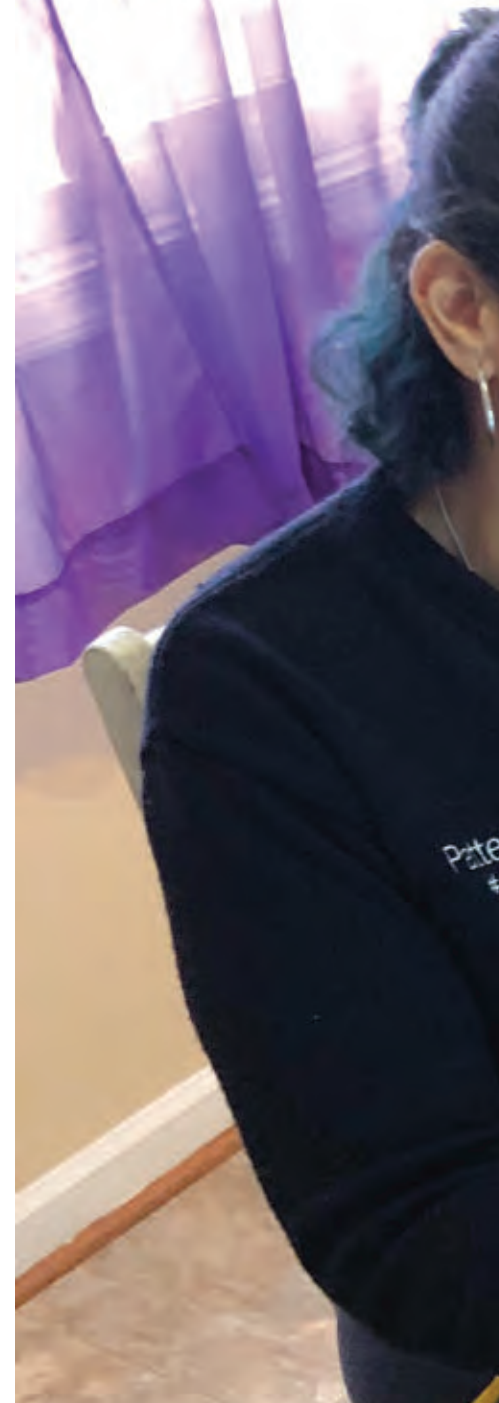


LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE NEW NORMAL

Isolation, comradery and call taking from home are the ingredients for Alexandria, Virginia's, pandemic response.

By Renee Gordon



A standing-ovation performance. I raised my hands for the touch-down. This is how I felt when our agency received our first 9-1-1 call at home. The Alexandria (Virginia) Department of Emergency Communications is no longer bound by the brick and mortar. Finally, technology can help us find our ever-changing new normal. Yes, our jobs are important and yes, we value the life and safety of the communities we serve. Now, what is normal for the rest of the economy can be normal for emergency communications.



The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the world. People fell sick and lost their lives, and our infrastructure at every level was tested. We had to adapt quickly to changes, and some things changed our lives forever.

Good can come from any situation. In less than one year, a vaccine suitable to administer worldwide was approved, saving millions of lives. Carbon emissions dropped by a record amount, creating cleaner air to breathe. More animals have been adopted in 2020 than ever before. The importance of time with loved ones was amplified, and the work from home revolution started. Normally, this would not include 9-1-1 and emergency communications.

HISTORICAL ADVANCES

From dialing 0 to get a switchboard operator to connect you to the nearest firehouse or police station to the first 9-1-1 call in Haleyville, Alabama, we have made significant advances. Public safety telecommunications, carriers and legislators have ensured we provide timely responses, location accuracy and assistance to the public until help arrives on the scene.

So, here we are in 2020-2021 amid a worldwide pandemic. How do we remain safe and available to continue to serve our communities? This is the story of the City of Alexandria, Virginia.

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Our Covid-19 response was multifaceted. Early on there were uncertainties. We didn't know much about how the virus was contracted or where it came from. We certainly didn't know how to avoid it. As science began to reveal what we could do to mitigate this crisis, our agency began to implement as many safety measures as possible.

SOCIAL DISTANCE

We split our shifts between the primary center and the backup center. Our shifts are relatively small, averaging about seven. Alexandria works 12-hour shifts (two on, two off, three on). This gave us the ability to have deep cleaning done at the center when it was unoccupied. If nothing else, it gave us peace of mind.

We started preparing in January and February 2020 when we first got word of the virus. We were well stocked on supplies before most took the threat seriously. The motto is and always will be, "expect the unexpected."

CLEANING PROCEDURES

Our inventory was in great shape. We made hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes available to all staff. We believed that if you are safe and careful at work and home, we had a better chance of steering clear of the virus. We felt it was prudent to wipe down your vehicle and doorknobs whenever possible. Everyone respected the process, and we didn't find the staff hoarding supplies. We all wanted to remain healthy and safe.

MASKS/PHYSICAL DISTANCING

We handed out masks to staff and everyone wore a mask. If you needed to dispatch without a mask, this was allowed. There had to be a reasonable amount of distance between staff, which was an easy feat with only seven employees in a center with 21 seats.

ISOLATION

When the COVID-19 positivity rate elevated in the Alexandria-Washington, D.C., area, we created what we called isolation teams. These teams stayed at our primary center over night for whatever period we felt would keep staff safe. We turned offices into sleeping quarters. This process ensured there was one whole shift of call takers and police/fire public safety telecommunicators.

Once inside, there was a sense of safety. There was no physical interaction with anyone outside the doors. We scheduled showers, cooked and ate together. I learned a lot in isolation. This time together built comradery, which we can often miss in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. This is the kind of relationship I want to build with my entire staff. We laughed, played cards, watched movies, exercised together and even feasted on crabs together.

I vowed to find ways to build relationships with staff that would not have been possible without the crisis. We had time to listen to each other. There is passion for our work, and everyone has a part.

QUARANTINE

Realizing that everyone needed a break, we did not have a problem when staff needed a vacation. However, we implemented rules to keep everyone safe. If you left town (out of the immediate vicinity of the ECC) or traveled to a hot spot, you were required to quarantine for two weeks before returning to the center. This is where having the ability to take calls from home has its benefits. Although we had a few positive cases, none could be attributed to exposure at work.

INVENTING THE REMOTE 9-1-1 CALL TAKER

The City of Alexandria upgraded its phone system in December 2019 in a joint project with Arlington County (Virginia). During the procurement process we also decided to upgrade our box phones, although we had never used them with the previous system. The box phones were designed to do remote operations in the field to assist police and fire when necessary.

We upgraded the box phones with the intention of trying to answer calls from home. This was considered a distant future endeavor. When Covid-19 hit and social distancing became a necessity, our future project became a now project.

Not everything went smoothly, but we remained focused on teamwork and the process unfolded quite well. Our IT team and the operations team did a phenomenal job working together. They pulled in the vendors, and we tested until we felt comfortable taking the first call from home. We were able to record our calls and knew that a dropped call would redirect back to the

next available call taker. IT, operations and management keep this machine moving.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

The City of Alexandria is an amazing place to work where the support is outstanding. Imagine telling your city manager that your center plans to begin taking 9-1-1 calls from home. There were understandable questions about liability but the amazing trust and support we received was priceless. We also had support from staff. Staff jumped in to test the capabilities. It worked, and we were all quite excited.

Things went so smoothly that I started to panic. One night I panicked so much about what we might have missed, I sent an email to APCO. I wanted to conduct a study. I begged to pick this apart, and I would share both good and bad with the emergency communications community. APCO graciously accepted and conducted a study. You can find it on the City of Alexandria website: alexandriava.gov/emergencycommunications/info/default.aspx?id=121242

THINGS TO CONSIDER

As I mentioned previously, the isolation teams really highlighted the importance of comradery to our center. One thing we realized with having remote call takers is the desire to interact with co-workers. Telework will work for some people, but more than half of our staff would prefer time to be with their co-workers. It's a nice break, but not all want to work from home.

Connectivity is an important issue. One thing we questioned was allowing staff to use their own internet connections. We decided against it for several reasons. First, it made the staff responsible for connectivity. Something could happen with the cable service beyond their control. Second, if they were responsible for connectivity, would we need to reimburse or pay the cost associated? We elected to give them FirstNet MiFi's or hotspots paid for by the department.

One thing we did not anticipate was the extra cost of forming the isolation. We were required to pay each employee stand-by pay for the hours they were not working, but required to remain on the property in isolation. We were still able to have several teams rotate through but had to readjust our cost model significantly.

Staff enjoyed the extra money and it was still worth every dime.

We had several close calls where people had come in with a possible exposure. We wanted to ensure that not only our employees remained safe, but their families as well. Several staff, including myself, had close interactions and were caretakers for parents. When there was a concern, we addressed it even if it meant keeping staff in a hotel until it was safe.

WHAT WE CAN BECOME

What we thought would be our future is happening now. There are so many ECCs either taking calls from home or in the works; the possibilities are endless. Several are experimenting with dispatching from home, as well.

We cannot afford to think that these new technologies are not for us. Let's get out of our traditional thinking and begin to see the possibilities. ●

Renee Gordon, RPL, CPE, ENP, has served as the Director for the Alexandria (Virginia) Department of Emergency Communications since 2015. Renee is an appointed Commissioner for the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies. Previously, she was the Director of 911 and Emergency Communications in Baltimore. She began her public safety career as a member of the Prince George's County (Maryland) Police Department and transitioned to public safety communications in 2008.

CDE EXAM #58174

QUIZ

- 1) Name some good that came out of 2020.
 - a. In less than one year, a vaccine suitable to administer worldwide was approved, saving millions of lives.
 - b. More animals have been adopted in 2020 than ever before.
 - c. The importance of time with loved ones was amplified.
 - d. The work from home revolution started.
 - e. All of the above
 - f. None of the above
- 2) Where was the first 9-1-1 call made in the United States?
 - a. Haleyville, Alabama
 - b. Savannah, Georgia
 - c. Beckley, West Virginia
 - d. Las Vegas, Nevada
- 3) Our motto is 'expect the unexpected.'
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 4) To dispatch without a mask, a telecommunicator must_____.
 - a. Be vaccinated.
 - b. Wear a clear face shield.
 - c. Have a reasonable amount of distance between themselves and other staff.
 - d. Previously contracted COVID-19.
- 5) What are isolation teams?
 - a. Teams that would stay overnight for whatever period we felt would keep staff safe.
 - b. Teams that would stay for dinner only until all have been fed and then leave.
 - c. Teams that would only stand by outside until needed.
 - d. Teams that would be a phone call away; they will travel to your agency when they can.
- 6) When returning from vacation, it was beneficial to be able to remote call take.
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 7) The original intended use of the box phones was designed to do remote operations in the field to assist police and fire when necessary.
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 8) What can you find on the City of Alexandria website?
 - a. The remote call taking APCO study
 - b. The remote call taking numbers for EMS only
 - c. The remote call taking numbers for police only
 - d. The remote call taking numbers for fire only
- 9) How did we handle connectivity from the home?
 - a. Used any internet we could locate.
 - b. Drove to the nearest fast-food restaurant and sat outside.
 - c. FirstNet MiFi's or hotspots.
 - d. Used our neighbor's internet services.
- 10) Working from home is for everyone.
 - a. True
 - b. False

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