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Recognizing 9-1-1 Telecommunicators as First Responders

by Jeffrey Satkowski,
Executive Director, Lapeer
County Central Dispatch

IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE, the spotlight often falls on the brave men and women who rush to the scene: fire-fighters, police officers, and paramedics. Yet, a vital but frequently overlooked group of workers serves as the first point of contact in a crisis: 9-1-1 telecommunicators.

Despite their pivotal role in saving lives and ensuring public safety, these professionals are classified as clerical office staff or, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office and Administrative Support Occupations.¹

Leaders in the emergency dispatch field believe it is time for 9-1-1 telecommunicators to be officially recognized as first responders at the federal level.

Critical, high-pressure work
9-1-1 telecommunicators spend their workdays answering distress calls, assessing situations, and dispatching appropriate emergency



9-1-1 telecommunicators are the first point of contact and a calm voice in the midst of chaos.

services. Theirs is the calm voice in the chaos, providing lifesaving instructions to callers in dire circumstances. They are the unsung heroes who work tirelessly behind the scenes, coordinating responses and ensuring that help reaches those in need swiftly and efficiently.

Classification of 9-1-1 telecommunicators as clerical office staff doesn't accurately reflect their work's nature or level of responsibility. Unlike traditional clerical roles, telecommunicators undergo extensive training in emergency communications, crisis management, and resource coordination. They must make split-second decisions under pressure, often serving as lifelines for those facing life-threatening situations.

Reclassification would eliminate disparities between different states and localities.

Moreover, 9-1-1 telecommunicators frequently encounter traumatic situations over the phone. Exposed to high levels of stress and trauma, they continue to perform their duties with professionalism and composure. Their work affects their mental and emotional well-being, highlighting the need for recognition and support commensurate with their role as first responders.

Benefits of reclassification

Reclassifying 9-1-1 telecommunicators as first responders at the federal level would bring several benefits. First, it would acknowledge the critical nature of their work and the

significant contributions they make to public safety. This recognition could lead to improved training standards, increased funding of staffing and resources, and better access to mental health support.

Second, it would help standardize the classification of 9-1-1 telecommunicators nationwide, ensuring consistency in their recognition and treatment as first responders. This would eliminate disparities between different states and localities, ensuring that all telecommunicators receive the respect and support they deserve.

Finally, recognizing 9-1-1 telecommunicators as first responders would enhance recruitment and retention efforts in the field. By elevating their status and providing

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¹ <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/office-and-administrative-support/home.htm>

Developing a Drone Program and Policies for Safe Operation

by Phil Kamm, Risk Control Consultant

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR new drone! After all the hard work and effort, the small-unmanned aircraft system (sUAS) has finally arrived. Next, you hear a half-chuckle, half-question: "Who gets to fly it?" This simple question shouldn't cause you to break out in a cold sweat—if you have properly prepared for the drone's arrival.

Drone use is on the rise

The use of drones has increased dramatically in recent years. Registrations of unmanned aircraft increased by 53 percent in 2023, with 864,000 registered drones and 332,000 registered pilots in the United States. Due to the vast array of potential uses, drone popularity within public safety and public works departments has significantly increased. Drones provide real-time videos and images for municipal operations that can increase safety and reduce mission times.

Drones can provide damage assessment of vehicle crashes; firefighting; searches in hard-to-reach areas—at night or under debris; delivery of emergency supplies such as food, water, and medicine; mapping affected areas; inspecting bridges, dams, and power lines; HazMat detection; surveillance of high crime areas...the list goes on.



Drones can help firefighters assess the situation in hard-to-reach areas and plan strategies to combat the blaze.

Developing drone policies

There are numerous resources to help guide your organization and ensure you are compliant with sUAS laws and regulations. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulates civil aviation, which includes drones, and is authorized to seize your aircraft and levy monetary penalties if you violate its rules. To create a sound policy, there is no better place to start your drone research than the FAA's website, www.faa.gov.

Be sure to include specific uses that constitute permissible flight, which might include law enforcement actions, disaster response, crash scene assessment, and overwatch of events.

Policies should also indicate what drone usage is prohibited. The FAA does not tolerate random or unlawful surveillance, harassment or intimidation, personal or business use, observing people not related to the task at hand, or violating healthcare privacy (HIPAA) regulations.

There are currently 864,000 registered drones and 332,000 registered pilots in the United States.

Drone policies do not need to be complex. They should stipulate ongoing training for pilots, maintenance procedures, and operational guidelines. When selecting your drone, emphasize safety and choose one that meets most, if not all, your basic requirements. Consider purchasing a drone with obstacle detection, avoidance technology, and other safety features. Battery life is also important: 30-minute batteries are considered the minimum, with extra charged batteries on hand a must.

Pilot guidelines, qualifications

All drone pilots must understand and follow the FAA's Part 107 guidelines. The FAA will often allow waivers to public safety agencies to operate outside certain restrictions during emergencies. When possible, request waivers before flying.

MMRMA has partnered with an FAA-affiliated instructor to offer drone safety courses, with future classes planned. Attendees receive in-depth information on areas such as airspace restrictions, flying Visual Line of Sight (VOS), flying over people and moving vehicles, night operations, reading maps, establishing Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFRs), infrastructure inspections, and more.

The knowledge and experience gained from MMRMA's two-to-three-day courses should provide more than adequate information for attendees to successfully complete the Part 107 certification process.

The FAA requires every drone that weighs between 0.55 and 55 pounds to be registered on its website.¹ Registration costs \$5 and is good for three years. Before you charge the batteries for your new drone, register it with the FAA. Failure to do so can lead to a hefty \$27,500 fine.

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¹ https://www.faa.gov/uas/getting_started/register_drone

The Discipline of Emergency Management in Michigan

by Therese Cremonte,
Livingston County Director
of Emergency Management

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT (EM) is the modern evolution born from the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950, signed into law by President Harry S. Truman on January 25, 1951. He described it as a "basic framework for preparations to minimize the effects of an attack on our civilian population, and to deal with the immediate emergency conditions such an attack would create."

Michigan-specific laws and structure

Act 390 of 1976 legislates the Emergency Management discipline in Michigan. The law defines the roles and framework followed by emergency managers in the government sector. The Governor of Michigan is the emergency manager for the state. The Michigan State Police (MSP) has responsibility for EM, through its Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division (EMHSD). The Director of the MSP, known as "The Colonel," is the direct conduit to the Governor.

According to Act 390, each Michigan county should have an emergency manager, and any jurisdiction with more than 25,000 residents must have an emergency manager. Otherwise, responsibility rests



with the jurisdiction's Chief Elected Official (CEO).

Managing and communicating in emergencies

The government EM system involves participation across local, county, state and federal levels, in that order. Decisions about whether to make an emergency or disaster "declaration" should be made with the collaboration of the emergency manager and the CEO.

Such a declaration is moved upward through the levels of the state system by the local emergency manager with the approval of the county CEO. Each declaration is then reviewed by EMHSD and the MSP Colonel. The Governor of Michigan may choose to make a "state declaration" and forward to the President of the United States to request a "federal declaration."

Collaboration is key

The unique responsibilities of the emergency manager make the discipline difficult

to understand and easy to disregard—until it's needed. Emergency managers must work collaboratively with first responders, 911 dispatch centers, health departments, public works, road commissions, government officials, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), private partners, hospitals, media outlets, and members of the local community.

The emergency manager works with first responders but does not usurp their responsibilities or duties. The local or county emergency manager helps to meet first responders' needs and works with elected officials and the media to get information out to the public. The emergency manager facilitates NGOs to meet community needs during an emergency but does not assume the responsibilities of the NGO.

The emergency manager also operates the Emergency Operations Center with trained, qualified staff to support the resources needed during a disaster.

EM is a five-stage, continuous cycle of prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation.

Preparation for unforeseeable events

Can emergencies or disasters be completely avoided? Of course not. That is why emergency management is legislated as an added layer of protection for communities in Michigan.

If the emergency manager does a good job with prevention, preparedness, and mitigation prior to an emergency or disaster; collaborates well with all afore-mentioned partners; makes plans relevant and flexible; and provides current, regular training and exercises, then the response and recovery phases will be short. The affected community can get back to normal with reduced government and business budget impacts.

The EM discipline is quietly at work during any "blue sky" day. There is no pause in the wheel of stages or the emergency manager's responsibilities. As soon as a plan is in place, it must stay up to date, be trained upon and tested,

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Wawatam Lighthouse at the Straights of Mackinaw began on dry land as a roadside attraction on I-75 near Monroe. When leaders in St. Ignace heard the lighthouse was to be demolished, they acted to save it. The 52' steel structure was cut apart, trucked to the Upper Peninsula, and relit in 2006. As such, it holds the distinction of being one of the last working light towers to be built in U.S. waters.

Michael Rhyner
Executive Director

Bryan J. Anderson, CPA
Managing Director

Cindy King
Director of Membership
Services and Human
Resources

Starr M. Kincaid, Esq.
Director of Claims
and Legal Services

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Notify MMRMA of drone(s)

Before your new drone takes its first flight, contact your MMRMA Member Representative about registering the drone with MMRMA's Underwriting department. If you don't, you may not have the proper coverage if your drone causes property damage or if a pilot is accused of misusing flight restrictions.

Don't forget the three most important aspects of operating a drone: training, training, and training. All members of your organization should be trained on your drone policy at least annually. Pilots technically operate under the supervision of administrators, so don't forget your leadership. They must understand the policies as they field questions regarding an employee's flying decisions.

Drone pilots should receive advanced training in the use of their agency's drones and equipment. However, until pilots have proven to be safe and proficient, they should practice their skill sets and



refrain from flying missions. And, of course, documentation for all training and maintenance must be kept up to date and ready for inspection.

As you make decisions on which drone best meets your needs, ask for input on what risk mitigation strategies have been most effective for other agencies. Solid policies and procedures on drone use don't have to be built from scratch. Listen to your peers and ask to use their materials as a reference. Capitalize on the many resources available and include real-life experiences in your drone program specific to your community's needs. Safe flying!

Reclassification of 9-1-1 Responders, continued from page 1

opportunities for career advancement, more workers may be attracted to this vital profession, leading to a stronger and more resilient emergency response system.

Reclassifying 9-1-1 telecommunications from clerical office staff to first responders is long overdue. These dedicated professionals are crucial in safeguarding public safety

and saving lives, often under challenging and stressful circumstances. It's time to give them the recognition and support they deserve by formally acknowledging their status as first responders at the federal level. By doing so, we can honor their contributions and strengthen our emergency response infrastructure for the benefit of all.

Discipline of EM, continued from page 3

with gaps then identified and addressed. Hazards must continuously be reviewed and considered. Public outreach is never ending.

Collaborative activities with local elected officials, response agencies, media, and NGOs are the core to protecting the community. In your agencies, emergency managers are there for your benefit. Stop by and ask them what they are working on. They will appreciate your interest and the opportunity to share their activities and accomplishments.

Therese Cremona served with the Michigan State Police for more than 26 years, including 5 years with the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division. In 2018, she was honored as Michigan's Professional Emergency Manager of The Year. She currently serves as Region One Homeland Security Planning Board Chairperson.

MMRMA reestablished its 911/Telecommunications Risk Control Advisory Committee, which meets several times a year to develop resources and support for members with dispatch departments and employees. Contact Membership Services for more information or if you are interested in serving on this committee when future vacancies arise.