

FAIRBANKS 911

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The Fairbanks dispatch center handles calls for service around the clock for Troopers all across D Detachment, Kodiak, the local court house, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Rail Road, Fort Yukon Police Department, State Parks, Tok Ambulance Service, after-hours calls for C Detachment, and for the FBI when it conducts operations in the Interior.



Prior to starting their shift, dispatchers prep their notebooks to take hand written notes on calls for service. Dispatchers in Fairbanks typically work 8-hour shifts, unless they are needed for overtime which can stretch a shift to 12 hours.



A Trooper looks over a dispatcher's shoulder as she is gathering information and passing it along to Troopers in the field attempting to track a fleeing suspect.

Ever heard of the CSI effect? Ask any cop and they will shake their head. TV shows like CSI make solving crimes look easy. In just one episode, the crime scene has been analyzed, DNA is back and the suspect is under arrest. It is a neat little package that is nothing like the real life timeline of how an investigation transpires.

The same can be said for dispatch. In the TV shows, dispatchers with sleek headsets type away as someone rambles in their ear about a crime then they look at high tech maps and send officers racing toward the emergency with a push of a button. Different scenes pop up on their monitors with pictures and information which can be passed on to responding officers... While this can be reality in some dispatch centers, it is far from the reality at the Department of Public Safety's dispatch center in Fairbanks. Walking into Fairbanks dispatch feels a lot like traveling back to the 80s.

At all the dispatcher stations, sitting next to the keyboards are notepads and pencils. If the pencil is sitting sideways it would roll off the desk. (The desks aren't slanted because of ergonomics; they broke and hang that way.) Dispatchers don't even have a headset or an integrated phone system.

"At all the stations there is one phone that has an admin line, Silver Alert line, Amber Alert line, a line for when we get calls from C Detachment villages and two village 911 lines," said Erica Roberts, an Emergency Services Dispatcher in Fairbanks. "Then there is the Fairbanks area phone for 911 which is sometimes transferred in from Fairbanks Emergency communication center. Sometimes they transfer non-emergency calls on that phone. Then we have little phones that are back-up phones incase lines go down but those numbers are not published."

If the internet goes down dispatchers have to call GCI to reroute calls to those back-up phones which aren't connected to the internet. In case the building needs to be evacuated, there is also a mobile phone dispatchers grab so calls for service can still be answered. Plus, one of the four dispatcher stations has the phone just for dispatching in Kodiak.

Just as complicated as the phone systems, is the computer systems. The computer programs don't talk to each other. That means the same information must be inputted into each program. A map can be pulled up, but it isn't detailed. Essentially it looks like an aerial photo with street lines and names overlaid— nothing nearly as nice as google maps.

As for the notebooks previously mentioned, those are used to track where the Troopers are and when and to make note of important comments that a Trooper is making. A dispatcher, either during an active call or a safety check, will write down the various Troopers' locations. At the end of the shift, the pages of the notebook are scanned, made into a pdf and saved for future reference. The only things to remind a dispatcher to check on a trooper if they haven't heard from them are regular timers, which can be overlooked during a frenzy of calls for service.

"We do the same processes as we've done since the 80s. The center was built in the 70s, has had some upgrades and new furniture since then,

but we are far behind on technology,” said Scott Vinton, Emergency Dispatch Supervisor.

Scott Vinton has worked at the Fairbanks Dispatch center for about 18 years. He has been the supervisor since 2012. “I moved to Alaska with the Air Force. After, I was told to apply for a dispatch position but didn’t get the job. A week later a second position opened and I got that one. We had two consoles, in 2002 it expanded to the current set-up but it is now passed its end of life. I’ve been through three phone systems and we expect to get a new one in July.”

Also in July, the Dispatch center is getting a new home. A literal hop, skip and a jump away from the current location in the same D detachment headquarters building, construction is underway to house more dispatcher stations with a new equipment upgrade and new technology known as Computer Aided Dispatch, CAD for short.

“CAD is used at the city of Fairbanks’ dispatch center, at Mat-Com... It allows for a dispatcher to pull data, to push data into other programs like ARMS (Alaska Records Management System), see where troopers are in real time,” said Vinton.

“There was one call, a shooting, where both FPD and AST were responding,” said Vinton. “FPD’s chief and our Colonel were in a meeting together and during the call the chief looked at his phone and could see where every FPD officer was. Our Colonel said I want that!”

It isn’t just helpful in active calls; it is helpful from an officer safety stand point. Unless a Trooper is on field training, they are alone.

“CAD has the ability to help track a trooper car or radio. If a Trooper doesn’t check in or is not responding, a dispatcher can see on a map where they are and send another trooper to check on them,” said Vinton. “In winter 1999 a Trooper was out driving. He rolled his vehicle and was incapacitated. A citizen found him. This was before cell phones. If we had CAD we would have been able to see the map and know something was not right because the car wasn’t on the road.”

In addition to visually aiding an active call and officer safety, CAD would allow for Fairbanks Dispatch track call volume instead of just calls for service. It would help with deciding staffing for dispatchers for any given day and shift. It would put certain decisions into a context.

Being a dispatcher is an intense job. Building a new dispatch center with modern technology and equipment will go a long way in helping get the job done to support the Troopers they send to calls for service. The new Fairbanks Dispatch Center is expected to be up and running in the middle of summer 2018.

Also in the beginning stages is a centralized statewide 911 dispatch center that allows DPS to serve as the Public Safety Answering Point for areas of the state that do not currently have one. One in four Alaskans lack enhanced 911 services. Often calls for help have to be transferred multiple times— sometimes, the call goes to an answering machine. A centralized 911 dispatch center would also serve as a back-up to places like the Fairbanks Dispatch Center during a large scale event. Moving towards a centralized statewide 911 dispatch center is a priority of the Department to keep building a Safer Alaska.

