

The Will to Communicate

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November 25, 2008, 0933 hours, Municipality of Murrysville Business District, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania – A high pressure transmission line carrying gasoline ruptured, creating a gasoline “geyser” that sprayed an estimated 10,000-12,000 gallons of gasoline 75 to 100 feet into the air and environment before the rupture was stopped, almost an hour after the incident began.

At 0939 hours, Murrysville Fire established an on-scene Incident Command Post and quickly transitioned to Unified Command (UC). The UC maintained constant communication with the County Department of Public Safety’s (DPS) 9-1-1 Center. Several miles away, at 0945 hours, the Municipality of Murrysville opened its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and fully staffed it by 1041 hours. The DPS Incident Response Team (IRT) and its Mobile Command and Communications Center (MCCC) arrived on scene at 1049 hours and immediately went operational, providing logistics and public information support to the UC. The county also staffed the county EOC with a watch team.

Three Basic Principles for Effective EM Communications

These five entities – UC, Murrysville EOC, DPS MCCC, DPS 9-1-1 Center and DPS EOC – employed three basic principles throughout the 12-hour event to establish, operate and maintain effective emergency management communications:

- Maximize the use of all available means of communications;
- Establish and maintain a “common operating picture”; and
- Practice “the will to communicate.”

UC/EOC personnel must be aware of and employ all means of communications available at the incident scene. Radio is one means. Other available means include landline, cellular, VOIP and satellite telephones; wireless computer connectivity; vehicular and foot messenger; or any combination of these.

During the Murrysville event, county fire departments, police departments, emergency medical service agencies, and the county hazardous materials response team relied heavily on radio communications over Westmoreland County’s four-year-old, highly reliable, county-wide 800 MHz digital trunked radio system. Concurrently, UC and EOC personnel monitoring operational radio transmissions from their locations received continuous real-time information on actions being taken and when.

The County IRT employed the MCCC’s wireless telephone and Internet-connected computers and field 9-1-1 telecommunications capabilities throughout the event. County IRT personnel repeatedly used wireless telephone to coordinate with the many media representatives at the scene. They also employed Nextel “direct-connect” to coordinate foam acquisition from Arnold Palmer Regional Airport and to coordinate with the media. Some actions required face-to-face communication. For example, Murrysville Police needed to drive to the local school district complex in the affected area to order an evacuation of their buildings to a safer location.

Need for a Common Operating Picture by All Entities Involved

A “common operating picture” means that all incident and emergency management entities can see and assess the same incident information in real-time. Emer-

gency managers at the Murrysville incident gained a good sense of occurring events by monitoring the radio. Radio transmissions, however, detailed just part of the picture. Westmoreland County and its local jurisdictions also use an Internet-based incident management program called Knowledge Center, developed by SSI, Inc. Knowledge Center allows emergency personnel to manage the various aspects of an event and to log and document, in real-time, all of the major actions taken by emergency managers and responders participating in the event.

9-1-1 Center telecommunicators and supervisors, county EOC watch team personnel, the MCCC IRT, the Murrysville EOC staff, the UC, and emergency personnel from surrounding counties posted 190 separate Knowledge Center log entries during the event, all of them in real time. Emergency management personnel who were logged on to the Knowledge Center knew exactly what was happening, regardless of their physical location. For example, emergency managers in the Region 13 Task Force area, which includes 13 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania and the City of Pittsburgh, were able to monitor the events from their home counties as they developed, and were able to communicate with personnel working the incident in Murrysville, by reading and posting entries into the Knowledge Center. This capability afforded everyone working the incident, and those observing the incident from afar, a true common operating picture in real time.

Conclusion

“The will to communicate” is the mind-set that incident command/emergency management personnel must practice in order to get critical

(continued on page 12)