**Factors that Create a Dynamic and Difficult Working Environment**

Two separate factors create a dynamic and difficult working environment in disaster areas:

* Changes in equipment
* Procedures and continual change

The operating environment in a disaster area will often be considerably different than what a telecommunicator is generally accustomed. Equipment, software, and facilities will be different.

As time passes, services will be restored and the operating conditions may change for the better or worse. Priorities, command structures, and the routing of citizen calls for services may change daily.

**Security and Personal Safety**

The personal security and safety of deployed telecommunicators is a critical consideration. The constituency in a disaster area immediately following the event may range from victims, emergency responders, to criminals.

**When deployed, consider:**

* Learn as much as possible about the deployment/disaster area. The terrain, conditions, and location of important landmarks. Danger areas, such as those not patrolled by law enforcement or known to have environmental risks, should be avoided.
* Do not go out of the PSAP alone. A "buddy system" should be used. This means telecommunicators should travel in pairs.
* Recognize signs and symptoms of stress and fatigue and react accordingly.
* Make sure drinking water is safe. Do not assume tap water is safe. Contamination of public water supplies and private wells after a disaster pose a significant threat of serious illness days and weeks after a disaster. If there is any uncertainty about the water quality, use only bottled water.
* Always carry identification and possibly health information. You should always carry your identification and deployment documents. If issued an identification card by the requesting agency, wear it at all times. Essential medical information, such as medical conditions, drug and food allergies, prescribed medicines and emergency contacts, should also be carried.
* No sightseeing. Take advantage of "down time" to relax or sleep. Telecommunicators may become injured or lost while sightseeing in unfamiliar areas after a disaster.
* Wear appropriate clothing. Clothing should be selected based on the working environment and weather conditions of the disaster area. Long pants and closed-toe shoes or boots should be worn in all conditions. TERT responders should only wear shirts, jackets, and hats with their team designations or their home agency designation. If these are not available, they should wear clothing without any team designation. Someone responding with TERT should not wear a USAR (urban search and rescue) shirt. Do not wear clothing that may be considered offensive because of language, images, or cut.

**Differences in Disaster Type**

The type of disaster will have a direct influence on the working conditions. Catastrophic disasters, such as hurricane Katrina, essentially eliminated safe drinking water, electricity, transportation routes, and brought the entire region to a standstill for days and weeks.

Terrorist attacks, such as the World Trade Center attacks, started and ended within a couple of hours, though the recovery took many months and even years.

A tornado may last minutes, yet the destruction may be widespread over a considerable and narrow area.

Depending on the extent of the destruction, the job duties of a telecommunicator and the length of deployment may vary considerably. The important point to remember is the recovery may change from deployment to arrival. As a result, telecommunicators must be able to adapt and change accordingly.

**Improvise, Overcome, and Adapt**

Since the operating environment will be different, it is imperative that telecommunicators:

* Overcome challenges.
* Improvise as necessary.
* Adapt to the situation.

This may be a continual process. Be prepared to learn quickly and "on the fly."

Make careful observations of how resident telecommunicators function and ask questions as often as necessary.

**PSAP/Agency Structure and Protocol**

The structure of the PSAP, technology, and the operational protocol are likely to be different and they may change over time as services are restored and additional emergency workers are brought to the area. You must adapt to the structure and protocols in use at the stricken PSAP.

**Structure:**

* **Chain-of-command:** The chain-of-command may be different and may change daily. The team leader of a deployed telecommunicator is your first point of contact. This will generally not change.
* **Center categorization:** In situations where the dispatch of calls was separated by function (i.e., different dispatch points for police, fire, and/or EMS), calls for services may be routed through a single PSAP or through a single dispatch console.
* **Dispatcher and call taker separation:** In situations where there may have been a clear distinction between call takers and dispatchers, those responsibilities may be combined in a single position. There may not be a distinction between these duties and the level of multi-tasking between different tasks may be higher.

**Technology Differences – Equipment**

* **The equipment (i.e., CAD, phones, software) will likely be different, not fully functional, improvised, or nonexistent.** Alternative methods of documentation, learning how to use existing equipment, and a general focus on the job should be the main priority. Do not be immediately concerned with "how outdated" the equipment may be or the "inefficiency" of the current system. These issues can be, if necessary, addressed later. The focus needs to be on learning the system to move to a supportive role as soon as possible.
* **Become familiar with equipment and limitations.** Identify the placement of equipment, resources, and information. Ask plenty of questions to ensure you have minimally obtained a basic ability to operate the equipment. The accessibility of local computer records, as well as the caller's information (ANI & ALI and/or Wireless Phase II location information) may not be fully accessible or functional.
* **Consider dynamics and continual change.** The equipment type and shortcomings may change as services are restored. As a result, the "system" of taking calls, dispatching first responders, and documenting activities may change daily.

**Protocol**

**Consider:**

* **Policy, codes, and local procedure.** Existing local procedures may not be in place depending on the nature of the disaster. The policy may be similar to the deployed telecommunicator's home policy, but the CAD codes, if used may be different. In addition, it is important to remember that the use of "10 codes" will be dropped in such situations and all radio transmissions will revert to plain English.
* **Prioritization of calls.** How calls are prioritized and the order in which emergency workers are dispatched may vary.
* **Documentation.** Automatic 9-1-1 and CAD documentation of incoming calls and dispatched units may be done manually with a pen/paper or log book.
* **Working with a diverse group of emergency responders.** It is not uncommon to work with a variety of different first responders (perhaps even including public works and private utility company employees). Keep in mind, these emergency responders may be from different states and may not have worked together before. Thus, the use of plain language in communication is critical.
* **Alternative job duties.** Deployed telecommunicators may be asked to do a number of different jobs/functions. These jobs should be appropriate given the situation, if not, remember you are in a disaster area and advise your team leader.

**Request for Service/Assistance**

The types of calls or requests for service will often be significantly different from those typically handled on a routine daily basis in a communication center. While it is common for telecommunicators to effectively manage high stress calls and periods of high volume, it is not common to continually handle a high volume of high stress calls.

Be careful in making assumptions based on the number of incoming calls. For example, if 200 calls come in one day, some telecommunicators from larger metropolitan areas may perceive this as a low number. However, if only two telecommunicators are taking the calls and dispatching emergency responders, the volume of calls has a new meaning.

**Other Issues and Considerations for Deployed Telecommunicators**

* **Geographical implications.** It is unlikely a deployed telecommunicator will be familiar with the geographical area in terms of streets, addresses, and other landmarks. By the same token, emergency responder may find it difficult to determine their location due to the destruction of landmarks and in the absence of street signs.
* **Type of service requests.** The PSAP may be the main point of contact for every citizen need, including restoration of utilities, resources, assistance, city/county offices, and any other type of need imaginable.
* **Quality of information.** The quality of information from callers may be poor. The caller may be emotional, angry, impatient, and may not know their physical location. Be prepared for a high volume of high stress calls. Remember, the caller has likely experienced a traumatic situation and their demeanor may be a result of the disaster and not a personal attack.
* **Responding to calls/questions.** Be truthful to callers and avoid promising anything that cannot be delivered. Avoid giving legal advice. The laws and civil statutes in states tend to vary considerably. What is true in one state may be incorrect in another state. Responses concerning similar questions must be consistent. The availability or lack of services/resources should be identified and any changes noted.
* **Inability to respond.** Be prepared to be unable to respond. The unavailability of first responders to provide a timely response may be limited due to limited personnel, impassable roads, or other conditions. There may not be little, if anything you can immediately do for the caller. These and other difficult calls will be very challenging.
* **Emergency responder requests for assistance.** Generally when emergency responders request assistance, backup is immediately sent. However, the resources may not be available in disaster areas. Additionally, emergency responders may make unrealistic requests (that would otherwise be common in non-disaster areas). Be patient.

[Close](javascript:self.close())