



Collaborating for Safer Communities

South Sound 911

Washington, United States

Community safety requires collaboration among governments, emergency services, and citizens. As calls for service increase, city agencies must work together with common purpose to help bridge gaps and improve safety.

“We can’t do it alone anymore,” said Scott Engle, chief of police for the Puyallup Police Department in Pierce County, Washington. “The world has become very complex, and we are all dependent on one another to work together.”

Part of the greater Seattle metropolitan area, Pierce County is the state’s second-most populous county. Previously, the county’s emergency services struggled to communicate effectively. Police departments could not efficiently share information with each other or with fire and rescue agencies. A few high-profile incidents tested the interoperability and effectiveness of the county’s dispatching and radio systems.

“A lack of interoperability really slowed down the response times that we were able to do in emergencies,” said Doug Richardson, a Pierce County Council member. “Particularly when you need to trade off to another agency, it’s critically important that they know what’s going on.”

When Pierce County leaders sought to improve their public safety communications systems and operations, they went all-in on collaboration and formed a new interlocal

agency, South Sound 911. Officials presented a plan, and residents voted to fund it through a 0.1 % sales tax.

With the support of local governments and public safety agencies and the approval of county voters, South Sound 911 began consolidating five public safety answering points (PSAPs). This included building a new communications center, replacing outdated 911 phone systems, improving 700 MHz and 800 MHz radio systems, and providing nearly 4,600 new public safety radios for first responders.

It also meant implementing a regional computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system that would improve information exchange among call-takers, dispatchers, and first responders. For this major undertaking, South Sound 911 selected Hexagon.

Hexagon’s Safety & Infrastructure division worked with South Sound 911 to implement its CAD system, configure it to the needs of 41 agencies, and onboard those agencies into the consolidated system in phases – first police, then fire.

Shared Systems & Information

South Sound 911 employs about 230 people, many of whom work in shifts to provide 24-hour service for 911 call-taking, dispatching, and records management. With

the consolidated system, South Sound 911 is realizing efficiencies to improve emergency communication and response services.

“Using a shared system, we’re able to get that data to and from different agencies faster than we ever were before,” said Tim Hannah, assistant director of South Sound 911.

Kim Barnard, a communications officer with South Sound 911, shared an example:

“I remember working with fire (dispatch) and a caller was not quite sure where his address was. He needed medical aid, so time was of the essence. We were both working on the same system and using different tools so that we could find his address, and the outcome was great.”

That collaboration extends beyond the communications center to first responders in their communities. Using laptops, tablets, and smartphones connected to the CAD system, police officers in different jurisdictions can see what neighboring officers are responding to, share data, and help each other. Police and fire agencies can also seamlessly work together.

Previously, an officer might unknowingly drive past an active call in another jurisdiction because departments weren’t using a common system.

“Now, if an event is happening outside of our jurisdictional borders, we know about it,” said Kelly Busey, chief of police

with Gig Harbor Police Department. “That ability to look at the same CAD data and use the same radio communication helps us help them, and vice versa. If there’s a big regional event or a need to exchange information between two agencies on an event, person, or crime, we can freely share that information in real time.”



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Kim Barnard
Communications Officer
South Sound 911

Major incidents, by nature, require such cross-jurisdictional response.

“In the last year, our department responded to two major passenger train derailments,” said Jim Sharp, fire chief with West Pierce Fire & Rescue. “Both of those were very significant incidents that required a lot of resources to come in from different jurisdictions. Being able to communicate and coordinate with all those different teams through one dispatch agency greatly improved response.”

This value reaches beyond immediate incidents. For instance, Puyallup police look at incident reports that have occurred in nearby jurisdictions during the previous



Fire departments can now receive detailed information from the communications center while en route to a fire or medical call via mobile data terminals in their vehicles linked to the CAD system. This allows them to start making operational decisions before they arrive on scene.

24 hours. Engle said this “regionalization of information” enhances situational awareness, helping officers become safer and more informed.

More Cost-Effective & Efficient Operations

By consolidating systems, vendors, and maintenance contracts under Hexagon, South Sound 911 is also saving taxpayers money and improving the efficiency of local public safety agencies. Police departments that once ran their own communications centers now rely on South Sound 911 for call-handling and dispatching, which allows them to focus on law enforcement.

“Dispatch and 911 call receiving is a very expensive enterprise, and it’s difficult for one agency to do that on their own,” said Sharp. “Bringing multiple agencies together makes it a lot more successful and cost-effective and builds efficiencies into the system.”

Such a consolidation is largely about efficiencies – not just financially, but also operationally. For example, fire departments can now receive detailed information from the communications center while en route to a fire or medical call via mobile data terminals that are linked to the CAD system in their vehicles. This allows them to start making operational decisions before they arrive on scene.

These mobile capabilities also enable police to complete reports in the field instead of returning to their stations, which improves productivity and provides a more visible police presence in communities.

“When we share the data, when we share the infrastructure, when we share the people, it becomes more efficient for all the agencies involved,” said Busey.

Better Community Involvement & Impact

Collaboration is built into South Sound 911’s governance as well. South Sound 911 is led by a policy board of elected officials, and an operations board of police and fire chiefs. Hannah explained how this stakeholder collaboration and transparency benefits public safety communications.

“These decisions were not made in the back room by a bunch of technology folks,” he said. “It’s really a collaborative effort amongst the police agencies, fire agencies, and South Sound 911 to come up with the best solutions.”

And they’re not done yet. With a shared operational model, South Sound 911 can further expand regional collaboration and integrate with other systems and public services. For example, it entered into an agreement to extend the CAD system and mobile applications to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, a U.S. military facility in Pierce County.

Agencies can also use richer data from the consolidated systems to improve the services they provide.

“We’re using the data in our systems to go beyond what we used to do,” said Hannah. “Now we’re using data to really drive discussions and help our agencies recognize how they can be more proactive in their communities.”

Making a positive impact on communities in Pierce County is the ultimate goal.



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Scott Engle

Chief of Police, Puyallup Police Department
Pierce County, Washington

“I can’t promise there will never be another fire, or the need for another law enforcement call, but by bringing all those agencies to the table and staying up with technology, we can provide the residents of Pierce County with the comfort of knowing that when they call or text 911, they’re going to get the support they need,” said Richardson.

Engle agreed. “Having all the agencies under one CAD system – it’s the best thing that’s ever happened.”

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