El Paso County safeguards public with scalable dispatch capabilities

CAD solution supports interoperability between 39 agencies

El Paso, Texas, is unique. Situated in the farthest western corner of the state near the U.S.-Mexico border, it is the 20th largest city in the United States. Despite its size, it is isolated from other large cities in Texas.

Responsible for a population of about 850,000 residents, the El Paso County 911 District handles more than 1.1 million calls for service annually. The 911 District supports one primary public safety answering point (PSAP) with a combined 54 call-taker and dispatcher positions, one backup PSAP with 38 combined positions, and 11

secondary PSAPs with a total of 26 combined positions. Together, these PSAPs serve 39 public safety agencies.

Because of El Paso's isolated location, the ability for these PSAPs and agencies to support one another is exceedingly important, not only for day-to-day operations, but also during major events and incidents. The 911 District needed a shared computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system to support interoperability among emergency response agencies across the region.

Ahead of the trend

Long before the concept of an Emergency Services IP Network (ESInet) was a reality, the 911 District implemented Hexagon's CAD solution. It needed a strong, reliable system that could handle police, fire, and medical dispatching for jurisdictions with populations from 1,000 to hundreds of thousands. Before, five larger agencies shared a common system, leaving all the smaller agencies to support themselves with existing resources and track calls with spreadsheets.

Now, the system is shared countywide. Beyond the initial 911 call, Hexagon's CAD solution provides a platform to share incident information and creates situational awareness when multiple agencies respond to the same incidents. The 911 District provides the infrastructure and technology, while the partner agencies handle dispatching. Currently, 39 different agencies – 24 law enforcement, 10 fire, four EMS, and El Paso County 911 – benefit from the shared system. These technologies are provided, managed, and funded fully by the 911 District.

Solidarity in tragedy

The city of El Paso was the site of a tragic domestic terrorism incident on Aug. 3, 2019. On that day, a gunman walked into a Wal-Mart store with an AK-47 rifle and opened fire. More than 20 people were killed and more than 20 others injured. El Paso County 911 District Director Scott Calderwood said the tragedy taxed the community and response systems to their limits, so the CAD system's scalability during that time was crucial.

The system was able to scale from 10 call-takers to 19, and police dispatch pods were increased from 8 to 12, with no changes to the CAD system. The users were able to simply log in and begin working. These same capabilities aided the 911 District during a visit by the pope to the border region, which required collaboration from local, state, and federal organizations.

"Our team feels the collaboration is second to none," said Calderwood. "During both of these events, El Paso was able to coordinate multiple agencies all responding to the same incident and all with the same situational awareness."

Knowing that other cities and regions may also face unpredictable incidents, Calderwood's advice to 911 agencies is to select a system that can easily scale and respond to fit their needs. "Choose a product that will be able to adapt to your changing environment and do so reliably," he said.

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