

Santa Visits O'Hare International Airport

By Geoffrey Downey

Ken Warrick's criteria for upgrading his center could have been mistaken for a 10-year-old's Christmas list. It was long, detailed, and full of requests for all of the latest gadgetry technology had to offer. What made Warrick's list different was that he didn't want these things so much for himself as for the benefit of total strangers.

Warrick is the manager of the Communication Center at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. The communication center handles 9-1-1 calls relating to airport emergencies. When it came time to replace the center's equipment, Warrick's list of needs was longer than the wait for a delayed flight.

"I needed greater speed dial capability. Faster access to supervisor monitoring. I also wanted to change the audio quality into the dispatcher's ear," Warrick said from his office at O'Hare.

This was only the tip of the iceberg. Other essentials included caller ID, a digital trunk line, touch screen monitors, and statistical reporting.

In January 1999 (after shopping was complete and equipment selections were made), the communication center was remodeled and wires pre-laid for the arrival of the ECS-1000™ digital switch and ten SeNTinel 9-1-1™ integrated workstations. The equipment was installed shortly after, and a changeover Warrick describes as "one of the smoothest changes we've ever had in our life" was made.

"The introduction of the new equipment released us from the burden of having to deal with old hardware and software that was no longer supported or repaired. The prime criteria that drew my attention to the new equipment was its product reliability and the way it addressed our Y2K concerns," Warrick said. "Chicago Department of Aviation commissioner, Mary Rose Loney, and the Communication Center have always prided themselves in being on the cutting edge of technology for communications."

But how much pressure can the manager of a PSAP, whose only concern is a single airport, feel? If numbers serve as any indication, a fair bit. Warrick calls O'Hare International a "city within a city" with good reason. Spread across 7,700 acres are four terminals and a hotel. More than 70 million people annually (almost 200,000 a day) come and go through 162 aircraft gates and 3,000 daily flights.

Numbers alone don't tell the entire story. Warrick and his team of thirty call-takers and six supervisors face the same demands as a standard PSAP. "Calls can run anywhere from a request for a police officer for a criminal act in progress, to a request for an ambulance for a sick person, to a fire in a trash can, to a fire in an airplane," he said. Aside of the typical calls, they must also