

Less is More in Caldwell County, NC: A Story of Integration

By Carla Bates and Richard Jenkins

By the very nature of their work, public safety people want to do what's best for their communities. After all, helping others is what we're about. The challenge lies in finding the best way to achieve that goal with the resources available to us.

Here in Caldwell County, North Carolina, we came face-to-face with this issue in 1998. After years of good service, our equipment became expensive or impossible to maintain, difficult to work with, and incapable of handling new demands for records management or wireless call support. We were no longer able to respond as effectively to our community's public safety requirements as we would have liked.

Our best instincts were telling us it was time for a change. Fortunately, the Y2K issue surfaced at the same time, and we were able to use it as a springboard to help generate community interest and support. Since the county was also planning to build a new jail and relocate the sheriff's department, it seemed the best thing we could do was to update everything.

We were looking for a PC-based solution that would help us keep pace with change through software upgrades, instead of expensive and ineffective hardware upgrades. Once we began to investigate what was out there, we knew we would need outside expertise to help us achieve our goals. After reviewing different products and speaking with other 9-1-1 centers, we asked CML Emergency Services to help us out.

An Amazing Transformation

To understand what's happened here, you have to know where we started. We had four PSAPs (public safety answering points): one in the county sheriff's office, one in the Lenoir Police Department, and two in Granite Falls (one in their police department and another in their fire department). Each had its own, totally independent, back room equipment.

We used a regular telephone system, with separate phones for 9-1-1 and administrative calls. Radio was handled with a push-button radio console. We used reel-to-reel Dictaphone for recording calls, and we used a DOS-based CAD that had the habit of being down more often than it was up. We had one monitor per position, and our dispatchers had to toggle back and forth to display the information they needed.

When we installed our new systems in January, everything was integrated onto CML's Universal Dispatcher™ workstation. In the sheriff's department, we have three monitors per position; in the Lenoir police department, there are four. We can display the drivers' license, telephone, radio, and CAD all at the same time—the information our dispatchers need is all right there.

Our four backroom switches have been replaced with a single CML ECS-1000™ digital switch that handles wireless calls and automatically routes calls to the appropriate PSAP depending on the location of the caller. The new technology has enabled Granite Falls to consolidate its

operations, saving the county money by reducing the number of PSAPs from four to three. We may be able to centralize our operations further over time.

With our new integrated equipment and applications, now when we receive a call, the SeNTinel screen is instantly populated with the ANI/ALI data, and information is automatically transferred to our CAD. This allows us to keep track of where a call is at any time. It provides access to jail management and RMS databases. And it gives our dispatchers on-line SOPs (standard operating procedures), APCO's EMS, LE & Fire guide cards, and an on-line North American Emergency Response Guide (NAERG) to assist in handling emergency calls.

A Smooth Transition

The county sheriff's department was the first to go on line, followed by the Lenoir police department. Because Granite Falls is served by a second Local Exchange Carrier, it took a bit longer to set up; CML had to coordinate the efforts of two telephone companies to get them on-line. In the interim, Granite Falls' dispatch needs were handled by the County 9-1-1 center. It was easy to handle their calls, then to change the routing with CML's ECS-1000 switch when Granite Falls was added into the loop.

CML also offered a unique solution for dealing with larger emergencies. As part of our upgrade, we equipped our EOC (emergency operations center) with their SeNTinel Web EOC™ package. This system fully integrates the EOC with our 9-1-1 centers. Now, in the event of a large-scale emergency, calls to our PSAPs will automatically update status boards in the EOC. They can use Web technology to bring in live camera feeds, weather reports, status updates of rescue operations, and other information they need to help them manage the deployment of emergency resources.

An Information Revolution

We thought we were doing a fairly good job of maintaining call statistics and records with our old system, but we weren't even close to what we can do with our new one.

Before, we were able to print out the ANI/ALI and time of call data. Period. Now we get that, plus a complete transcript of the call transaction, a chronological summary of what happened, the time of each action, and when the call was completed. By eliminating the task-oriented work that used to be required for maintaining and reporting stats, we definitely save time and have streamlined our jobs.

We can now more accurately track both the number and type of calls we receive. In fact, we have already noticed a significant increase in call volume over last year, both in the number of calls per incident, and the number of incidents being reported. We attribute some of this increase to the growing popularity of cell phones. In the past, we used to get one or two calls following a highway wreck, but now we're getting as many as five or six. At the same time, the number of calls for service is increasing. This seems to be part of a national trend either because there are more people or it's just a sign of the times.

Now that we have better information about the demands we're facing, we can more effectively evaluate what we're doing and plan for the future as we see trends develop both in the nature and

volume of calls we receive. It helps us provide a better service to the community and to keep county officials and citizens informed about the issues that matter to them.

A Different World

When we survey where we are today, we believe we've gone a lot further than we had dreamed possible: we consolidated our equipment, integrated our operations and services, and achieved tremendous gains in productivity. For those of us who have been here over many years, we're truly in a different world.

The final chapter of this adventure still has to be written. Perhaps it never will be as we constantly try to manage shifting demands and attitudes. But we are confident that we can move forward with a flexible, responsive infrastructure that can readily be adapted as new technologies are developed in the future.

The bottom line is that we feel we can achieve the goal that we share with our colleagues across the country: that of providing the best level of emergency response services for our community with the resources and technologies that are currently available. We all sleep a little better at night with this knowledge.

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