

Going for Gold—Emergency Communications Planning for the Salt Lake City 2002 Olympics

By Jerry Evans

Event planning for the 2002 Winter Olympic theater in Salt Lake City, Utah, is much the same as planning for any other large scale event where public safety is to be considered. And yet, it is very different. One could relate it to planning for an earthquake for which you knew the exact date it would occur.

Our planning began close to three years before the Olympics. Changes were constant and will probably occur right up the Olympic opening ceremonies. Change was probably the keyword for the planning stage.

The first thing that became obvious to us was the incredible overuse of acronyms. Like the trades and professions, the Olympics carries with it a whole new list of terms and acronyms. The most common term became the word “venue”. Venue applies not only to the areas where the events are held, but also to the events themselves, and the support areas such as the Medals Plaza. Salt Lake City will host only ice-skating as a sport venue, but will also host other non-sport venues such as the Olympic Stadium for opening and closing ceremonies, the airport, and several hotels, etc.

Since the terrorist attack on the Israeli athletes in September of 1972 in Munich, Germany, security has been a big issue for planning. This was increased after the events of September 11 in our country. While the Olympics are a symbol of unification and peace among nations, it cannot be overlooked as a worldwide broadcast event.

Early in the planning was the formation of UOPSC (acronym for Utah Olympic Public Safety Committee). The committee’s mission was to identify communication needs for Federal, state and local agencies; design a communication system; manage operations, insure maintenance, and identify training needs. All forms of communication were identified including phones, radios, video, data lines, pagers, and fiber optics, to mention a few. A separate subcommittee was formed dealing only with public safety communications. The keyword here was security, as most of the public safety communications would be handled by the FBI, Secret Service and local police agencies.

My dealings are with fire and EMS, thus the concentration for my areas became issues such as staffing, equipment, budget, policies and procedures, interoperability, and day-to-day operation.

Staffing began with the cancellation of all vacation and holiday requests during the month of the Olympics. Since the sheer numbers of participants, support personnel, and visitors would increase dramatically, it was reasonable that our fire and EMS events would increase proportionally. The Olympic Committee approved monies for overtime,

which helped with the increased staffing needs. Our dispatch personnel will work their regular shifts and will commit to a certain number of overtime shifts. These were left up to the individual. Some will want to work as much as possible for the extra money. Some prefer as little as possible. We asked everyone to commit to some overtime. Volunteers will cover the remainder. These volunteers needed to be people from the same profession and, in our case, accredited Emergency Medical Dispatchers. This necessitated solving the problem of housing and feeding. A local host volunteered to provide for the volunteers.

Equipment was the next item to address. It helped to have our local telephone company as an Olympic sponsor. They became directly involved because of their vested interest. Extra 9-1-1 consoles are being installed to handle the expected number of 9-1-1 calls. They are not, however, free. It is a budgeted item coming from our 9-1-1 surcharges on telephones in our area.

With current technology, we decided it was not longer necessary to put dispatchers at each venue command center. As a result of the experience gained at the Sidney games we decided instead to use a “business as usual” plan. Emergencies are what we do for a business and it is only the increased volume we needed to deal with.

Policies and procedures follow closely with current practice. We asked that as few new terms be used as possible and that there be no special codes to learn. We attempted not to rename venues so that locations would be familiar to dispatchers. A good example of this was the Olympic Village. At a former Olympic site the dormitories were renamed after animals and different floors by color. An emergency might be reported in gazelle red 19. We wanted it reported by address, floor and apartment number, just as it is now. Plain language in place of nine or ten codes will be used. The police will use encrypted radio.

Because many agencies will be involved, the State Radio Call Number Guide will be used, which has been in use for a number of years. Radio interoperability was a concern since the tornado went through Salt Lake City several years ago and communication was difficult. This was solved in two ways. First we received, through the Department of Justice, a grant for a radio interoperability system. Since that time we have also been able to get all fire departments and police agencies in the area on the 800-band radio. Talk groups and event channels have been specified for the Olympics.

Budget is a major concern. We had heard that the Olympics brought big money and infrastructure that would be left after the games were over. The games spend enormous amounts of money but our experience in the communications area was that beyond the overtime money previously mentioned, everything else had to come from our local budget. This was more than challenging. Vendors were willing to contribute equipment in exchange for being able to advertise that it was used for the Olympics. Because of strict copyright standards this was not possible.

The bottom line has become, “business as usual”. Are we concerned about terrorists, demonstrators, huge, hard-to-control crowds, code enforcement, etc.? Of course we are. But emergency response is our business and we will meet the demand.

And do we get to go to the events? Yes, the same as you do. Buy the tickets and find the time on your few days off to attend. I suppose I will enjoy the games the same as most of the world—watching it on TV, sitting on my sleeping bag in my office eating an MRE and drinking bottled water. But the excitement of the games far outweighs the inconvenience or concerns. It is a world event, and Salt Lake City will do its best to be a good host, and provide the athletes the opportunity to do their best and go for the gold.

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