

The Need for Wireless E9-1-1—The Human Side

By Craig Whittington

The critical nature of emergency services and the rapidly changing world of technology demands that we must constantly strive to update, revise and improve our general knowledge base of this, our chosen profession. Truer words were never spoken as was when someone once told me that “in this business your either moving forward or falling behind, because here, there is no in between”.

However, just as the title implies, I would like to take you my fellow communications professionals away from “technical” side of emergency services and look at “*The Human Side*” of a recent incident, and what it could do for Wireless E9-1-1 in your area.

Like all true stories, this one is about real people faced with real issues. The primary individual in this story is the victim, Mark Taylor. Mark is the co-owner of a successful business in Greensboro, North Carolina. He is happily married to a lovely lady, has 2 teenage children, owns a beautiful home in a nice neighborhood and, as an avid outdoorsman, he loves to spend his spare time on his sailboat. In fact, if not for one problem most would say Mark has the perfect life. You see, several years ago Mark discovered that he has a potentially life threatening medical condition.

His condition is not one that he can control with daily medications, diet or exercise. His “condition” can strike at any time, and without rapid medical intervention he would surely die. What strange and exotic condition plagues Mark Taylor you ask? He is allergic to bee stings. Yes, that’s what I said, Mark is *highly* allergic to bee stings! Even the smallest sting can cause such a violent reaction that, if not treated, would most likely end Mark’s life.

Now before you begin to think this author has taken leave of his senses (and some here in North Carolina would say that happened long ago), humor me and let me tell you of what happened on Sunday, November 27, 2000.

When the normally cold November weather gave way to a warm afternoon, this lover of nature took the opportunity to get out of the house for a few hours to check on his boat. It was a trip he had made several times before, but this time, it would be a trip he would never forget.

Just after 3 p.m., as he was driving leisurely through the rural Guilford County on his way back home, Mark’s entire life suddenly was threatened. Before he knew it, a small bee flew through the open window of his truck and stung him on the neck.

Mark has known for many years that he is allergic to bee stings, so when he felt the bee sting his neck he immediately knew he was going to need help. Within a few moments,

he began to feel his body reacting to the sting—his vision began to blur, and as he fought to find a spot to pull his truck off the roadway, he could feel his airway begin to close.

As he brought his truck to a stop, his thoughts were filled with the knowledge of what he had to do. To survive he knew he had to inject himself with the emergency medication he always carried. (Mark carries a syringe containing a medication called epinephrine, a drug that is normally prescribed by a physician to people like him who suffer bee sting allergies.) Quickly he broke open the medication vial and shoved the needle through his blue jeans and into his upper leg.

Having had bee stings before, he knew that the medication would only slow the growing allergic reaction and that he had to get help. It was then he reached for his cellular phone and dialed 9-1-1. As he did, he could feel his body shutting down and his consciousness slipping away.

Mark's 9-1-1 call was quickly answered by Telecommunicator Lori Slone, a nearly 5-year member of the Guilford County Emergency Services Communications Center. Before she could ask him anything, he told Communicator Slone that he was allergic to bees and had just been stung. He also informed her that he had already used his emergency kit and that he was having a bad reaction.

Communicator Slone immediately sensed the urgency in Mark's voice and quickly asked him where exactly he was located. She was forced to do this because Mark's cellular provider has not yet begun to provide Phase I service in Guilford County (even though the service had been requested by the center nearly two years prior).

Mark's feeble reply was "I'm in Stokesdale, at an intersection, I need help, I'm not gonna make it." Then he desperately repeated "I need help." As Communicator Slone repeatedly asked him for a more precise location, Mark slipped quietly into unconsciousness.

Communicator Slone, having no idea what had happened to her caller could now only hear his labored breathing through the open line of the cell phone. She continued trying to get him to answer her, but to no avail.

Stokesdale, a very rural community, covers a large area in northwest Guilford County and has numerous intersections. While she continued to keep the phone line open, Communicator Slone (who was working at a call taker position that afternoon) quickly loaded the call into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD). She then spawned the call to Communicator Mike Gregson who was working a EMS dispatch console, Communicator Melanie Neal who was working at a fire dispatch console, and to part-time Communicator Sydney Shoaf who was working at a sheriff's dispatch console.

A brief discussion between the team members in the center resulted in the agreement that the best plan to find Mark would be to respond all available personnel to the parking lot of a well known local community store in Stokesdale.

Communicator Gregson then dispatched paramedic level Guilford County EMS transport unit 359 and “Medic 1” (one of six single paramedic quick response vehicles based in the rural areas of Guilford County) to begin a search for Mark. Meanwhile, Communicator Shoaf dispatched the nearest three Guilford County Sheriff’s Deputies to assist in the search. Communicator Neal dispatched the Stokesdale Volunteer Fire Department to assist in the search (Stokesdale Fire regularly assists Guilford County EMS through their first responder program).

While she continued to try to get Mark to talk to her, Communicator Slone suddenly heard something that gave her a glimmer of hope. Through the victim’s still-open cell phone, she heard the unmistakable moan of a siren in the distance. She recognized the sound as that of the siren located atop the Stokesdale Fire Station.

Realizing that, while she still didn’t know Mark’s exact location, he had to be somewhere relatively close to the Stokesdale Fire Station, Communicator Slone advised the other members of her team of what she had heard. Then as the remaining communications team members handled other calls, Communicators Gregson, Neal and Shoaf alerted the field units.

As the fire station’s siren was winding down, Communicator Slone then heard another welcome sound. It was the sound of an approaching emergency vehicle siren. As the faint siren grew louder, her hopes grew—but suddenly the siren stopped. Realizing that someone was now near Mark, she asked Communicator Gregson to check with the paramedic on the responding EMS “Medic” unit to see if he had just turned off his siren.

Paramedic Eddie Lashley, who was assigned to EMS “Medic 1” that afternoon, advised the communicators that he had, in fact, just turned off his siren and that he was in the Stokesdale area searching for the caller.

As Stokesdale firefighters began methodically searching every vehicle at every intersection in their community, Communicator Gregson instructed Paramedic Lashley to reactivate his vehicle’s siren and drive slowly through the area. Almost immediately, Communicator Slone again heard the siren through the open phone.

The sound of the siren grew steadily louder, until finally Communicator Slone felt that the emergency vehicle had to be “right at” the caller’s vehicle. Communicator Gregson advised Paramedic Lashley of what Slone was hearing.

At that same moment, Paramedic Lashley observed a lone white pickup truck in the vacant parking lot of a daycare center (remember this was a Sunday afternoon). As he exited his vehicle, Paramedic Lashley observed a white male subject slumped against the door of the truck.

As he approached, Paramedic Lashley called out several times to the subject in the truck. He gingerly opened the door and, in doing so, caused the male subject to fall outwards into his arms. The sudden movement seemed to stimulate Mark and he briefly regained consciousness. He was only able to briefly tell Paramedic Lashley that he was allergic to bee stings, had been stung and had already injected himself, before passing out again.

Some 13 long and agonizing minutes had passed since Mark Taylor had placed his 9-1-1 call for assistance. When Paramedic Lashley initially assessed him, Mark had no blood pressure. Later Mark would learn from emergency room medical staff that, had a few more minutes passed before being found, the outcome would have been quite different.

Fortunately for all, the outcome was positive. On Wednesday November 30, after a few days of recuperation, Mark Taylor and his wife paid a visit to the Guilford County Emergency Services 9-1-1 center to meet and thank the communicators and paramedics who helped him.

Later, Mr. Taylor also made one other very crucial visit. At the request of this writer, he accompanied me to the monthly meeting of the North Carolina State Wireless Board in Raleigh, North Carolina. The North Carolina State Wireless Board is charged by state statute with overseeing the implementation of Phase I—and ultimately Phase II—wireless 9-1-1 throughout the state.

Members of the 9-1-1 center and Mr. Taylor detailed the events of his experience to the board members, who also listened to an audiotape of the incident. Mark also explained to the board how surprised and upset he was to learn that his cellular provider was not providing Phase I data to the center, even though they had been requested to do so by Guilford County Emergency Service in December 1998. Mark went on to strongly urge the board members to use every means at their disposal to pressure all the wireless carriers in North Carolina to begin providing Phase I data to all primary 9-1-1 centers.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to say that here in Guilford County our 9-1-1 center has millions of dollars in some of the most state-of-the-art equipment. However, in this case, due to the lack of available data, all the equipment in the world was no good. What saved Mark Taylor was a team of very dedicated communicators who never gave up—a team that pulled together by combining their individual knowledge base to find a way to help a citizen in his darkest hour.

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed reading this account, I hope you will give it some thought, and if you have a wireless carrier in your area that is not providing Phase I service to your center, refer them to this article. Now go back to reading your tech articles and as always, have a 9-1-Wonderful Day!

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