

COUNTY OF ERIE
OFFICE OF COUNTY
EXECUTIVE



Barry Grossman
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Public Safety Newsletter
December 2010

During the past 12 months in office, the Administration made the 911 Center a top priority and felt there was great potential for success. With the hiring of Todd Geers as Director of Public Safety, the 911 Center has stabilized operations in a monumental way that has impacted not only the 911 Center and day to day operations, but many other agencies as well. Additional staffing in the Communications and Information Technology (IT) Departments, along with additional training, has also played a significant role in benefitting not only the Safety Center, but all Erie County residents. This newsletter is again an opportunity to share with you the on-going proactive steps being taken to keep Erie County citizens safe. Kudos to Director Todd Geers and his staff at the 911 Center for all the hard work and dedication that has been shown which I am confident will continue well into the future.



Barry Grossman
County Executive

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County
Executive

Jerry Mifsud
Director of
Administration

Todd Geers
Director of
Public Safety

Dale Robinson
Emergency
Management
Coordinator

John Grappy
911
Coordinator

Abdul Osman
Chief
Information
Officer

In November, I stated the next newsletter would focus on the operations side of the 9-1-1 center; however, it seems appropriate to turn our attention to the catastrophic incident that occurred in Union City in December.

Union City lost an historic landmark on December 2, 2010 when fire consumed the iconic Ethan Allan Building. The all-wood building and its decades of accumulated sawdust created the perfect storm for a fire. Reaching across the county and into neighboring states, the unprecedented 7-alarm fire demanded over 50 fire apparatuses from 26 agencies. Erie County 9-1-1 responded superbly! Immediately 3 tactical fire dispatchers were assigned to the Union City incident and all hands in the dispatch center pulled together to ensure no disruption in 9-1-1 call-taking and dispatch throughout Erie County.

What follows are thoughts shared by Union City Fire Chief Bob Wolf as the Incident Commander on-scene and an internal perspective of the activities that day from 2 tactical dispatchers and the Shift Commander.



Todd R. Geers, Director of Public Safety

Photo courtesy of Jack Hanrahan
Erie Times News

An Inside Look.....

On December 2, 2010, at 11:41 p.m., Station 113 responded to a reported commercial structure fire at 77 South Main Street in Union City Borough. As officers were responding, the Communications Center relayed information to Asst. Chief Hawley of a fire being confirmed and possible entrapment. Asst. Chief Hawley immediately requested a second alarm assignment.



I arrived, completed my 360 tour, and went face to face with Asst. Chief Hawley and assumed command of 77 South Main Street - 38 minutes into the incident. It was evident that this was going to be one of the largest incidents I had ever participated in. Although radio traffic was heavy, it was very evident to me that the Communications Center was paying very close attention to the call. The radio operators maintained their professionalism. They were put to the test by what I would consider one of the larger scale incidents since they went to live dispatching.



The event was very complex, not only for the firefighters but for the dispatchers as well. Resources were summoned to the scene from at least 24 fire departments. Along with that, there were two police agencies, EMA representatives from the Borough of Union City and Erie County, Red Cross, Emergycare, Penelec, PennDOT, National Fuel Gas, and many others.

During the event, I found the need to draft a press release. I called the Communications Center to retrieve information on the incident. I remember asking the lady who answered the phone, "How is it going?" and she replied, "It's busy.". I told her who I was and something along the lines that they were doing a great job.

The day after the incident, County Executive Barry Grossman and ECDOPS Director Todd Geers came to Union City to tour the incident site. I remarked to Director Geers that I was very impressed with the way the Communication Center handled the incident. Director Geers also informed me that, at one point, they had several telecommunicators working on the incident and that he was out in the dispatch center helping where needed.



I am sure that when those dispatchers went to work and began their shifts that morning, they never envisioned being put to the test the way that they were. I certainly was not expecting to see such a large scale incident that day. At times it was very stressful trying to coordinate efforts. Many of the out of county agencies are operating on different frequencies and in some cases different bands. In retrospect, one way we could have improved the communications on this incident was to move staging to a different frequency then fire ground operations. This would have led to the operational frequency being less busy.



NIMS/ICS was utilized in this incident. It is the practice of my Department to do this on most incidents. The one component that was extremely difficult to handle was accountability. We ended up making a decision for each apparatus to keep track of the crew that came with it. We also used a loose form of Unified Command. Police services were coordinated with Chief Kevin Jones of the Union City Police Department. Although he was not present at all times at the Command Post, he checked in with me periodically. When summoned to the Command Post, he was there within minutes.

I want to thank everyone who had a part in this incident. I commend the staff at ECDOPS for the services they provided that day. It was outstanding.

Robert G. Wolf – Fire Chief
Union City Fire Company

A Tactical View.....

“The day began like any other ... I came in and assigned the telecommunicators to their respective consoles. The call volume had been low that morning when a call came in for a structure fire at the Ethan Allen Building in Union City Borough. The next 6 ½ hours would prove to be demanding. Erie County provided 16 fire departments and one police department and resources were requested from neighboring Crawford and Warren Counties. I was busy making the necessary notifications, shutting down railroad traffic, notifying the state EOC, making sure we had resources available for other incoming emergencies, logging in to help take 9-1-1 calls, assisting the IT department with computer issues, and sitting in for the telecommunicators to give necessary breaks. I would like to recognize the staff working that day: Leann Brown, Chandra Light, Matt Scowden, Scott Pelinsky, Ben Cardot, Glenda Balesk, and Ryan Rutkowski. Everyone pulled together and worked as a team, making a disaster run as smooth as possible.”



Jennifer Waxham
Acting Shift Commander



“Working in public safety since I was 19 years old, it was always stressed to me that if there were ever a fire at the Ethan Allen Building to be prepared for a large scale incident. When we heard the call-taker state Ethan Allen building and fire in the wall, I felt an adrenalin rush but had to slow myself down to focus on dispatching the 1st alarm. After Chief 1141 requested a 2nd alarm, my team really came together and we started planning on what resources we could use. After many hours of acquiring resources, communicating with command, and moving equipment around the county, I was released of my console at 10 p.m.”



Leann Brown
911 Dispatcher



“On Thursday, December 2, 2010, the line up went like this: Jennifer Waxham was acting shift commander, Leann Brown was sitting at County Fire, Scott Pelinsky was sitting at Millcreek Fire, Ryne Rutkowski was sitting at Erie Police Main, Glenda Balesk was sitting at Erie Police Backup and County Police, Matt Scowden was sitting with Jennifer Maloney as a call taker and I were sitting at Erie Fire.

That morning was quite slow until Leanne had to say she was bored - that did it. At 11:39 a.m., the call came into the center reporting that there was a fire at the Ethan Allen Building in Union City. With quick response, Leann started dispatching the call while Scott and I started placing the companies on the call. The first unit on the scene was 1142 confirming fire on the 2nd floor of the structure, along with more units arriving on scene and attempting to get the fire under control with no luck. At 12:05 p.m., Leann received the word that the building was being evacuated and at that point the evacuation tones were set off. All we could do at this point was focus on the safety of the firefighters that were on scene.

With additional calls coming in stating that the fire was spreading to the surrounding area and commands coming in for more fire trucks to report to the scene, it rapidly became a very serious situation. Matt

Scowden was then pulled from call taking to come over and help back up the fire dispatchers. With Leann doing the 10 minute status checks and me trying to keep up with the reports, on top of still having to dispatch the Erie Fire Department on calls and Scott still having to dispatch all the Millcreek Fire Departments to the fire, we all maintained great composure with great team work.

Jen, along with Matt Exley, were making phone calls to other counties for more apparatus to respond to Union City, as well as making calls to the railroad companies to stop the rail service through the area and the utility companies to get crews to the fire to shut off the power and gas.

Ryne and Glenda maintained control on the police end of the PSAP. Also - thank goodness for Jen giving us breaks to eat and go to the bathroom because without those short breaks, I don't think we would have made it the 6 ½ hours that we sat there fighting this fire from our end. Unfortunately, the building was a complete loss but thankfully there were no injuries to any firefighters on scene. If it wasn't for the great teamwork in the PSAP and on scene, I feel that this could have been a complete catastrophe. Finally, on December 3, 2010 at 10:32 a.m., the final fire engine went back into service, almost 24 hours later.”



Chandra Light
911 Dispatcher

In memory of...

Tom Westhoff
Member – Erie County LEPC



Tom Westhoff was one of the original appointments to the Erie County LEPC by County Executive Judy Lynch. As there was no staff support at that time, Tom personally took charge of the development and review of the original objective to implement off-site plans to respond to releases of extremely hazardous chemicals from each of the dozens of facilities in the county where such chemicals were stored. Tom, along with Chris Nutter, worked on each one of the original facility plans for Erie County.

Tom was a quiet guy who did a lot of detail work behind the scenes, most of which was under-appreciated, and for which he was not fully recognized until his initial retirement from the LEPC. He was one of the first to recognize the need to improve EMA staffing for handling LEPC/HAZMAT issues. Tom was responsible for suggesting the need, which ultimately became an LEPC and county government priority, to create a county position to oversee critical EHS Facility/Tier II functions. The county was fortunate to be able to convince Tom to accept that position on a part time basis.

Many members of the LEPC had the opportunity to work public events with Tom (Celebrate Erie, and others). He was always fascinating to talk to and had a wealth of knowledge on any number of issues (including the Chicago Cubs). He contributed hundreds and hundreds of hours as a volunteer dedicated to Public Safety.

Tom is best remembered as an educator, a man of history. He was typically quiet during LEPC meetings while many of us pontificated about every issue. He spoke when he needed to redirect or correct our logic. He knew more, gave more and cared more than we ever realized at the time. His efforts have left behind a lasting benefit to the safety of all Erie County residents and emergency responders. He had a strong passion for Public Safety and he will be greatly missed.

Accolades from the EMS Community!



On December 5, 2010, a missing child call was quickly processed and dispatched in 51 seconds! Martha Klemp, Tom Brown, Lou DePonceau, Jack Carter, and Jim Allen handled this call. Outstanding work!

Catching the bad guy always makes our day! Tom Brown, Lou DePonceau, and Jack Carter pounced on a December 9, 2010 burglary/theft call in Erie. The call was processed and dispatched in 2 minutes and 10 seconds, so quickly that the suspect was apprehended! Well Done!

Seconds count in an emergency call and Team C members, John Semple, Dan Palka, Jim Allen, Joe Boyd, Jack Carter, Lou DePonceau, Mike Adams, Nick Seelinger, Martha Klemp, and TJ Brown, showed their stuff. A multi-residential structure fire in Erie came in on December 14, 2010 and was dispatched in 1 minute and 38 seconds. All personnel were involved. Wow, that is impressive!

A residential structure fire in Erie was reported on December 12, 2010. Josh Ely, Zach Criscione, John Durlin, and Andy Carne processed and dispatched this call in 1 minute and 53 seconds with "exceptional documentation," according to the Training Coordinator, Matt Exley.



HAPPY NEW YEAR

Wishing all of you a Happy and Healthy New Year!