

## North Suburban Emergency Communications Center

### The Importance of Quality Assurance Assessments in the PSAP

The North Suburban Emergency Communications Center is a consolidated PSAP serving police, fire and EMS departments in suburban Chicago. On an annual basis, with a staff of 53, more than 215,000 incidents are managed.

Sherrill Ornberg is an adventurous, dedicated and well known public servant. She began her career in emergency communications in 1970. Desiring to become a police officer and being told that her only options as a woman were either as a meter maid or a traffic controller, she decided to seek a position as a police dispatcher. To her amazement, the Chicago-area police departments were predominately staffed by male dispatchers, and she discovered that she couldn't find a department that was willing to hire her. Determined, Ornberg offered to work for free and was given a temporary intern dispatch position. She has worked in emergency communications ever since. "If I had to do it all over again, I would do it exactly the same way. I love my profession," says Ornberg.

She was integral in establishing the original Center, initially serving four agencies. Since the Center's inception 20 years ago, Ornberg has served as its Executive Director. As additional partners joined, it evolved into the North Suburban Emergency Communications Center. When asked what major changes Ornberg witnessed during her tenure, she states "Everything has changed. At almost every turn, technology has been ahead of public safety. We are always in catch-up mode, trying to keep up with technologies that keep rapidly evolving." Ornberg takes solace that they have the equipment ready for the next phase, which is NG9-1-1. "In Illinois, NG9-1-1 is not a reality yet. The NSECC has the equipment to handle it, but at this point we cannot accept text, video or pictures. That delay is due to the individual phone companies' capabilities but hopefully they will be ready soon."

### NextGeneration Quality911 – Dispatcher Evaluation Software

In early 2010, the NSECC purchased HigherGround's Capture911 recording system from authorized reseller Commercial Electronics Corp to replace a competing vendor's defective unit. Most dear to Sherrill's heart was the additional purchase of HigherGround's Quality911 dispatcher evaluation solution. "To be perfectly honest a recorder is a recorder is a recorder, as long as it works and is reliable. Pretty much all tier 1 equipment in the industry does the same thing. Where the HigherGround's product is so far advanced, in my opinion, is the QA component," says Ornberg.

HigherGround Quality911 allows supervisors to fine tune service quality and ensure compliance with the PSAP's standards and protocols. The tool assesses and improves the skills of call-takers and dispatchers through regular evaluations of recorded interactions. "QA review is the paramount mechanism which allows management to know what your employees' capabilities, strengths and weaknesses are. If you are not conducting quality assurance assessments, then you have no idea what your staff is doing, unless you are a psychic."

Most states do not have standards in place for the training or evaluating of call-takers and dispatchers. For those locations that do have policies, most are considered voluntary measures and lack any regulatory oversight. For the past decade, Ornberg and her management team used a homegrown "paper and pencil" method to score call-takers and dispatchers. It did not include numeric scoring or have a mechanism for historic tracking. "When I first saw Quality911 a light bulb went off," says Ornberg. "I knew that by using this tool to focus on each employee's strengths and weaknesses, the Center would have the ability to deliver the best quality service that we possibly could achieve. It allows us to better serve our citizens and improve protection of our sworn."

Center supervisors conduct monthly calibration sessions and complete a minimum of one QA assessment per week per employee of randomly selected calls. Targeted calls, such as a substantial incident or a complaint, also receive an evaluation. The reviews are used to identify areas for training and coaching. In addition, at the end of the year when management conducts performance reviews, more than 60 evaluations per employee provide a historical, quantifiable metrics of their performance. "Quality 911 has been the cat's pajamas. It is everything I need it to be, plus more. It allows management to determine not only what questions that we want, but what the weight of each question should be based on specific criteria important to our individual PSAP. My supervisors love it and it has cut their QA work load significantly."

## **A Campaign for National Standards**

Ornberg's passion for quality and customer service has put her in the national spotlight. "At this point in my career, I have decided to make it a personal goal, that for the remaining portion of my career, I will dedicate my efforts in an attempt to advance QA reviews and training programs nationally," she states. In addition to her numerous speaking engagements across the country at APCO and NENA events, Ornberg serves on the Denise Amber Lee Foundation QA Committee which is chartered with writing the QA standards for the nation.

"In January 2008, Denise Lee was kidnapped in broad daylight, and struggled for her life for several hours. In that time, four 9-1-1 calls were placed, including one from Denise herself, and one from a courageous bystander, Jane Kowalski, who provided an exact location of Denise to authorities while she was on the phone for several minutes. Because those 9-1-1 calls were not all properly handled, it was possible for Denise's rapist and murderer to commit his crimes." The foundation's mission is: "To promote and support public safety through uniform training, standardized protocols, defined measurable outcomes, and technological advances in the 9-1-1 system" ([www.deniseamberlee.org](http://www.deniseamberlee.org)). As a measure of their efforts, Florida recently passed legislation for such mandates and named the bill in honor of Denise Amber Lee. The foundation's efforts are certainly working.