Expect the unexpected

It may be extremely challenging to plan for atypical events, but it’s equally necessary to do so.

By Brent Boykin

There are dozens of emergency response scenarios that public safety answering points (PSAPs) encounter on a regular basis, from structure fires and traffic accidents to domestic violence incidents and muggings to drug overdoses and accidental falls. These types of events happen with such regularity that most public safety agencies have policies in place that govern how the response will play out, and have trained their personnel well to ensure that the response goes according to plan.

But what about those events that happen so infrequently they barely register on the radar screen? Or those events that fall outside the scope of a PSAP’s normal responsibilities? Or those events that start out being another agency’s responsibility, but due to a turn of events revert to the PSAP? A failure to take such events into account could have disastrous consequences for both the citizen in need, the PSAP and the public safety agency it serves.

Here’s an example. Let’s say that a citizen who needs supplemental oxygen to combat the effects of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is running short on canisters because he neglected to order a new supply on time. He knows that this doesn’t constitute an emergency, so he doesn’t dial 911, but instead calls his health-care provider, who arranges for a rush shipment to be delivered to his doorstep the next day. But overnight it starts to snow—and keeps snowing, dropping more than a foot onto the ground by sunrise. Then the wind kicks up dramatically, as the snow continues to fall, creating blizzard conditions so severe in some areas that whiteout conditions exist. In just a few more hours, nearly two feet of snow are on the ground. The snow plows are having great difficulty trying to keep up, so roads quickly are becoming treacherous, in some cases impassible.

This is just the beginning. As the storm rages on, a pileup involving three dozen vehicles has occurred—including two semi-trailers and a gasoline tanker that overturned. Meanwhile, several structure fires have broken out, caused by faulty space heaters, and a riot is ensuing at a supermarket that ran out of essential items. And in the midst of this chaos, a call is placed to the PSAP from the COPD patient, who had just been informed by the delivery service that the shipment of oxygen canisters won’t be arriving today as scheduled due to the weather conditions—and he is just a few hours away from being completely out of this life-sustaining substance, a situation that, at least in his mind, now constitutes an emergency.

So how is the PSAP going to handle this? Will it decide to dispatch an ambulance to provide a temporary supply of oxygen to the patient and then transport him to a hospital emergency room where he will stay until the crisis passes? Will it contact the public works department to see whether a snow plow could transport the oxygen canisters to the man’s home? Will it decide to do nothing because it needs to triage the many emergency situations that are popping up all...
over the jurisdiction, and the COPD patient’s event is very low on the priority scale. Or will it do nothing because the event doesn’t fall under the PSAP’s defined responsibilities?

A clear-cut policy governing such a scenario, and effective training, would make it much easier for the PSAP staff to make the appropriate decision. But that’s easier said than done.

Challenges and solutions

The scenario described above is just one of many that would fall outside the scope of a PSAP’s normal operations; in fact, the number of such scenarios is limited only by one’s imagination.

And that poses an enormous challenge for PSAPs on several levels. First, there simply is no way to predict every unusual situation that a PSAP is going to encounter. Second, time and resources already are limited, so even if one could identify all of the possible outside-the-realm scenarios, it would be unrealistic to think that policies could be written for all of them. Third, it already is difficult enough to find the time and money needed to train personnel on core competencies, i.e., the scenarios that they encounter on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Expanding training regimens to include dozens of anomalies that may never happen would be equally unrealistic.

On the other hand, it is just as unrealistic to take a head-in-the-sand approach and do nothing at all. It is critical that PSAPs operate with a “do no harm” mindset. What this essentially means is that PSAPs must do the right thing even if doing so isn’t covered by policy. There are legal aspects to this—the worst possible outcome of a PSAP’s failure to act is that the municipality is sued for negligence. The key question that is asked in such cases always is: did the staff do harm, i.e., make the situation worse by what it did, or in this case, by what it didn’t do. And well before the lawsuit is filed, rest assured that the municipality and PSAP both will be attacked publicly by the media.

All of that said, the PSAP does not always have to be the response entity in such situations. It is perfectly acceptable to transfer the call information to another agency that is better prepared or positioned to provide an effective response. The cardinal rule in any PSAP is to never hold onto information—move it somewhere. Getting information into the hands of those who actually can do something about the situation is the foundation of what PSAPs are all about. They do this every day when they dispatch police, fire and EMS responders to emergency incidents. In order to effectively handle non-everyday events, they have to think outside their normal sphere.

Again, the question begs: exactly how does one do that when there are so many potential scenarios to consider? Here are a few tips that will help PSAP managers get their arms around this.

- **Prioritize**—While it is true that there are countless potential scenarios that fall outside a PSAP’s normal scope of operations, it is equally true that certain scenarios will occur far more often than others based on the unique aspects of the community and region. Let’s revisit the oxygen canister example we explored earlier in this article. It may well be
possible for a PSAP’s managers to uncover data that indicates its service area has a
inglish number of COPD suffers that average. It also might be in a climate that is
pron to winter storms. Given these factors, it would be prudent to consider that the
scenario described earlier has a significantly higher prospect of occurring than other
uncommon events, which would warrant the creation of a policy for handling it.
Undoubtedly, other higher-potential uncommon events could be identified in a similar
fashion. These are the events that the PSAP managers should target for written
policies.

- **Do your homework**—Once you’ve identified the uncommon events that your PSAP is
  most likely to encounter, it’s time to analyze all of the public-sector agencies in your
  jurisdiction to determine their capabilities and resources. Once you know that, you can
determine the agencies that are the best match for the scenarios that you’ve identified.

- **Reach out**—Now it is time to contact those agencies and work with them to create
  policies for the scenarios you’ve identified, as it is the lack of policies that will get an
  agency into trouble. Start by reviewing the policies of neighboring agencies—both inside
  and outside of public safety—to determine whether any of them address the scenarios
  you’ve identified. If none do, be vigilant and convince them to work with you to create
  such policies, no matter how unlikely the scenarios might be—because proactive policy
  creation prevents knee-jerk reactions.

- **Train your personnel**—Knowing what to do and then doing it effectively and in a timely
  manner is difficult enough when telecommunicators have been trained properly, but
  exponentially so if they haven’t. Create a “Top Ten” list of the most likely uncommon
  scenarios and make sure that personnel are trained on them at least once a year.

The unexpected event that falls outside of normal operations is the most vexing for any public
safety agency, but particularly PSAPs. However, with a little creative thinking and due
diligence, PSAP managers can ensure that the citizens who fall victim to such events receive
effective response—and that the agency doesn’t land on the front page because of a negative story.

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