



The Chairman's Corner

by

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COLUMBIA COUNTY 9-1-1 (10/11/21)

Over time, the Columbia County Emergency 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Department, as it's officially known, has increasingly become the nerve center for emergency response in Columbia County.

As director of 9-1-1 Rob Lopez says, "The 9-1-1 center is basically quarterbacking EMS services," which includes fire, medical, or police-related activity. "The active role that 9-1-1 dispatchers play in managing an incident has greatly increased. Dispatch isn't what it was 20 years ago."

Director Lopez manages his department with a full-time staff of 12, including himself. In all, county 9-1-1 dispatches for 31 fire companies, five rescue squads, all police agencies on emergency calls, the county Haz-Mat team, and the county Cause and Origin Team.

All county 9-1-1 dispatchers are trained at the Advanced Law Enforcement Dispatch level. This training prepares department staff to effectively deal with hysterical callers, assaults, robberies, domestic violence, officer safety issues, bomb threats and other emergency police situations.

Keeping the public safe even before an incident occurs is a key component of the 9-1-1 mission. Also numbering among the department's tasks are things such as overdose tracking and surveillance, EMS systems status management, maintaining ambulance coverage in needed areas, and disseminating info to the public and public safety partners.

Director Lopez strongly advises county residents to make use of the NY-Alert system for critical and emergency alerts. Visit <https://alert.ny.gov> for free sign-up and set the alerts that interest you. They can be received via phone, email, text, and fax.

With the advent of the Next Generation 9-1-1 system, Director Lopez said, "We had to take our systems into the GIS world. We actually do all the GIS updates, the street and address maintenance, in-house. We also share our maintenance data with New York State."

Further, county 9-1-1 serves as the official National Weather Service warning point for the county. Dispatchers are responsible for monitoring severe weather outbreaks and warning emergency response personnel of threatening weather situations.

Director Lopez points out that all the different systems that 9-1-1 manages and maintains help with dispatching, in an age when incidents are not necessarily getting larger yet responses are getting larger because the numbers of volunteers are depleting. "We're having to use more resources to manage an incident," he says.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, has added yet another dimension to 9-1-1 services. It's important for everyone to realize that the staffing situation at hospitals is ultimately causing ambulances to sit at the

ER longer in order to discharge patients, therefore, ambulances are not returning to service as quickly. Again, 9-1-1 finds itself in the position of needing to move more resources into the depleted areas.

This is all a far cry from the early days of emergency response, when emergency dispatching around the county would be handled by local telephone operators, who would then attempt to locate key individuals in the fire company or otherwise activate the fire siren.

We should all be thankful for the enormous contributions Director Lopez and the 9-1-1 department make to our county.