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Unfortunately, neither of the people I reached out to for an interview responded, so I was unable to get direct answers, but based on the ARES-RACES website I was able to piece together some information about communication, redundancy, and technical issues. In Delaware County, each emergency service has its own technical capabilities and resources.  Technical difficulties usually arise during an event which require increased capabilities, more than the ES departments have.  ARES is able to remedy this by supplying communication teams, units, and resources like antennas, handheld radios, repeaters, battery operated items, and tactical communication kits.  In Delaware County, ARES has been useful in providing communications during Mass Casualty exercises, SNS full-scale exercises, community 5ks, the Philadelphia Airport full-scale exercise, and have been deployed during Hurricane Sandy.

ARES can provide email capabilities to the organizations they serve, which can be critically important if an agency suffers prolonged power outages or a failure of its telecommunication infrastructure.  They are also able to set up mobile Wi-Fi hot spots. ARES provides units called “repeaters” which can move a weak or low radio signals across longer distances without degradation.  These are useful during multi-jurisdictional events where communication needs to occur over large geographic areas.  ARES has 10 repeaters throughout the county, covering four types of systems—FM voice, digital voice, digital data, and packet.

ARES is also able to provide assistance to neighboring counties, cities, and states through memorandums of understanding, which can increase the number of communication resources available during a large scale event, and ensure a redundant communication network.  The use of alternative power sources makes ARES critical to emergency communication.  Communication systems can be affected during emergencies because commercial power is often disrupted or knocked out completely.  By providing communications independent of the main power grid, ARES can ensure emergency communications continue for periods from a few hours to a week or longer.  We have seen this capability during Hurricanes Katrina, and Sandy, and it has been recognized by the federal government as being a critically important aspect  of response.

Delaware County ARES (nd). Retrieved from: <http://www.delcoares.org/>

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For this week’s assignment, I interviewed Mary Elizabeth Newsom who is the coordinator for the Regional Disaster Dispatch Center (RDCC), American Red Cross Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter, which is the headquarter is the national call center. She takes calls from client/agencies all over the country and coordinates the local disaster response for them by directly contacting first responders in that region. Therefore, most of her answers were from a communications perspective.

Communication systems used at the Red Cross

RC view- The dispatch database, where all the client/ agency information regarding a local disaster is inputted and positive contact with duty officer (first responder) from that local area is made either manually or automatically through this database

Transera- An internet based communication system that receives, consults, transfers and records the incoming calls from the client/agency. This system allows calls to be taken from home as well.

Sharepoint- A dispatch database similar to RC view

Onecallnow- A system that sends out notifications via text message, email or phone call of a location that is requiring volunteers to lend a hand.

Main Barriers in communication

From a non-technical perspective, Mary Elizabeth feels that language is one of the main barriers, followed by not able to judge emotions or facial cues from the voice of the clients.

From a technical perspective, finding out the exact location with the address the client/agency provides is sometimes an issue. When this information is fed into RC view, at times the system doesn't recognize the address thereby delaying response. In that case, she has to manually contact the duty officer and he would have to figure out the exact location delaying it even further. Reaching out to the duty officer by phone may sometimes be an issue as there may be signal issues or the person just doesn't answer the call.

Another issues she points out is when the call volumes is large, the phones start to lag and don’t work properly. This was faced when hurricane Harvey and Irma hit the south. The large number of incoming calls severely clogged the phone lines resulting in the client's voice to break up or being completely inaudible. In her words “it was a nightmare”. Especially since all the calls were directed and redirected to Philadelphia (even from parts that were not affected by the hurricanes but people wanted to know about a family member in parts that were affected) the situation at the RDCC got messy as the phone lines got fuzzy.

One last issue she pointed out was regarding training. Since 90% are volunteers at the Red Cross, they are all required to be trained to use all the above mentioned systems. She says this is a barrier because some of the volunteers still struggle with the system and this can slow down communication and response.

Back-up systems

If the phone lines at the Red Cross are not working properly or goes down due to high volume of incoming calls or any other reasons, she said they use their own cell phones, as Transera provides that facility. If RC view is down then Sharepoint is used. If both are down, then they make hard copies of the information and manually contact duty officers. She wasn’t sure about internet backups or power backups.

Solutions for better communication

She feels in times of disaster having multiple sites to set up helplines rather than only Philadelphia being the main dispatch center may solve a lot of problems both technically and non-technically. She also says funding is the one of the main solutions. She feels the Red Cross needs to update their infrastructure in the field of communications and that requires funding.