

Mobile Computing To The Rescue

by Jay McCall

Since September 11 we've all become more aware of the role firefighters play in emergency situations. But, have you ever thought about the role wireless technology plays in helping these heroes do their jobs? The Federal Way Fire Department (Federal Way, WA) is a classic example of how mobile computing and wireless technology can offer firemen fast communication and real-time access to critical information.

The Challenge: Slow Dispatch Times

Previously, Federal Way Fire Department owned and operated the 911 call center that serviced its area. But, because of rising costs associated with operating the call center, the fire department decided to close down the center and outsource this service to a large, third-party service provider — Valley Communications (King County, WA). While outsourcing its call center proved to save money, it presented a new challenge as well — slower dispatch times. "Valley Communications handles 20 times the calls that we handled

at our call center," says Grant Gaspard, chief of operation support services at Federal Way Fire Department. "Call centers use tones sent out over VHF to dispatch messages to firemen using voice pagers in the area. Because Valley Communications sends out so many messages, these tones stack up and cause voice transmission delays."

Wireless Eliminates The Wait

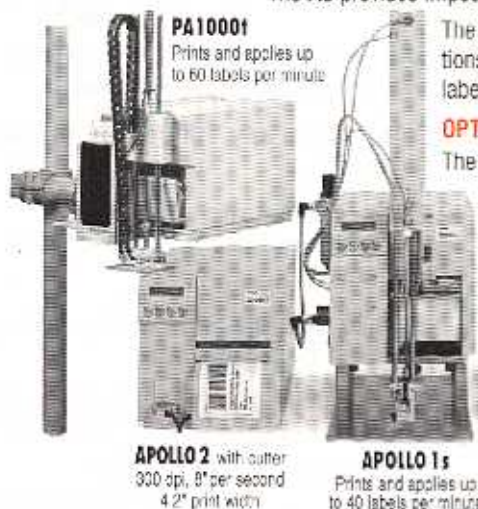
Federal Way Fire Department responded to the problem by installing Panasonic (Secaucus, NJ) Toughbook 28 ruggedized laptop computers with Motorola 800 MHz 2-way radio modems in each fire truck. The radio modems use a proprietary signal within 300 MHz bandwidth to send text data from the dispatch center's CAD (computer aided dispatching) system to the mounted notebooks. "Our new solution reduced dispatch times from 75 seconds to under 45 seconds," notes Gaspard. Initially, the mobile computing solution had some integration issues, however. "When we first installed the software, it wouldn't allow messages to be sent

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or received through the communications port," recalls Gaspard. "We found the problem required a two-part solution. First, we had to experiment with the network adapters that plug into the communications port." Gaspard and his IT staff tried seven network adapters before finding 3Com's (Santa Clara, CA) Mobile LAN PC card. This solved the problem of the communications port being able to send and receive data, but the system still would crash from time to time. Gaspard solved this second problem by upgrading the operating system from Windows NT to Windows XP. "Ever since we upgraded to Windows XP, we have been able to boot up our computers in a fraction of the time that we could previously and we haven't had any crashes," says Gaspard.

The Next Step: Real-Time Access To Mission Critical Data

Even though Federal Way Fire Department now has immediate access to dispatches sent from the 911 call center, it plans to take its mobile computing solution a step further by giving its firefighters access to other useful data and graph-



The Federal Way Fire Department uses Panasonic wireless ruggedized laptop computers to receive critical dispatch information related to emergency calls.

ics such as building profiles and schematics. "We are looking into adding CDPD (cellular digital packet data) to our wireless solution so that firefighters can access the dispatching database and get up-to-the-minute information," says Gaspard. "They would be able to retrieve such information as the schematics to a building, which could help them quickly locate hazardous/explosive chemicals and also know where the power and gas lines can be shut off." Right now Gaspard burns the data from the database to compact discs and distributes CDs to the firefighters for their laptops. The CDs are accurate to within a few weeks. The benefit of giving firefighters access to the database is that they will be able to update the database in real time. "We plan to create templates on the screens that will make use of drop down menus for easier data entry," says Gaspard. "That way our men can focus more on doing their jobs and not so much on typing words correctly into a computer." □

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