MAX-imizing Idaho PSAP's Critical Communications

Zetron MAX Systems Equip Latah County for Remote Ops and Next-Gen Functionality

With its new Zetron MAX Dispatch and MAX Call-Taking systems, Latah County, Idaho, is reaping the benefits of updated, IP-based functionality and is equipped to meet emerging Next-Generation communication requirements.

As Support Services Supervisor for the Latah County, Idaho, sheriff's office, Mike Rosen brings a unique perspective to his work.

From 1990 to 2012, he served in the U.S. Marine Corps in a variety of positions where he oversaw operations and logistics. This exposed him to an array of emerging communications technologies. So when he left the military and was subsequently hired by the Latah County sheriff's office into a position that included supervising its public safety communications, he quickly recognized that the agency's communications equipment had fallen behind. With the approval of Latah County Sheriff Wayne Rausch, Rosen set about to rectify this situation.

Latah County

Latah County, Idaho, comprises most of the eastern portion of the Palouse. A region known for its rolling hills and rich agriculture, it is a major producer of wheat, legumes, and timber.

The Latah County Sheriff's Office Support Services Division provides administrative services to a number of county departments and offices and also oversees the county's public safety answering point (PSAP).

"We patrol an area of 1,100 square miles," says Rosen. "We also answer 9-1-1 calls, and provide dispatching for the entire county's law-enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services agencies, except for Moscow, which contracts a private company to provide these services."

The case for an update

By 2012, a number of factors were converging to make updating the Latah County's 9-1-1 center a priority. The agency had grown to capacity and space was tight. And their call-taking and dispatch equipment was about 12 years old. So even though it was still reliable and fully operational, it was not designed to provide the updated functionality the agency was beginning to need. Nor was it built to support the next-generation features Latah County—and most PSAPs throughout the country—will soon be required to provide.

"At some point," says Rosen, "the State of Idaho is going to require its PSAPs to handle the variety of communication formats—data, voice, text, and images—people are now using routinely. This is something we all need to prepare for."

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The case for updating Latah County's communications equipment was compelling. As a result, Latah County received a grant from the Idaho Emergency Communications Commission and additional Emergency 9-1-1 funds to obtain and install the new call-taking and dispatch systems necessary to make their operations current and prepare them for the future.

Valence and Zetron

As Latah County's ongoing and official "single-source provider," Valence Wireless & Communications of Spokane, Washington, was the automatic choice to help the agency obtain and install their new communications equipment. It was also determined early on that Zetron would provide the dispatch and call-taking systems for the project. "Latah County is a long-time and very satisfied Zetron customer," says Valence president, Michael Deakins "Plus, they had spoken with neighboring Shoshone County, who was very happy with their recently installed Zetron MAX Dispatch system. Both agencies also realized that using the same equipment would improve their ability to back each other up."

Why remote operations matter

The MAX systems' support for remote operations over IP was particularly appealing to Latah County. Deakins explains why.

"Several years ago, someone across the street from dispatch was shooting a rifle into the center," he says. "The operators were evacuated to a backup site that was connected to the main center over a dedicated leased line. As I discussed the MAX systems with Latah County, I explained that they'd be able to eliminate their leased line and use IP to connect their backup to the main center over their network. This was important to them. They haven't had to use their backup very often, but the shooting incident taught them that when they need it, they really need it."

For all of these reasons, Latah County went ahead with a plan to install three positions of MAX Dispatch and Call-Taking; two at the main center and one remote position at their backup location.

An aggressive but doable schedule

A final go-live deadline for the project was established, then milestones were set to support it. Rosen admits that the schedule was aggressive, but he was confident that it was doable. "Whenever someone started telling me why they couldn't do it, my response was, 'OK, now tell me how you will do it.'"

A temporary center

Valence began by setting up an area in the courthouse basement to serve as a temporary communications center while the main room was being demolished and renovated.

"Setting up the temporary center was a substantial amount of work," says Deakins, "but it kept things running, and it also gave the framers, carpenters, and painters the freedom to do their work without having to worry that they might interfere with the center's operations."

System adaptations

Valence staged, and tested the equipment at their office before installing it at the center. They also configured and adapted it to meet the customer's unique specifications.

One adaptation involved placing a callbox at the entry area and integrating the box into the consoles. The callbox allows visitors entering the area to simply press a button to call dispatch. The dispatchers can then answer the call from their consoles.

Another adaptation involved integrating a backup analog phone with the center's existing administrative lines. This ensures that, even if the main system suffers a catastrophic failure, their three main administrative lines can still be answered by dispatchers.

"Preparing them to connect to their remote position over the network was another important adaptation," says Deakins. "The network had to be set up and provisioned to support this change."

A successful transition

The transition to the new equipment was handled carefully and methodically. Each position was tested and verified before being brought online. The care with which this was done paid off.

"There were no disruptions in service at all," says Deakins. "Once the new equipment was in place, we left the old system up for 48 hours, but only as a security blanket. The few issues that did come up were dealt with very successfully before and during the cutover."

Pre-wired for expansion

The center and its new equipment have been functioning for nearly a year. And Rosen is happy with how things have turned out. "It's all working very well," he says. "The new equipment is flexible, easy to use, and pre-wired to expand. It also gives us the capability to offer our services to other agencies that might be interested in using them." ■