

E-Comm Dispatcher Named Communicator of the Year



Ronna Straka of E-Comm: 2004 APCO Canada Public Safety Communicator of the Year

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APCO (Association of Public Safety Communications Officials) Canada named Ronna Straka of E-Comm as its 2004 APCO Canada Public Safety Communicator of the Year. The award was presented at a special luncheon at the 70th annual APCO International Conference in Montreal in August.

Ronna is a resident of Burnaby and 14-year veteran of police dispatching, and was chosen as the recipient of the Award as the result of her performance as the primary dis-

patcher for an event in Vancouver in February of this year. A shooting incident in east-end Vancouver resulted in the deployment of a large number of police units and officers simultaneously dealing with a number of potentially armed suspects over a large area. Many of those involved commented that it was largely due to the professional

demeanor displayed by Ronna that resulted in a successful conclusion to the incident. In accepting her award, Ronna acknowledged all of the people at E-Comm: call-takers and fellow dispatchers, and the teams from Wireless and Information Technology.

"By protecting our police, fire and ambulance members and the community in general, we make a difference to our communities by helping to make them safer places to work and live."

Well said, Ronna!

Celebration of Light

The Celebration of Light fireworks in Vancouver in August, although very challenging nights for our Operations, Information Technology and Wireless staff, went extremely well. With between 250,000 - 400,000 people crammed onto the beaches of English Bay, our people and our systems were in full swing. The Wireless Department reports radio traffic peaked at 6,052 transmissions (push-to-talks) on the first fireworks night (July 28th), a dramatic 30% increase over the first night in 2003 (4,659 transmissions). For the other nights our radio stats were as follows:

- July 31, 2004: 5,938 (up from 4,403 in 2003) 35% increase
- August 4, 2004: 5,195 (up from 4,450 in 2003) 17% increase
- August 7, 2004: 5,323 (up from 4,372 in 2003) 22% increase

The Computer-Aided Dispatch System (CAD) held its own even though it experienced 10 - 20% more volume (depending on the night) than our busiest Celebration of Light night in 2003. Thanks and congratulations to all E-Comm departments and emergency service personnel involved in making things go as smoothly as possible.

Number of calls to 9-1-1 during Celebration of Light days and nights

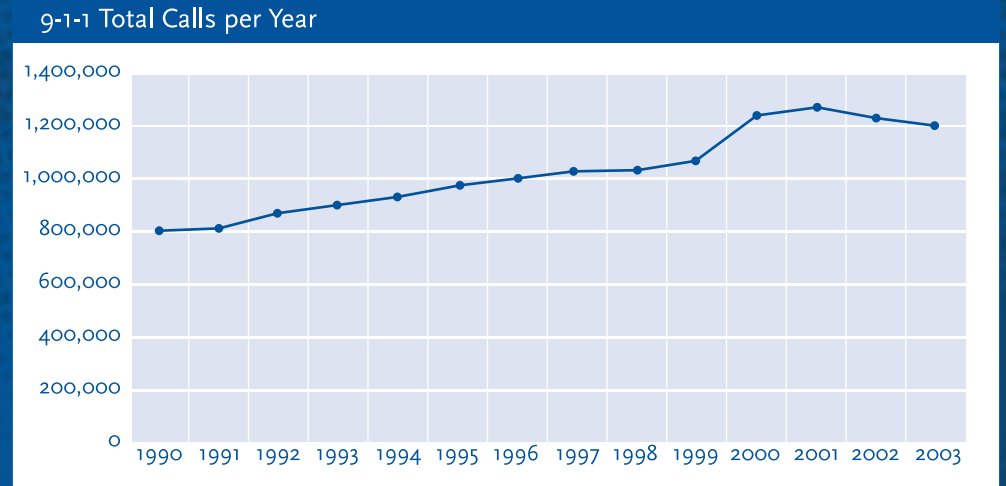
July 28	3,347	August 4	3,149
July 31	3, 669	August 7	3,302

Tips for Dialing 9-1-1

9-1-1 is your connection to police, fire and ambulance. Our call-takers and dispatchers are highly trained, dedicated professionals who will get you the help you need. Please remember these tips whenever you call 9-1-1:

- Use 9-1-1 in emergency situations that require police, fire or ambulance.
- When an E-Comm 9-1-1 call-taker answers they will ask you if you need "police, fire or ambulance." The call-taker will also confirm for which city.
- Your call will be immediately transferred. Stay on the line and follow instructions. Your 9-1-1 call-taker will stay on the line with you to make sure your call is answered by the agency you need.
- Be prepared to answer questions. Listen carefully; speak clearly and try to remain calm.
- Know your location at all times. This is particularly important if you are calling from a cell phone.
- Don't program 9-1-1 into speed dial. It takes a split second to dial 9-1-1, and when it's pre-programmed you can dial 9-1-1 accidentally.
- If you do dial 9-1-1 accidentally, please stay on the line and tell us. If you hang up we don't know if you are okay.
- Teach your non-English speaking family and friends to learn the English word for the language they do speak in case a translator is needed.

For many more tips visit www.ecomm.bc.ca



Number of 9-1-1 calls placed to E-Comm <i>includes abandoned calls</i>	April	101,708
	May	104,444
	June	107,802
	July	114,455
	August	115,600
	September	107,259
	October	110,969
	November	98,973
	January	98,056
	February	93,966
	March	101,575

E-Comm is committed to the use of environmentally responsible papers. By choosing 100% post-consumer recycled fiber instead of virgin paper for this printed material the following savings to our natural resources were realized:

Trees Saved	Wood Reduced (Lbs)	Landfill Reduced (Lbs)	Energy Reduced (btu)	Water Reduced (Gallons)	Net Greenhouse Emissions (Lbs)
.5	292.93	45.7	710.06	430.72	88.62

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9-1-1 is the Number

9-1-1 is synonymous with getting help. Most of us know that when in trouble, dialing 9-1-1 will give us quick access to police, fire and ambulance. We teach our children how to use it and we've come to accept it as part of our every day lives. But beyond dialing 9-1-1, how many of us actually know how it works and how to make it work best for those who need it most? In this two part series, we will take a look at the history of 9-1-1, how it works, including technological advancements and tips for using the service properly.

THE HISTORY OF 9-1-1

The three digit emergency number 9-1-1 is older than you might think. Emergency response systems date back to the 1930's when Great Britain first introduced its "9-9-9" system (the equivalent of our 9-1-1). 9-1-1 was then introduced in North America some 30 years later, when on February 16, 1968, the first emergency 9-1-1 call was dispatched from Haleyville, Alabama. It took Canada a little longer but eventually the Great White North introduced 9-1-1 in Winnipeg (as 9-9-9) on June 21, 1959. Canada later converted its three-digit emergency number to 9-1-1 in 1972.

The city of Vancouver was the first in British Columbia to introduce 9-1-1 as the city-wide emergency number. But it was the GVRD that made sure every community in the Greater Vancouver area had access to 9-1-1 when it introduced the emergency service in June 1990 (the Whistler area introduced 9-1-1 in 1992 followed by the Sunshine Coast in 1996).

The numbers "9-1-1" were selected for emergency service for several reasons. First, it's easy to remember and could be dialed faster

from a rotary dial phone than 9-9-9. Second, it's a series of numbers that had never been used before (for example as an area code). Today, more than 1.25 million 9-1-1 calls (includes abandoned calls) are placed to E-Comm, the regional 9-1-1 call centre for southwest B.C. each year. Across North America, 9-1-1 is a proven life-saving operation and the stories of the kinds of calls to 9-1-1 run from the sublime to the ridiculous. Stories of children as young as three years old dialing 9-1-1 and saving a life, to the case of a special assistance dog that dialed 9-1-1 in Florida to help its injured owner. But for every heartwarming success, there are also stories of frivolous calls that tie up the emergency lines. Calls like (believe it or not), "when do we turn the clocks back?" and "can you call me a cab?"

HOW DOES 9-1-1 WORK?

E-Comm provides 9-1-1 service for the Greater Vancouver Regional District, the Sunshine Coast Regional District (SCRD) and the Whistler area. (E-Comm also provides emergency dispatch services for a number of police and fire

Story continued inside >>>

>>> Continued from front cover.

departments in those areas, but that's an article for another edition of E-Communique!). The 9-1-1 service is contracted to E-Comm by the GVRD. The GVRD collects for this service from participating municipalities through property taxes and then remits payment to E-Comm.

When a caller dials 9-1-1, the E-Comm call-taker asks, "do you need police, fire or ambulance?" (the call-taker will also confirm for which municipality). E-Comm's job is to then connect the caller as quickly as possible to the agency the caller has requested. The E-Comm call-taker will remain on the line with the caller until the agency answers. The entire process usually takes around 25-30 seconds.

If a caller is unsure of what service they need, the E-Comm 9-1-1 call-taker is trained to ask a few quick questions to help determine which agency is required and will connect the caller accordingly. Once connected to the agency, their call-taker can, at any time, also contact other agencies to assist with response. For example, if the BC Ambulance Service receives a call where police presence is required, they will contact the appropriate department/detachment for assistance.

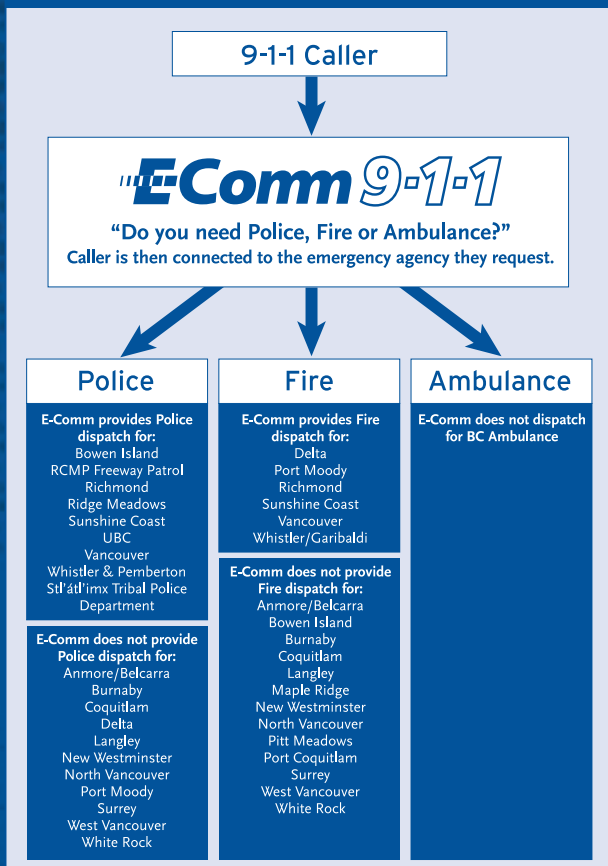
Once the call is down-streamed (transferred) to the agency the caller has requested, the E-Comm 9-1-1 call-taker disengages from the call and moves on to answering other 9-1-1 calls. Some of the agencies that E-Comm downstreams calls to are located in the E-Comm facility and others are not (see chart).

There have been significant 9-1-1 technology enhancements since 9-1-1 was introduced to Canada in 1959. Call-takers now have the ability to see the phone number from which the 9-1-1 call has been dialed (if they call from a landline) and the address associated with that telephone number. This has greatly assisted in emergency response because in cases where the caller could not communicate their location, help was still able to be dispatched because the address information was known.

phones has had both positive and negative impacts for 9-1-1. It has increased the public's ability to call 9-1-1 (it is estimated there are more than 500,000 cell phone users in the GVRD alone), but that has also meant a significant increase in wireless call volumes which take longer to process because until recently, wireless phone companies did not provide any caller information including your phone number. 9-1-1 call-takers now receive your phone number but they do not receive your location information. That's why it's so important to know your location at all times if you are dialing 9-1-1 from a cell phone and to communicate your location as soon as you are asked.

Technology is again rapidly changing, and there are a number of other consumer products that have hit the market that are going to have further major impact on 9-1-1. In the next issue of E-Communique we will profile one of them, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). We will also answer some of the most frequently asked questions about 9-1-1 including recorded messages and translation services.

How 9-1-1 Works



e-communique

MEET OUR BOARD...

Beginning with this issue of E-Communique, we will be profiling two of our Board directors, asking each for their comments on emergency communications. Watch for new profiles in every edition of our newsletter.



Mayor Lois Jackson (Delta)

Represents Corporation of Delta on the E-Comm Board

- 34-year resident of Delta
- Mayor since 1999; served as Councillor from 1973-1999
- On the E-Comm Board since 1999

Lois Jackson, you might say, has emergency service in her blood. As a young girl in Ontario, she watched her father work days to keep the local nickel factory running during World War II (at the direction of the Armed Forces) and volunteer at night by serving in their area's "home guard," helping residents ready themselves for emergency situations. It was her first exposure to emergency preparedness and likely one of the reasons why public safety is so important to her today.



Councillor Jon Harris (Maple Ridge)

Represents Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows on the E-Comm Board

- 63-year resident of Maple Ridge
- Served as Councillor since 1990
- On the E-Comm Board since 2000

Jon Harris, a dedicated Councillor, Notary Public and member of the Maple Ridge Volunteer Fire Department for ten years, says he's on the Board of E-Comm at the pleasure of Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge—the two municipalities he represents. "Both municipalities graciously re-appointed me," he says. "They recognize that continuity is good and both are very supportive."

Why did you want to be on the E-Comm Board? There are certainly less challenging prospects than consolidating emergency communications.

Preparation has always been important to me—it's the best insurance policy. If we don't have reliable shared communications, then people will be isolated in a disaster. We cannot be complacent about this. I have to admit that back in 1999 when I first joined the Board I was not a full supporter, but I can tell you my perspective has shifted 180 degrees! We cannot separate ourselves from each other when it comes to communication... that will endanger lives. Our challenge as a Board is to convince all municipalities that this is a good investment of tax dollars and of major benefit to the entire region—for both responders and the public. My support of the E-Comm concept will continue.

How important is public safety among all of the issues facing municipalities? Did you notice a shift in support post September 11?

Absolutely—we all became much more aware of just how vulnerable a world we live in. And in New York, their emergency services were not on a shared radio system like ours are here. That is highly documented as to why there was

such an enormous loss of life among emergency services. We are better prepared. But you know, it's not just about the big disasters... it's also about day-to-day general communication. And there are lots of examples of how the shared system has assisted police, fire and ambulance members.

What are your frustrations with regard to emergency services/communications?

I get frustrated that we sometimes forget the enormity of this project. A lot of work has been done in a very short timeframe. We are leaders. I also think that we tend to forget that people who work in emergency communications are heroes—I think it's important that we recognize the jobs all of our emergency personnel do. It's not easy.

What are some of your future hopes and goals for E-Comm?

I feel that we need to do more outreach to the remaining communities that are not using the radio system. It's a big challenge—but I am totally convinced this is the way to go. It's not enough that people "think" they are safe—they have to be safe.

Why did you want to be on the E-Comm Board?

When I first joined the Board it was more about curiosity and even some skepticism. But I've come to appreciate that this is an extremely worthwhile endeavor and is a model that is being looked at all over the world. When the 2010 Olympic evaluation commission was here, we heard that they were extremely impressed with our facility and it's that kind of feedback that should make us all proud.

How has the focus on public safety changed in your municipality over the years?

Even in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows—so far removed from New York—there was, and still is, nervousness. There is more emphasis on civic security. You know, before September 11 if there was a cover off of a water main, you'd just send a water guy to fix it. Now we send someone to check the water too and the police check for suspicious activity. It's changed. When people in New York talk about how we do things in our region... then we know we are onto something right.

How important is it for your municipality to be part of a shared radio system?

When I talk to police members in my municipality, they tell me how much they like the system. It works well and they are glad to be a part of it. How can we expect police and other emergency workers to do their work well without a strong communications system? Shared systems are an idea whose time has come.

What are some of E-Comm's notable achievements?

You know, there was a time when it was a minor miracle to get people onto the radio system and into dispatch. For different reasons. Now, more and more agencies are approaching us first. It is happening slowly, but surely. More will come. The challenge is convincing people, showing them we have long-term vision, long-term plans. My vision is that one day everyone is using one system—one 9-1-1 system, one radio system and that no one community will be denied the service. I am proud to be part of a new concept—it's satisfying knowing you are helping in a small way to build something great.