

Crisis management part IV: Emergency phone enquiries

When reports of a major incident involving large numbers people reach the news, organisations have minutes to set up and activate call centres, says **Jerry J Novosad, Jr**

LARGE SCALE INCIDENTS REQUIRE the establishment of a central database to manage information on persons believed to be directly affected. In such cases, call centres must be capable of responding immediately and be able to receive and process up to 30,000 calls in a single 24-hour period.

As well as receiving and sorting through inbound telephone calls, the centre must be able to capture and organise information from the callers accurately and provide the most current information consistently. Then they begin to return calls to those who are most directly affected.

These centres must have many key capabilities, the first of which is a guaranteed 24-hour worldwide response, 365 days a year. The guaranteed response upon notification must be within 30 minutes activation with a minimum of one trained agent, 25 trained agents within the first hour, 50 trained agents within the second hour and 100 trained agents available within the third hour until they are no longer needed.

Additional trained agents are also required: 30 for notification; 40 to help family members to travel to the incident if applicable; 20 to provide data management; and 50 to provide supervisory and administrative support.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

All sites must be connected via a global Secure Socket Layer (SSL) Virtual Private Network (VPN) with one central point of integration with data back-up, integrity and security. Web hosting, emergency response application and database servers should be monitored and managed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. All software, database and network systems must have complete redundancy for failsafe operation. Satellite call centre access points should also be set up to help client accessibility and centres must have sets of all toll free numbers from around the world.

As far as personnel are concerned, call centres must be able to have access to interpreters for over 170 different languages



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and all call centre agents and managers should be trained and exercised monthly.

Users should be able to access the database from any established internet connection, with secure user ID and password and liaison with multiple government casualty bureaus for information co-ordination and family care. In addition, centres must have established contacts with major media networks to disseminate free phone numbers following activation, and be able to deliver personal care, with informed agents sensitive to the emotional crisis.

A key component of the call centre is a database management system whose capabilities should be:

- Ability to support multiple concurrent incidents without affecting actual incident data;
- Configured to receive electronic input of data from various systems so an immediate list of persons directly affected can be created;
- Ability to create a master listing of missing persons from inbound calls;
- Addresses both the initial response to an

incident and the ongoing support required of the telephone enquiry centre in the days, weeks, months, and even years following an incident, while retaining all call records and relationships between callers, survivors, families and friends;

- Pre-defined scripts for all types of incidents to guide agents through the incident data collection process;
- Maintains absolute referential data integrity; and
- Links callers to the persons directly affected and vice versa, allowing for easy data management to identify next of kin.

Some organisations that maintain call centre capability to conduct their normal business attempt to perform an emergency call centre function using their in-house resource, but this can be difficult. Most do not have enough capability to devote sufficient resources to address an emergency situation and maintain normal business continuity.

Maintaining a trained workforce is expensive, with further costs arising from addressing the emotional effects on employees and insurance issues. One option is to outsource the emergency call centre response, which is far less expensive than using company resources to maintain a capability that may never be used. Normal business continuity is not interrupted; employees are not subjected to the emotions of dealing with families affected by a mass fatality and insurance policies will reimburse the operational costs of the call centre.

Business must ensure outsourced capabilities meet the criteria listed above, making sure that the centre they choose is not affected by other business. Some choose a centre that responds to other emergencies, but these can overwhelm response capability, leaving little time and resource for their needs.

A good viable model is a general business call centre that supports multiple businesses, spread over multiple time zones, with inbound and outbound capability. These generally have sufficient agents to cope.

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