

911: Nerve Center of local safety network

The 911 Call Center – the nerve center of Kingman County public safety – is housed in a 220 square foot room in the basement of the current Law Enforcement Center at 120 N. Spruce in Kingman. The building is located in a flood plain.

The Center is where all emergency telephone calls are answered, along with daytime and after hours administrative calls to the Kingman County Sheriff and Kingman Police. A staff of five full-time and four part-time communication officers (dispatchers) and one 911 chief communication officer comprise this key department, which is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. The staff also takes late payments on city utilities and gives out keys to the Kingman County Activity Center.

Most of the time, there is one dispatcher on duty. That person cannot leave the room unless someone else can step in and man the myriad of equipment. Oftentimes, a nearby law enforcement officer spells dispatchers so they can take a break. Not just anyone can fill in for a dispatcher, even if only for a few minutes. The job is too specialized.

Everything in the Call Center is specially designed, or at least it should be. There are two chairs rated as 24/7 chairs with 12-15 year warranties. The chairs have arms that “click out” to accommodate an officer’s gun. An illustration of crowded conditions is a printer paper tray extender that has been duct taped back in place. It extended just far enough that officers kept hitting it with their guns and eventually broke it off. There simply isn’t enough room for them to steer clear of it.

The main console was designed for dispatch but not for the administrative duties that now also take place there, such as entering warrants. If a dispatcher is typing in warrants and receives a 911 call, the warrant work often ends up on the floor because there isn’t room for both it and the note pad the dispatcher needs to handle the emergency.

The city of Kingman includes U.S. Highway 54, which adds a whole new element of potential concern and stress for law enforcement.

“(The highway) changes who we pull over and it changes the situation for us,” said Heather Kinsler, 911 chief communication officer. “I think that’s difficult for people to understand what actually does drive through our town on a regular day-to-day basis.”

Kingman’s 911, jointly funded by the city and county, dispatches for numerous agencies, including all fire departments in the county, Kingman EMS, Norwich EMS, Cunningham EMS, Zenda 43, Kingman police and Kingman County sheriff. They also sometimes dispatch Kansas Highway Patrol, Kansas Department of Transportation, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, county road and bridge department, medical helicopters and even the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. From Aug. 2, 2012 to July 31, 2013, they dealt with 24,429 incoming calls.

Kingman’s computer aided dispatch (CAD) and 911 system were purchased with grant funds in 2006 for approximately \$250,000. The current update cost \$167,941 and was paid by the Kansas Enhanced 911 Advisory Board Grant. Also, 911 receives a \$50,000 annual payment from the state that pays for specific items, including updates and services to its CAD system and its 911 phone lines.

Kinsler noted that Kingman County sits amid three counties – Pratt, Reno and Sedgwick – that have more population, junior colleges, universities and bigger budgets. Keeping up with technology is not an option. The county has to be able to communicate on those counties’ platforms. Otherwise, response to emergencies could be delayed.

The CAD servers are in a closet off the main 911 room and they have to be kept cool. But the HVAC system for that area is the same one for the main room, so there are times dispatchers are literally shivering at their stations to keep the computers cool enough.

“We need to have more space so we can keep our equipment more appropriately at the right temperatures,” Kinsler said. “In 1996 when they put this in (the basement), it was great. It did all the stuff they needed it to do. But as technology moves forward we’ve got to move forward with it.”