



# Fire Watch

Los Angeles Fire Department Newsletter

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Los Angeles Fire Department  
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[www.lafd.org](http://www.lafd.org)

#### **Our Mission**

“To preserve life and property, promote public safety, foster economic growth through leadership, management and actions, as an all-risk fire and life safety response provider.”

The Los Angeles Fire Department Newsletter is published monthly by the Planning Section.

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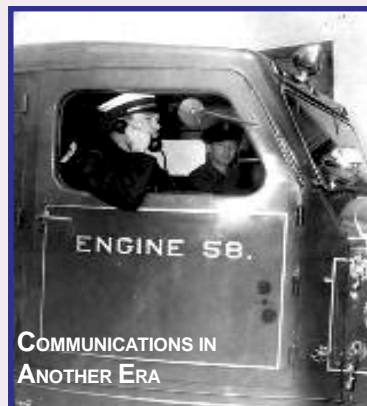
## Operations Control Dispatch Section (OCD)

Three pistol shots rang out on Main Street at 3:37 a.m., that brisk February morning in 1885. The shots, a signal that a fire had broken out, awakened half a dozen members of a recently formed Los Angeles organization known as 38's Engine Company Number One. One of those members dressed quickly, saddled his horse, and galloped to the brick firehouse at Los Angeles and Plaza Streets, where he tugged on a rope, causing a bell atop the building to awaken all members of the 38-man brigade that was the precursor to the Los Angeles Fire Department we know today.



WESTLAKE FACILITY

While we can imagine the clamor of responding to that fire alarm, the members of the 38's would not be able to comprehend what routinely takes place 120 years later less than a quarter-mile away in a serpentine and windowless series of rooms far below City Hall East.



COMMUNICATIONS IN ANOTHER ERA

Welcome to OCD, the LAFD's "Operations Control Dispatch" Section, which serves as the vital first link between the citizens of Los Angeles and time-critical life safety services.

Thankfully, the rhythmic gunshots and tolling bells of yesteryear have given way to the predictable voice of Ann-Marie Dadley, a 31-



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year-old Linguistic Specialist from Colorado, who was chosen to serve as the automated dispatch voice of the LAFD. Ann-Marie will celebrate her virtual fifth anniversary with the LAFD in February, having worked 43,800

trained dispatchers has an experienced dispatcher assigned to them as their trainer and mentor. Once the new dispatchers complete the more than 800 hours of training, they are ready to begin their new assignments as one of

messages for Battalion Commanders.

The actual fire calls were seldom broadcast over police radios as the Fire Department remained skeptical for years about the dependability of two-way radios. Instead, the Chiefs were simply told to "Phone Westlake (or Coldwater)." The Chiefs carried telephone handsets in their cars, and would stop at the nearest fire-alarm box, plug in, and receive their information from their respective Fire Department signal office.

It wasn't until 1946 that LAFD engines and trucks became equipped with two-way radios. Configured in the 33-MHz band, the frequencies from this original allocation were used into the late 1980's.



Old OCD

the 75 LAFD Dispatchers assigned to OCD. While headset-clad Firefighter/Dispatchers are surrounded by high technology today, what got them there is an amazing story.

continuous hours without a break. With the un-natural ability to communicate simultaneously with different messages to 32 different Fire Stations at any given moment, Ann-Marie (with more than a little help from Firefighter/Dispatchers) alerted LAFD crews to 714,658 responses last year alone, an average of 958 responses per day.

While technology abounds at OCD, it takes highly trained personnel to use it. To begin the training, members must have a minimum of four years of field experience. Once selected for OCD training, members begin an arduous nine-week 40-hour-per week classroom training program. This training consists of learning the Department's dispatch protocols, fire station locations, and specialty apparatus locations throughout the City. Following the classroom portion of the training, members are required to utilize their newly learned skills by working 20-24 hour shifts on the dispatch floor. Each of the newly

## LAFD's RADIO SYSTEM

In 1934, the Los Angeles Fire Department installed Los Angeles Police Department radio receivers and later transceivers exclusively in fire boats and Battalion Chiefs' cars.

While our Department continued to rely primarily on telephones and street-corner fire alarm boxes for field communications, the Westlake Signal Office on 6th Street near Alvarado, and the "Coldwater Signal Office" on Mulholland Drive, would often phone LAPD Communications when they had fires or other urgent



WESTLAKE DISPATCHER AT WORK

Prior to modernization in 1972, LAFD dispatch operations were conducted manually in three separate locations throughout the City: Westlake, Coldwater and San Pedro Signal Offices. After a comprehensive study, consolidation of the three older dispatch sites into the new OCD in Level P-4 at City Hall East occurred. Implementation of the



first generation computer-assisted "Fire Command and Control System" was not far behind.

Today, every field member of the Los Angeles Fire Department is equipped with a hand-held radio which provides them with a communication link to OCD as well as every LAFD resource in the City. This system operates on 18 dedicated voice radio channels utilizing the 800 MHz band in a conventional analog format. We've come a long way!



FOUR FLOORS UNDER CITY HALL EAST

Captains scheduled on the floor is normally 1 Captain and 11 dispatchers. However, based on the Departments emergency needs, when necessary, all personnel can be summoned to the dispatch floor to augment the

## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

All emergency and non-emergency communications at OCD are recorded 24 hours a day. The Department's Dispatch Quality Improvement Section uses these recordings to provide training, and to routinely evaluate Dispatcher and system performance in an effort to continually improve the quality of service we deliver.

## EQUIPMENT

Several sub-systems comprise the second generation Fire Command and Control System (FSCCS II) to provide each calltaker and Dispatcher with complete and current incident and resource status information. Each of the 22 dispatch consoles at OCD are fully equipped and capable of performing identical functions.

Without leaving their seats, each Dispatcher and supervisor on duty has access to complete information and full control of all Department fire and EMS resources.

## WORK LOAD

In Fiscal Year 2002/03, a total of 1,187,296 requests for service were received by OCD personnel. These calls for help resulted in over 352,320 incidents being handled by the Department, or an average of 965 per day. To really put things into perspective... That's 20,830 calls taken by each Dipatcher per year at OCD.



DISPATCH CONSOLE

## PERSONNEL

There are 75 Firefighter III/ Dispatchers, 9 Captains, and 3 Battalion Chiefs assigned on platoon duty at OCD. These personnel are equally divided into three platoons working the same 24-hour shifts as Neighborhood Firefighters. While on-duty, the 25 Dispatchers and 3 Captains, all of whom have field experience and are certified as Emergency Medical Dispatchers, are scheduled to work on the "floor" by alternating watches at various times during their 24-hour tour of duty. The number of Dispatchers and

number of members on the dispatch floor.

In addition to the members assigned to platoon duty at OCD, a small army of civilian and special-duty uniformed personnel work behind the scenes in the Dispatch System Support Unit to keep this vital operation up and running.

## DISPATCHING

An available call-taker answers the emergency

call and enters the incident type and location (if the call is a 9-1-1 call, the location is automatically entered) into the computer. An identifying number is assigned automatically to the incident and the location is checked against the street index file by the computer. The computer determines the closest fire station, unit availability, and displays a recommended assignment of companies. The Dispatcher is also notified by the computer of any other incidents in



progress within 1,500 feet of the new incident.

EMS incidents require the call-taker to adhere to written protocols that include appropriate “key questions” and when indicated, pre-arrival instructions. “Key questions” are designed to ensure that the proper level of service is dispatched to every emergency medical incident while pre-arrival instructions help to provide comfort, and oftentimes life-saving instructions to citizen rescuers on scene prior to the arrival of Fire Department personnel.

## FUTURE OCD

The Fire Department is in the final stages of finalizing plans for the future home for OCD. Built with Bond “Q” funds, the approximately 80,000 square-foot 2-story structure will be located at Temple and Alameda Streets adjacent to new Fire Station 4. The Department’s new Communication Apparatus will also be housed at the new Station. The new dispatch center will house the Fire Department’s OCD, the LAPD’s DOC, and the City of Los Angeles’ EOC, and will be equipped with state of the art technology. The new dispatch center will have the capability to house up to 42 Fire Department members.



## CONCLUSION

The Los Angeles Fire Department is the only major metropolitan fire department in the United States that provides its citizenry with the benefit of highly trained dispatch personnel with years of field fire and EMS experience.

Without fail and 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, the men and women at OCD continue to provide the vital communication lifeline between the Los Angeles Fire Department and the citizens we serve.



*Special thanks to Public Service Officer Brian Humphrey for providing valuable input into this month’s Fire Watch. Brian Humphrey is a Paramedic trained Firefighter and 20-year veteran of the Los Angeles Fire Department. He has served as the “B” Platoon Public Service Officer since 1993. A fifth generation Californian, Brian has harbored a fascination with America’s Fire Service in general, and the LAFD in particular since his Fire Service Day visit to Fire Station 39 in 1966.*