

STORM OF UNCERTAINTY

Determining location gets complicated when homes, people and landmarks shift during disasters

By Alex Snyder

The first thing telecommunicators are taught as call takers is to verify a caller's location. Without a location, a dispatcher does not know where to send help to a caller. Sometimes a caller is unfamiliar with the location or surroundings. Maybe a caller is new to the area or just a visitor. The caller could be a child unable to read an address. All of these are situations that are encountered regularly in a call center. What about those special circumstances? Natural disasters that change the landscape of an area so even lifelong residents cannot recognize location are examples of a set of special circumstances.

NATURAL DISASTERS

There are many types of natural disasters that require emergency response: wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes. Each of these types of disasters comes with its own set of challenges. Callers may lose their sense of direction because of different types of situations. Some may become overwhelmed with the stress of a potentially life-threatening situation. Envision yourself as a caller during one of these events. What would cause you to become unfamiliar with even your own home? Smoke during a wildfire that forces you to flee your home? Winds and water moving a structure from one place to another?

HURRICANES

Last year has had a very active hurricane season. With a hurricane come strong winds, rain, possible flooding and tornadoes. All of these can become problems in a communications center. We try our best to safeguard ourselves against these problems with extra staffing and preparing the citizens we serve

with safety measures like curfews and sand bags. On the other end of the telephone line, callers are encountering their own problems due to hurricane weather. If a caller has relocated due to a storm, they may be unfamiliar with the address. This is a time when location accuracy helps call takers. In a more extreme case, what happens when a caller thinks their location is somewhere when they have moved without knowing where?

During a storm with a storm surge and high winds, buildings can be moved from their foundations. Callers may have begun the storm in one location and later find that winds and water have moved the building. They have no way of knowing where exactly the building now stands or in which direction it has been moved. What does a call taker do in this scenario? We look to location accuracy.

HURRICANE KATRINA

Sheri Hokamp, communications center supervisor for Biloxi Police Department, recalls many of those challenges while

working during Hurricane Katrina. Her dispatch center employees had been moved from their communications center to the Emergency Operations Center for Biloxi. At that location, Phase I was not available with even caller ID. Citizens calling into 9-1-1 were moving to higher ground due to rising water levels caused by flooding that comes with hurricanes, as well as the storm surge that Hurricane Katrina brought with her. Another problem was that as people lost power, they were unable to see landmarks. This is one of the things asked by call takers to people who are unsure of their location. Without those landmarks, people were even more disoriented.

During a natural disaster such as a hurricane or similar storm, problems such as location accuracy exist. Those problems continue in the aftermath as well. Debris obstructs roadways. Landmarks have been moved. Residences and businesses have moved. Street signs are lost. All of these things cause confusion for callers and first responders. There will be confusion among first responders if they were mobile during a storm and immediately after it ends.

The question is what do you do when all of these things happen? Biloxi dispatchers relied heavily on callers knowing their original location immediately prior to the storm's beginning. Homes that were in a designated flood zone were of particular importance in this area. This area was under mandatory evacuation. Officers and firefighters went door-to-door in these neighborhoods gathering information about its occupants. Was