

GEOGRAPHY TESTING & IN-SERVICE TRAINING

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PEI wishes to thank Mr. Ruffedt for allowing us to post this information on our website. We very much liked Pennington County 9-1-1's approach and felt the information might be of benefit to numerous other Centers.

Back when I got into the business (1990), dispatch applicants were tested on local geographic knowledge and only locals ended up getting hired. Then in 1993 when we went enhanced 9-1-1 and purchased our first GIS system and integrated it with CAD, we started to realize that local geographic knowledge was not so much of an issue anymore. Today, we hire dispatchers from all over and while local geographic knowledge may give new hires a slight advantage, the accuracy and ease of use of our various geographic systems make "local geographic knowledge" less of an issue when making hiring decisions. Of course, having an accurate and updated GIS, CAD and geo-file and MSAG is crucial.

Along the same line, we recently discovered that it was not our new hires that we needed to worry about but our "old timers". It seems that for the first two or three years, a new dispatcher will use the above mentioned resources religiously. But after that, maybe a little complacency sets in and people start to get lazy and not use their resources. We suspected this after some senior dispatchers had several "mis-dispatches" where reviews of the calls made it obvious that they did not use their geographic resources and did not know which responder to send to an obvious location.

So we developed a geography test of the 60 most common places and intersections that a dispatcher who had worked here for 2+ years should know from memory. For each "place" (question on the test) the dispatcher had to list the appropriate Fire, LE and EMS responder, without the aid of any geographic aid. The test was mandatory for everyone, Supervisors and FTOs included. We were shocked that the average test score was 72%. So we developed a cross referenced "cheat sheet" with those 60 most common places identified. Then we conducted in-service "geographic refresher" training for everyone who scored below 90%. I was amazed at how positive the staff took this training and how much fun they had in class. We made it real interactive with a blank outline of the county and as I started drawing in major roads and common places, they had to name them and then draw them on their own paper maps. A couple of our people even asked to attend the training more than once. We also went over "geographic traps" in this day and age of cell phones, such as cell callers who report that they are "at the airport" or "near the courthouse" or "at the post office". We reminded our staff that every big and small community that we serve has an airport, courthouse or city hall, post office, etc. and that the common "geographic traps" will get you every time. Wireless Phase 1 and 2 will greatly help but until then....

We plan to give the test again soon to see if our efforts paid off. If nothing else, I hope that it rattled a few cages and reminded everyone to use their resources and not fall into those "geographic traps" that always seem to come back and haunt an otherwise good dispatcher.
