



## **July 2007: 911 Emergency Calls** by Groveland Fire Chief Shane Warner

Have you ever wondered who answers when you make an emergency 9-1-1 call? Have you ever thought about what type of training the 9-1-1 dispatcher receives? Have you wondered why both a fire engine and an ambulance respond to an emergency medical call?

Because we live in a remote area much different than the rest of Tuolumne County, I am asked many interesting questions just like these. I will try to answer these and other questions about the 9-1-1 emergency system and how it processes a call from the time you activate it until you see the ambulance, fire engine, or sheriff's deputy arrive at your house.

The 9-1-1 system originated in the late sixties and was first used by AT&T whose operators would call for emergency responders for their customers. At that time, many small independent phone companies were not using the system. Over several years the phone industry, with President Johnson's urging, pushed to formulate a nationwide emergency phone system with the three digit call sign of 9-1-1. Slowly all of the phone companies replaced operators with the emergency 9-1-1 system.

During this time the emergency calls were answered by ambulance personnel. Not until the early eighties did fire departments become part of the local first responder programs. The system was originally designed to improve response times by firefighters responding to medical emergencies, especially in remote locations or where ambulances and ambulance personnel were unavailable. Also, firefighters are able to augment the ambulance personnel because most emergency medical calls need more than two people. It has been proven that the faster the response, the better the outcome for the patient. Brain cells die if deprived of oxygen for four to six minutes and it is usually irreversible after six to ten minutes.

When you call 9-1-1 from your home phone you are connected to the Tuolumne County Sheriff's Department Dispatch Center. The operator will ask you the nature of your emergency and your name. He will verify the information that appears on the system screen by asking for the number you are calling from, the address you are calling from, and the nearest cross street. If it is a medical emergency she will ask the patient's chief complaint or medical need and current status. This last question is vital information for the responding ambulance and firefighting personnel because it prepares them for what they need to do first upon arrival. Next the Sheriff's Dispatch relays your information to Fire Dispatch (formally known as the Emergency Command Center) located in San Andreas, which is operated by CAL Fire personnel. Once they receive the information they dispatch the appropriate fire agencies to the emergency call. Meanwhile, the sheriff's department is also dispatching the Tuolumne County Ambulance personnel.

The transfer process can take several minutes depending on the availability of dispatchers who may be busy with other emergency calls that may have a higher priority than yours. Medical aid ambulance calls are given high priority. When asked if they have ever received complaints about callers receiving a busy signal when calling 9-1-1, dispatch center personnel replied that only once back in the early nineties was the system overwhelmed. It was during a severe cold snap with falling trees causing traffic accidents, road blockages and house damage. Even when the dispatch center was inundated with callers most got through by the second call.

The Tuolumne County Sheriff's Department has a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system that supports fourteen dedicated 9-1-1 phone lines. They also have six non-emergency lines, two lines that are directed to CAL Fire dispatch, and one California Highway Patrol (CHP) line. After six months of hands-on training, dispatchers are allowed to operate the console without supervision.

If you use a cell phone to report an emergency situation, your call is routed in a completely different way depending on the cell tower nearest to your location. If you are a Golden State, AT&T or Cingular customer, your 9-1-1 call will be answered by the Stockton or Merced CHP Dispatch. If you are traveling through Yosemite National Park and have an emergency, your 9-1-1 cell phone call will be answered by the Park Dispatch or CHP Dispatch.

The CHP Dispatch will forward your call to the Tuolumne County Sheriff's Department. Often these CHP out-of-area dispatchers will not be familiar with the highways or landmarks you may reference, such as Highway 120 or Priest Grade. Your cell phone call will not automatically put your information into their system, so they need you to provide all necessary locations and details. It is important to stay at your current calling location because in most mountain communities cell service can be hit or miss, making it important to keep the signal strength at the optimum level. There is nothing more discouraging for a 9-1-1 dispatcher than to lose a caller because the wireless signal is lost.

One last but very important point is to always activate the 9-1-1 system in an emergency instead of calling the Groveland Fire Department or the Pine Mountain Lake main gate. Years ago Pine Mountain Lake security dispatched the Groveland Fire Department on a low band radio system. Everyone inside PML accessed the fire department through PML security. Since then we have joined the rest of the county in using the central dispatch system. I encourage all local citizens to use the 9-1-1 system in an emergency because it saves vital time that could make the difference in saving lives and property.

I will be writing articles in the coming months about the Groveland Fire Department and ways to keep our community safe and healthy. Also, please visit our website at <http://www.grovelandfire.com>. Finally, Fire Prevention week is October 7–13, at which time we will have an open house at the Groveland Fire Station. More details will be given about this event in next month's article.