REGINA QU'APPELLE HEALTH REGION

THE CHALLENGE

When an emergency call comes in at the communications center of the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region, Regina, Saskatchewan, it could be originating across the hall—or from hundreds of miles away.

Serving the communications needs of the organization is a challenging task. Regina's Regional Communications Centre does that and more, as it also provides emergency dispatch services to their region and three others. From their facility in Regina, the unit answers approximately 150,000 requests for service annually, including more than 42,000 calls for emergency services. The four communications specialists at the center launch communications that deploy 40 ambulance services, 76 fire departments and 80 first responder teams, serving more than 130 communities in southern Saskatchewan.

This is all possible because in 2006, the management team in the Regional Communications Centre determined that they needed to reassess their role in the region, including the possibility that growing demand for emergency call services might force them to roll back service availability to parts of the region. By analyzing the trends they were seeing—a growing number of calls, compounded by expanding communications technologies such as cell phones and the Internet—they realized that the call volume in their center would continue to be a challenge.

Rather than reduce critical services to the region, Kim Gutwin, superintendent of the center, led a team that explored changes that would save time and cost. Their search led them to Spok, the leading provider of call center and emergency management technology solutions.

THE SOLUTION

Gutwin and his team decided to implement Spok® e.Notify in their communications center. The center's network takes advantage of nearly every imaginable communications technology: pagers, telephones (both home and business land lines, including TDM and VoIP, as well as cellular), text messaging, email, and public address included. Once an emergency call comes in, the communications specialists

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initiate a Spok e.Notify message that immediately alerts all local emergency response teams in a pre-determined call-tree fashion, on their preferred communication device. Instead of relying on humans to call, text or page emergency response teams, the Spok system handles it. The system's two-way alert and confirmation technology also automatically initiates escalations or backup calls as needed, leaving nothing to chance. All of the communications specialists are certified by the International Academy of Emergency Dispatch (IAED). They are trained to determine the needs of each caller, deploy the appropriate resources, and if necessary, provide communications support during the emergency to ensure the best outcome.

"Now [Spok] e.Notify helps our network of more than 200 call groups, each with 20 to 30 responders, get emergency care to anyone in our cities or out in the rural areas of our province more quickly, more reliably, and more efficiently," Gutwin said. "The notification system has allowed many of the communities we serve to provide 21st-century services to their residents. We've had fantastic results."

THE RESULTS

Since implementation of the Spok system, Regina's key performance indices show significant improvement in the center's ability to reach, direct, and manage responses from their vast coverage area and diverse set of responders. "Our activation time—the time it takes from when we receive a call until we initiate an emergency response— has dropped from an average of five to 10 minutes before we had the system, to about 40 seconds," explained Gutwin. "That's a dramatic improvement in our ability to handle emergency situations. It gets emergency teams moving faster, and it allows our communications specialists to handle the next situation much more quickly."

The center's 9-1-1 answer time—the amount of time before a call is picked up—has improved as well. With a goal of 90 percent answer time within 60 seconds, the staff quickly rose from 80 percent success to 91 percent. Gutwin predicts further improvements as communications specialists become even more proficient and experienced. "We've been able to maintain and improve on our key performance indicators, despite a dramatically increased call volume and the same number of human resources. These improvements are operationally huge."

There's broad agreement across the area served by Regina Qu'Appelle that the Spok e.Notify solution has proven its value in ways that go beyond the usual improvement and efficiency numbers. "It's allowed us to communicate with our rural emergency service providers, especially the small fire departments and first responders, in ways that just wouldn't have happened before. They simply couldn't afford sophisticated communications systems—they'd still be trying to use radios, and they'd be on their own," concluded Gutwin. "So what we're seeing is the survivability of an essential service, because if we couldn't provide this, I don't know what they would've done."

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