History
Fire Communications

The world of emergency services communications has developed greatly over the history of the profession. From its origins where an individual ran to ring a town bell and call volunteers or the community to a fire, to today's modern communications center equipped with Enhanced 9-1-1 (E9-1-1), Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems, and sophisticated two-way communications capabilities (in some cases including satellites), fire communications has always involved using the best available technology to help the community. The Ventura County Fire Protection District Fire Communications Center (FCC) is an example of how technology is being used to save lives.

Fire Lookout Towers

In the early days of the Fire District, the County used mountaintop lookout towers since telephone service was limited among its scattered rural population. Ventura County assisted the Los Angeles County Fire Department in putting up the Triunfo Peak lookout in May 1930.

In November of that year, the Potrero fire burned 23,000 acres between Thousand Oaks and the coast and incinerated the Triunfo Peak tower. Los Angeles County rebuilt the tower and it operated each fire season until the late 1960s, when Los Angeles County took the tower out of service.

The U.S. Forest Service built a lookout tower on Santa Paula Peak in 1931. The Fire District paid for its staffing during the fire season.

In 1933, the District built its own concrete block lookout tower on South Mountain. During very strong northeast winds its operator evacuated the tower for fear that the large glass windows would blow in.

In 1967, the Sence Ranch brush fire burned the roof off the tower. The District operated the South Mountain tower every fire season until 1974.

Fire Telephone System to FCC

Using Federal work program funding, the Fire District installed its own telephone system in 1934 to communicate with its six stations. The system's phone lines ran on poles across the county to the stations and to the South Mountain lookout. This system was used until radios became available in the late 1940s.

Original fire telephone system.

In the event of an emergency, if telephone service existed, residents called directly to their local fire station. This was called the village system. Under the village system, if the apparatus was leaving the station, the telephone could be ringing with no one there to answer it. Personnel would not know if someone was calling in another emergency or reporting the same one. In addition to off-duty personnel and volunteers, the wives of Captains or Chiefs living on the property would cover the telephone during an emergency response.

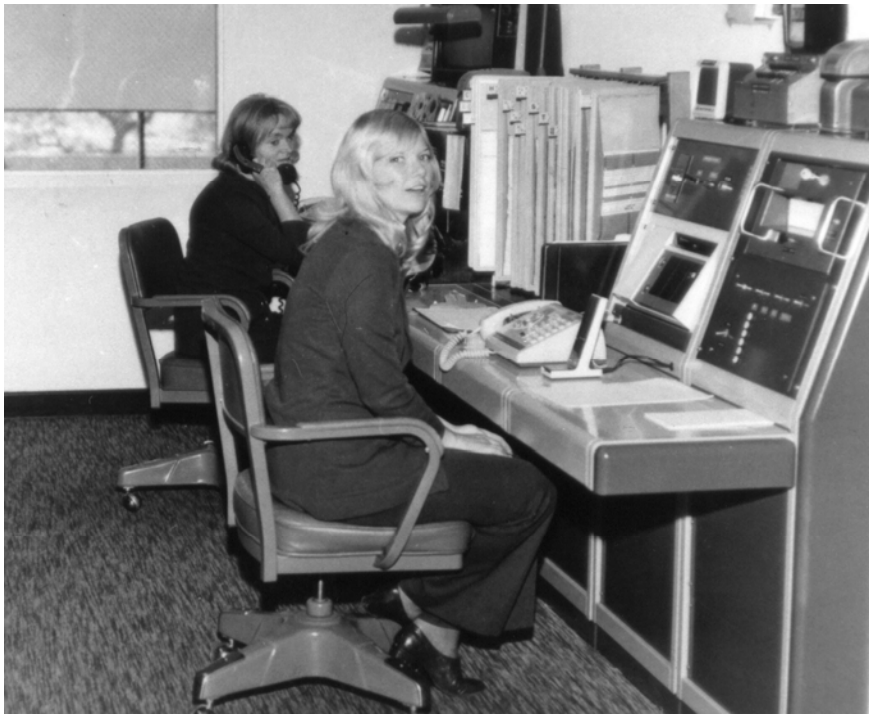
The Fire District used the village system until October 11, 1969, when Control 3 went into service, switching over all phones in the Conejo Valley's fire stations to the switchboard in the kitchen at old Station 31 on Erbes Road in Thousand Oaks. Within minutes a brush fire was reported at Control 3.

Later, Control 5 started up at Station 54 to control the phones in the Oxnard Plains and Camarillo, followed by Control 4 at Station 41 and Control 2 at the former Station 24 on the Avenue near Ventura. Eventually Control 1 was established at Santa Paula headquarters. This completed the task of taking the phones' answering points out of all fire stations, which was only the first step to a central dispatch system.

Control 1 at Santa Paula Headquarters

Up to this point, the functions of dispatching were handled by station personnel and volunteers assigned to the switchboards. During normal business hours the receptionist at the Ventura County Fire Protection District's headquarters would answer the incoming telephone calls ("Control 1"), with sworn personnel answering after hours and weekends. .

In 1974, Thousand Oaks Control 3 and Simi Valley Control 4 were combined to make up the Conejo Control Center at the new Station 30.



Conejo Control Center in Thousand Oaks.

Around 1973 the process of bringing civilians into the department as dispatchers started, and two were hired to work at “Conejo” and “Control 1.” This process was gradual though, and the first two civilians worked during normal business hours.

In 1976, the “Conejo Control Center” as well as the remaining “Controls” (1, 2, and 5) were moved into a new, centralized dispatch center located at the Camarillo Airport. The first building used had been the former Air Force brig. Later it was moved to what had been the Airport Office building.

With the consolidation to the Camarillo Airport facility, civilian personnel staffed the dispatch center around the clock. All telephone calls placed to the District’s fire stations were answered at this one, centralized point and it was the beginning of the Fire Communications Center (FCC), as we know it today.

Ventura Dispatch at Camarillo Airport.

The next major change came in 1983 when the 911 system went into service. In 1990, the Ventura County Fire Department placed its first Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system into service. The CAD system represented a modern method of public safety dispatching replacing the manual methods of call-taking and resource dispatching that had been used previously.

In 1993, the City of Fillmore contracted with the Ventura County Fire Department to provide dispatching services for the Fillmore Fire Department**,** which included call-taking and radio dispatching services. Also in 1993 (February), FCC began offering Emergency Medical Dispatching (EMD) services to the citizens of Ventura County as the first agency to have a fully trained staff of EMD dispatchers.

FCC began limited call-taking (after business hours, weekends and holidays) and full radio dispatching for the Ojai Ambulance Company (presently Lifeline Medical

Transport) in June 1998. This represented FCC's first experience dispatching for a private sector ambulance company. In addition, FCC became the Hospital Diversion Coordination Center, tracking and reporting the diversion status of all local hospitals.

Also in 1998, the FCC staff began working the same 24-hour shift schedule used by the firefighter personnel.

The next major change to the Fire Communications Center came in 2001 when a contract was signed between the Ventura County Fire Department and the private sector ambulance company American Medical Response (AMR) consolidating the dispatch functions of both entities in FCC.

The City of Ventura contracted with the Ventura County Fire Department for dispatch services in February, 2002, and FCC began total dispatch services for the Ventura City Fire Department. The Ventura City consolidation was followed shortly thereafter by the City of Santa Paula, and in July 2002, FCC began dispatching the personnel and resources of the Santa Paula Fire Department. With the inclusion of the Santa Paula Fire Department, FCC truly became a regional fire and EMS dispatch center.

The latest change occurred in March of 2008 with the assumption of dispatching services for Gold Coast Ambulance.

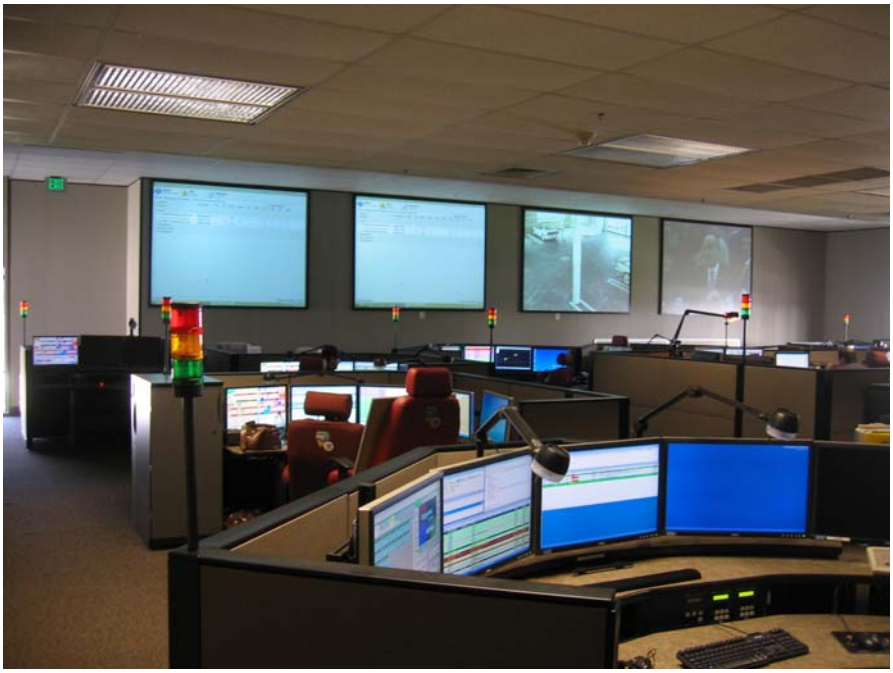
In addition to the duties associated with performing the daily dispatching functions for the various agencies as noted above, the Fire Communications Center also serves as the Operational Area Coordinator for the California Emergency Management Agency (CalEMA). This role requires; the evaluation of conditions and resource availability within the Ventura County operational area, the coordinated dispatching of requested resources from those available within the area, notification to the Regional Fire and Rescue Coordinator reporting conditions (including situations and resources status) of the area, and the requesting of mutual aid resources as are needed to fulfill requests initiated by local jurisdictions or to reinforce seriously depleted resources within the operational area.

Internal Communications

Internal communications started with a bell in the old post office tower to call off-duty personnel and volunteers and personnel in Ojai. A bell was also used in Fillmore until it was replaced with an air horn. The Santa Paula Station used an air horn as both city departments were using a siren to call their personnel. Sirens were used in the rest of the department to notify volunteers and off-duty personnel until Alert Radios started replacing the sirens and horns in 1966.

In 1947, the first radios used by the Fire District were on the Sheriff's frequency. This was very limiting, as they had to relay from the Sheriff's Office to the Fire Department to receive additional equipment, though it was better than running to the closest station and getting on the phone to call for assistance.

The Fire District received its own radio frequency, 154.010, but at the time it was only a two-way system. Unit-to-unit, or three-way, arrived in 1951. In 1969, the District received its second frequency and other frequencies were added in 1986.



New Fire Communications Center at Camarillo Airport.

In November 2006, a new 16,000 square-foot Fire Communications Center went into operation at Camarillo's Airport. The six million dollar, two-story building, was the first built from the ground up specifically for a Ventura County Fire Communications Center.

The new facility is equipped with a nine million dollar, state-of-the art system that utilizes computerized mapping and global positioning system that tracks all fire apparatus in Ventura County except Oxnard Fire. The system directs the closest equipment to the scene. In the old system, fire and ambulance units would be dispatched to the scene by their responsible sector.

The new facility also provides the dispatchers with a more comfortable living and advanced training environment.

As we look at the present day communication systems and observe the fast pace at which new technologies are introduced, it's difficult to imagine what systems will be in use in 10 or 20 years from now at Ventura County Fire Department, but the District is committed to providing the best service possible for its citizens, so the FCC will remain on the cutting-edge of fire dispatching.