

Washoe emergency agencies have beefed up readiness

Susan Voyles
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Washoe County is ahead of the game in meeting federal orders to have an emergency operations center.

Two years ago, the emergency operations center opened in an \$8.3 million building shared with the Regional Dispatch Center operated by the city of Reno. Next door is the new regional safety training center, all located just across north U.S. 395 from the Washoe County Sheriff's Office on Parr Boulevard.

The new facilities are largely a result of contending with the New Year's Day flood in 1997 of the Truckee River, which caused nearly \$700 million in damages and lost business.

In handling that disaster, public safety officials squeezed into a conference room at the county building that was used as the command room. Regional dispatch operations were moved inside a police command truck outside the county building after the center nearly flooded in the basement of the downtown Reno fire department.

Using Homeland Security and other grants, about \$170,000 worth of computer and communications equipment was installed this year. Overhead computerized screens can track responses to emergencies, including the location of emergency vehicles displayed on maps produced by aerial photographs.

In the large room, green-coded vests are draped over chairs identifying tables for officials overseeing operations. Yellow, green and other colored vests signify the tables for management, logistics, planning and finance people.

"When you look across the room, you know immediately when somebody is in here," said Aaron Kenneston, county emergency manager. The room can handle up to 90 people.

"Las Vegas Metro (police) looked at it here almost a month ago," said Assistant Sheriff Jim Lopey. "It's garnered a lot of attention."

Top officials can meet in an executive conference room and a television setup allows

them to talk face-to-face with state or Incline Village emergency officials. Soon the governor's office will be tied into the system.

In a side room, computer-generated maps using aerial photographs are available and can be displayed on a computerized screen to track firefighters or snow removal efforts. Four big TVs in the room allow officials to monitor the news.

"We're all visual people," Kenneston said.

The federal government is requiring local governments to make progress in 36 areas of being prepared for terrorism and disasters by 2008. Future federal grants for emergency equipment and training will be distributed on how well local communities meet their goals.

Here's how the region stands in other specified areas:

* **Law enforcement intelligence:** Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Reno police created a special investigations unit for terrorism and hate crimes that includes four police officers from the region. Reno, Sparks, Washoe County and state and federal agencies formally meet quarterly to share files and communicate more often, said Reno Sgt. Chris Lang, who's in charge of the special unit.

"Every piece of training we can get, we give to both uniformed officers and the departments as a whole," Lang said. "We're doing the best we can. There's no lack of effort right now."

While consolidating regional police remains an elusive goal for local officials, Reno emergency manager Marty Scheuerman said officers often work and train together, especially at the new regional training center.

"I have no doubt when come emergency time, they can all act as one," he said.

* **Firefighting:** Reno, Sparks, state and federal fire agencies have long backed each other up, using a unified incident command system. Reno took over Washoe's major fire department three years ago, which has been of tremendous help in coordinating responses, Scheuerman said.

More than 25 federal, state and local agencies cooperate in the Sierra Wildfire Front, serving as a model for the rest of the nation, according to the Nevada Fire Safe Council. The council recently gave the county an assessment of fire risks to be addressed in 33 local communities that's now being reviewed. With its approval, the county would be eligible for federal wildfire grants.

* **Volunteerism:** The sheriff's department created the Citizens Homeland Security Council 2½ years ago and the Citizens Emergency Response Team 1½ years ago. Among the 240 residents of the security council are a number of retired law

enforcement agents. They have been trained to recognize and prepare for threats from hazardous materials and terrorism. They help during special events and emergency exercises.

“We want them to be acutely aware of what terrorists do if they are in our community, what to look for is someone is surveilling a potential target,” Lopey said. “They’re our eyes and ears. We have to get citizens involved. Law enforcement cannot do it alone.”

The citizens response team has about 130 members who can assist in disasters and who have gone through a several training courses. More than 50 volunteers were involved in the snow emergency last winter, staffing a phone bank where snowbound residents could call for help to get medicines or medical supplies. Other volunteers made the deliveries.

Lopey said the two groups also will be working with airport security during heightened alerts at Reno-Tahoe International Airport. So far, he said 54 people have volunteered to do this. Other plans for the volunteers include providing extra security for railroad lines and educating homeowners about wildland fire safety.

The local Associated General Contractors chapter created a volunteer group to help with emergencies after contractors were called in to help with the 1997 flood. It is the first volunteer AGC group in the nation ready to help with disasters.

*** Health issues:** Local hospital workers are involved in the full-scale emergency drills. They are required to conduct two emergency drills a year and continually update a hazard vulnerability analysis to work on their weak areas, said Steve Matles, Washoe Medical Center safety officer.

In the past, drills have focused on decontamination, mass care and medication, trauma, tracking patients to reunite them with their families and quarantines. Every quarter, hospitals conduct fire drills and Washoe Med routinely hold drills on infant abduction and power blackouts.

The state has a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention certified laboratory at the University of Nevada, Reno, capable of testing for bioterrorism agents with staff cleared by the FBI. It would work closely with the CDC in Atlanta where the first tests would be sent and is linked to the state lab in California. It’s rated higher than the state lab in Las Vegas.

The ambulance service operated by the Regional Medical Services Authority has added software to its dispatching system that tracks symptoms that could be the outbreak of a major disease or virus, whether natural or man-made.

*** Communications:** A 800 megahertz radio system links fire and police responders and began operations two years ago. New equipment links federal firefighters who use another frequency into the system. Certified ham radio operators serve as a back when

there's a power failure or to assist the Red Cross in unifying families in full-scale disasters.

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