When riots broke out in Salinas last month, county 9-1-1 dispatchers played a critical role in this volatile situation. During the hours this was taking place, local agencies relied on dispatchers to relay information and get needed assistance to a very serious situation.

What was it like in the Emergency Communications Center during this event? Emergency Communications Operations Manager Olivia Madrigal describes how the center and dispatchers responded to this community crisis.

Q. 9-1-1 dispatchers may not be thought of as first responders, but they are, particularly in a situation like the recent Salinas unrest.

We do think of ourselves as the ‘first’ of the first responders because most incidents begin here with a telephone call. We answer the call, talk to the reporting party, then dispatchers make decisions about how to proceed based on their training and experience. Dispatchers use interrogation skills and techniques to elicit specific information so they can classify, prioritize and dispatch the appropriate response to
each individual incident. By the time a field unit gets on scene, we have already been involved with the detail for some time and have done what we can to provide the field units with what they need to prepare for and affect the best possible response.

With situations like the riots, there are often multiple callers talking to multiple dispatchers and the information coming in can be conflicting. As you can imagine, the call volume increases, as does the noise on the dispatch floor and the pressure to manage this potential chaos. Faced with multiple streams of information of varying quality and accuracy, dispatchers must turn raw information into useful intelligence, wading through this information to find what is most accurate and relevant, and quickly relay that information to the field units.

Q. Can you describe the situation in the emergency center the night of the Salinas riots?

Tension began to build in the center as we got word that more and more people were gathering at one specific location, and calls for service for Salinas Police started stacking up due to all units being tied up at this event and field units began to double up.

Salinas Police dispatchers ultimately sent an instant urgent message around the dispatch room requesting assistance of all dispatchers on duty as they could not keep up with all the activities related to this incident. For dispatchers, this is when the adrenaline kicks in and they all came together as a cohesive team. The main concern is to keep calm and stay focused to ensure all necessary information is captured and assistance is sent in a timely manner. By doing our job properly, we help keep officers in the field safe.

Q. How do dispatchers keep feelings in control in an unusual situation?

Experience and training! Experienced dispatchers deal with difficult situations all day, every day; it is the very nature of what they do. After years of doing this work, what may seem like an unusual or stressful situation to others does not necessarily present a challenge. Of course, when dispatchers knows that colleagues in the field could be in danger, their senses are definitely heightened and they take extra care to do the best job they can.
Q. Have dispatchers experienced a riot situation before?

Civil disobedience events are very rare. One of our long-time staff members, Operations Supervisor John Mount, recalls several large scale fight/riot situations in Monterey in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Q. How do dispatchers look back at this situation?

Any given workday has potential for a chaotic or dynamic situation for a dispatcher - you just never know what will unfold from a single call. Training prepares them to be ready.

Dispatchers were satisfied with their handling of this crisis and the team effort they provided but managers and supervisors were more than satisfied--they thought staff did exemplary work during this crisis and sent a commendation memo to all dispatch personnel, which reads in part, “I am pleased and proud of the work that you have done over the last couple of weeks and especially the past 24 hours…I want to commend each of you for pulling together, supporting each other, keeping the public safety personnel safe and getting the job done!”

Public Works Offers Adopt-A-Roadway Program

You can adopt a pet, why not adopt a road?

Monterey County’s Public Works Department has an Adopt-a-Roadway program that helps keep county roads clean and encourages pride in the community.

The program was established in 1992, it allows volunteers to adopt a road, doing litter pick up and landscape maintenance. Sheila Castillo, the coordinator of the program, says while there are some individuals, families and groups typically adopt a section of roadway as a project.

“We have a variety of participants, 4H clubs, painting companies, families and other types of groups,” says Castillo. “They usually adopt a
roadway in front of their homes or businesses. The program helps save taxpayer monies and is a great community project.”

A total of 43 sections of roadway have been ‘adopted’ by local groups, most are in Monterey, Carmel Valley, on North Davis Road and near Chualar, but there are 10 roads that are still available for ‘adoption.’ Castillo says if there is a particular road a group wants to work on, Public Works crews can scope it out and see if it’s feasible for the program.

There are a few rules for roadway adoption – it’s a two-year commitment for a two-mile stretch of road, teen volunteers must work with adults, there is only a minimum amount of supervision from the Public Works Department so groups have to be able to work on their own and there are some safety limits as to what roads can be adopted.

If you or a volunteer organization is interested in a project, Adopt-A-Roadway might be a perfect fit. Call Sheila Castillo at 755-4918 for more information.