

Saline County's New Enhanced 911 System Switched “On” Tuesday



Telecommunications Specialist Kelsey Morton looks at her dispatching screens Tuesday morning, Feb. 16, in preparation to begin receiving emergency calls while, from left, Commenco Inc. Service Manager Bill Holcomb, Saline County E911 Assistant Director Stacie Smith, **Cushing Technologies Inc Sales Manager Carol Benedict**, Saline County 911 Commission member Jesse Coslet and Saline County Sheriff Wally George stand by in the foreground. (Geoff Rands/Democrat-News

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By GEOFF RANDS/Staff writer

There were more than 20 people in and out of the Saline County E911 Dispatch Center's dispatch room Tuesday morning, Feb. 16, and most chatted quietly among themselves, trying to pass the time as they waited for the center to receive its first emergency call.

Although the center dispatched its first vehicle, an ambulance, within about a half an hour of when administrators expected the calls to begin coming in, that emergency call had been received by the same agency that would have received it the day before.

The center received no emergency calls as of 10:45 a.m., said 911 Commission member Jesse Coslet.

Amid their hushed conversations, several people, such as Saline County E911 Assistant Director Stacie Smith, Coslet and Commenco Inc.'s Bill Holcomb, inspected workstations and spoke hurriedly on their cell phones, working to ensure the morning went as smoothly as possible.

Looking across the room at the dispatching stations, Saline County Sheriff Wally George spoke briefly about what he called "gut boxes," the radio units that he used in his early days of law enforcement. They weighed over 100 pounds and took up a significant portion of a vehicle's trunk, he said.

They were particularly troublesome on the rougher county roads, when a single too-harsh bump could break one of the glass tubes that enabled the gut box to transmit radio waves, leaving the law enforcer on his or her own.

"From that to this, we've come a long way," he said.

The phone first rang at about 10:03 a.m., but it was merely a test call, rather than the call for which everyone had been waiting. Smith instructed several employees to ask that family members call the center five minutes later.

When the phone rang again at 10:06 a.m., the conversation among observers stopped, resuming when the phones began to ring more steadily a few minutes later.

Several observers began to gather near dispatch stations, waiting excitedly. As the phones continued to ring with callers reporting no emergencies, the tension in the room faded, but the excitement remained.

"It's going about as smooth as we could expect," said commission Vice President John Rieves. "I think everyone's got the jitters right now, and rightfully so. But it's going to work out."

Among others present in the center were 911 Commission members Jack Lenz Jr., Corbin Allred, Cathie Jeffries and John Fletcher; Wade Kelling of Saline County Ambulance District No. 3; commission Medical Director Doug Koehn; Cushing Technologies Sales Manager Carol Benedict; Lafayette County E911 Director Mark Allen; and Saline County Ambulance District No. 1 Paramedic John Branson.

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