

New \$180,000 robot system helping Northampton Fire Department dispatchers do their job

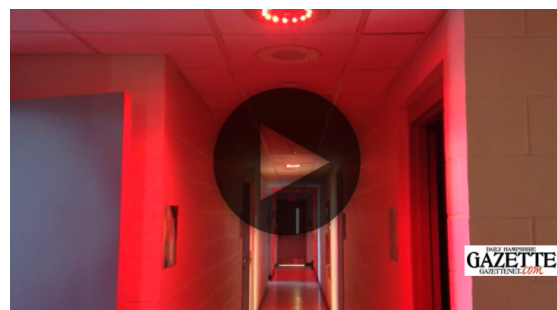
NORTHAMPTON – Journalists and the occasional enthusiast spend lots of time listening to emergency dispatch scanners, the static voices on the radio providing a window onto the work a city's emergency services do day and night.

So it may only have come as a surprise in this newsroom when a high-pitched robot's voice came crackling over the airwaves earlier this month.

"We don't have a name for her," Northampton Public Safety Dispatch's lead dispatcher Nina Barszcz said laughing.

That robotic "her" is part of a more than \$180,000 upgrade to Northampton Fire Department's station alerting system, which dispatchers say is already making their work a bit easier.

"All the dispatchers are happy with it," said Director of Communications Kelly Banister. "They let us build the system how we want it to be."



PURVIS SYSTEMS

Under the previous alerting system, a dispatcher would take a call, enter pertinent information and then had to manually page relevant units with those details, Banister said.

That was a lot of work that is done automatically under the new system, which was purchased from the Rhode Island-based custom technology and communications company PURVIS.

Now, once dispatchers are done typing in essentials about an emergency, that information is immediately sent out. That means dispatchers can stay on the phone with distressed callers instead of putting them on hold to send out units. "They don't feel abandoned," Banister said.

"The old station alerting system basically is as old as the station — about 18 years old — and basically was in disrepair and needed to be replaced," Fire Chief Duane Nichols said last week when the switchover began. The department couldn't even get parts to fix the old system, Assistant Fire Chief Jon Davine said.

That dilapidation led the department to begin searching for new technology. They found PURVIS at a national conference, and did a site visit in Boston, where the city's fire department has upgraded to the company's system.

"They loved it, and Boston doesn't change for anything," Davine said. The department was convinced.

The system also includes other improvements that streamline the department's process: new speakers around the station; new screens and physical printouts, which show firefighters basic messages about the emergency they're heading to; and new LED lights alerting firefighters to an emergency, which Davine said saves significant money that was previously spent replacing lots of fluorescent bulbs.

The computerized female voice has also made things easier for firefighters listening in.

"The way she speaks is clear and consistent," Barszcz, the lead dispatcher, said. Unlike human voices, the computer's voice is the same tone, volume and speed every call, and dispatchers can adjust those settings to meet firefighters' preferences.

There have been a few early-stage wrinkles in the system's rollout. The automated voice, as anyone who has interacted with speaking computers can understand, mispronounces words — Tobin Manor and Assistant Chief Davine's last name, for example.

But dispatchers and fire chiefs told the Gazette that PURVIS had provided quick and effective tech support. Dispatchers have been taking note of garbled words, and can then easily change the pronunciation.

Of course, with automation entering the workplace, questions about humans losing their jobs are bound to follow. But Fire Chief Nichols said nobody is going anywhere.

"We're still going to need dispatchers, they're a vital component in the system here," Nichols said.

So as everyone settles in to working with their new robotic colleague, all that's left is giving her a name. Davine and the dispatchers on duty Thursday agreed to consider naming her, or perhaps letting school children do so.

Dusty Christensen can be reached at dchristensen@gazettenet.com.