

Seattle Fire Department gets some aid from Zones

As the United States' 23rd largest fire department, the Seattle Fire Department serves a daily population of 1.5 million in a land area of 84 square miles. It does so with some 64 fire trucks, medic units and other department vehicles and about 1,150 in total personnel.



Obviously, those running the fire stations and deploying firefighters and medics to emergencies have enough stress in their jobs — they don't need to have to worry about IT system failures as well.

Fortunately, thanks to the Zones Solutions Team partnering with VMware and Dell specialists, the Seattle Fire Department will have in 2013 a new disaster-recovery system that increases its virtualization and storage and allows for automatic backup of all of its emergency and non-emergency systems.

The department's mission-critical Emergency Call Management system has long had a reliable backup, but four other vital systems — records management, the Automated Vehicle Locator (AVL) system, and the paging and automated station-alerting systems — did not.

The stress level would go up

What that meant, according to Dan Whipple, a systems engineer for the Seattle Fire Department, was that any outage involving the department's computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system would force dispatchers to resort to

manual call-taking. "The stress level would go up," he says. "It affects the continuity of decision-making."

The department recognized the need to upgrade its virtualization and disaster-recovery capabilities in mid-2011, and reached out to Zones, which in turn, brought in VMware and Dell. "It was very important for us to get some kind of disaster recovery in place to migrate as many services as possible to a secondary site," Whipple says.

"We needed a simple solution, to be able to migrate systems [for backup]" over to the Seattle Police Department's west precinct, the fire department's backup system location (the primary system is at department's Fire Alarm Center).

Pre-sales consultations involved Whipple and others from the department's IT team, plus representatives of the Zones Solutions Team and VMware, and later, Dell's storage team, and were fruitful, says Brian Christensen, Zones Business Development Manager for the Public Sector.

Client:

Seattle Fire Department. As the country's 23rd-largest fire department, serving a daily population of 1.5 million in a land area of 84 square miles.

IT Project:

Enlist the expertise of an IT solution provider to virtualize the Fire Department's data and communications system and design a disaster failover solution at a secondary location.

Solution:

Zones recommended a VMware virtualized environment for networked communications and data transfer, combined with Dell SAN devices installed at each location for consistent and compatible failover and retrieval functionality.

Results:

The upgraded disaster recovery system has more capacity for non-emergency data, and greater IT management and flexibility. The new failover system brought peace-of-mind to the Fire Department that their service to the greater Seattle community would remain consistent and transparent, even in the event of criminal or natural disaster.

They found us something that would work for our budget

The Zones, VMware and Dell teams eventually proposed a solution that included VMware vSphere Enterprise, VMware Site Recovery Manager, and two Dell MD i3220i Storage Area Networks at the main and backup system locations. "They laid out the low-end and high-end options for us, and found us something that would work for our budget," Whipple says. "They understood all about the shrinking budgets [of municipalities and local governments]."

Once completed early this year, Christensen says, the fire department not only will have an upgrade to its disaster-recovery system, but will also have increased its virtualization footprint, have more capacity for non-emergency data, and have greater flexibility in offering server services to the department's IT team.

Zones 'showed us how cost-effective this could be'

Whipple had high praise for, in particular, Christensen, who he says "showed us how cost-effective this solution could be," and David Cannon, a Zones systems engineer who helped spearhead both the management approval and implementation processes.

"David brought to the table the things that have worked and not worked in other places," Whipple says. "No way could we have had that knowledge otherwise. When David talked to us as lead engineers on the project, he really got down to the weeds with us [technically]. But when he talked to management, he talked at their level. He didn't alienate anyone with all of his technical knowledge.

"At the end of the day, convincing management was critical to the success of the project, and it was important that David was involved in that — important to management and to the taxpayers of Seattle."

Asked if the Seattle Fire Department is a happy Zones customer, Whipple says, "That's an understatement. Zones came in and helped us from Day One. They provided us the knowledge that we didn't have."

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