

# Dallas Police Department dropping police code for plain English

02:13 PM CDT on Monday, March 23, 2009

By ERIC AASEN / The Dallas Morning News  
[eaasen@dallasnews.com](mailto:eaasen@dallasnews.com)

Catch a cop show over the past several decades and these strings of numbers barked over police radios might sound familiar:

*"1-Adam-12, a 4-15 fight." ... "We have a 9-11. Armed robbery in progress."*

Or in the words of the bumbling Barney Fife: *"Mayberry Unit No. 1 over and, uh, Roger. Roger. Out and under. 10-40. Bye."*

But many real-life police departments are ditching the digits, replacing the lingo with plain English.

In Dallas, that means so long "7," hello "minor accident."

Also Online

[Blog: Crime](#)

[Twitter: Dallas crime news](#)

Today, the Dallas Police Department moves to a new plain-language system that's supposed to make communications more universal and less complicated. No more of those distinctive radio codes or signals.

The department says it's following a nationwide trend, but some call it the end of an era.

Others say the switch is no big deal. Many Dallas police dispatches already include plain language because it's simple.

"It's a no-brainer," Dallas Police Senior Cpl. Herb Ebsen said. "It's just common sense. If we start speaking in codes, you have a real chance for a problem or misinterpretation."

The switch became more prevalent after Sept. 11, 2001. During the terrorist attacks, different agencies had problems communicating because they used different codes or their signals had varying meanings.

Federal officials require that plain language be used during major disasters and exercises that involve several agencies or jurisdictions, according to a 2006 government alert.

"There simply is little or no room for misunderstanding in an emergency situation," the alert stated.

Practice during Katrina

Dallas has used a signal system for several decades.

A minor disturbance is a 6, while a major disturbance is a 6X. A major accident is a 7X. An officer wanting to grab something to eat? That's a 50.

Got that? 10-4. (Understood.)

Dallas police acknowledge there could be a slight learning curve for some officers and dispatchers. But they don't anticipate issues, especially because the department already has practice using plain language.

When Dallas housed Hurricane Katrina evacuees, several agencies used the same radio system. So, the departments "had to take care to use terminology that we would understand," Dallas Police Lt. Chris Aulbaugh said.

In a crisis, the codes tend to go out the window, Ebsen said.

"Officers who have been there a while learn pretty quickly that if something big is going on, just talk plainly to say what's going on," he said.

Michael Calhoun, a Dallas police dispatcher, said there will be some other benefits to dropping the signals: Rookies probably won't have to memorize all those codes.

"It'll make their lives a whole lot easier," he said.

So, let's put Calhoun on the spot. What does 22 mean?

*Animal incident*, he said, without hesitating.

How about 34?

*Suicide*.

And 11?

## *Burglary.*

'The way cops talk'

In the 1930s, so-called 10-codes were used to relay details quickly because police radios had only one channel, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Through the years, departments developed their own unique codes or signals that were different from even neighboring agencies. So one department's 10-13 ("officer in trouble") was another department's "request wrecker."

Police officers also have different ways of saying things.

When East Coast officers say "collar," they mean arrest, but in Nevada, officers say "rip," said Tim Dees, a retired police officer and senior editor for lawofficer.com, a law enforcement Web site. With many agencies working together, "if you use the wrong word in the wrong context, people will look at you funny," he said.

As hard as agencies try to scrub out codes and signals, it will be difficult to extinguish something that's been ingrained for decades in police forces, Dees said.

"It becomes a matter of pride to use that and to know what those things mean," he said. "There's always going to be an element of jargon there. I expect you'll hear it occasionally creep back.

"That's the way that cops talk."

### OLD POLICE SIGNALS

The Dallas Police Department is eliminating radio codes for a new plain-language system. A few signals currently used by police:

7 – Minor accident

7X – Major accident

11 – Burglary

12 – Burglar alarm

18 – Fire alarm

23 – Parking violation

26 – Missing person

27 – Dead person

28 – Sick person

34 – Suicide

50 – Eating