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Metro Security brought equipment to help firefighters on the scene of the Metrolink crash.

*LAFD photo*

## Metro Security Officers Aided Emergency Teams at Sept. 12 Metrolink Crash

- Five employees offer help in environment some could not believe

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Oct. 22, 2008) On Friday, Sept. 12, while 225 passengers rode west on Metrolink Ventura County Line 111, five members of the Metro Security team worked throughout the Metro system, unaware they were about to become participants in Los Angeles County's worst train crash since 1956.

Ronald Allen patrolled the Green Line, and Rene Lopez patrolled the Blue Line. Jack Eckles had just left a meeting at Gateway. Rick Nelson was in the Metro Security Control Room. Dan Cowden was in his Plaza-level office.

Within 45 minutes of the 4:23 p.m. collision of a Union Pacific freight train and a Metrolink train, these five members of Metro Security, all trained to work in grave emergency situations, would reach Chatsworth and spend Friday evening in an environment most could not believe.



Rick Nelson learned of the Sept. 12 crash from the television in the Metro Security Control Room. *Photo by Ned Racine*

The 1956 crash killed 30 passengers. The Metrolink crash would kill 25.

Cowden, director of security, took a call from the watch sergeant saying that a Metrolink train had crashed and one of its cars was leaning. Cowden turned on the television. It was 4:30 p.m., seven minutes after the crash.

Nelson, a senior security officer, learned of the crash from the television in the Metro Security Control Room. "It was incredible," Nelson remembers as his first reaction. "It just didn't seem real. I didn't think that it would really happen."

Nelson asked the Metro Security dispatcher to contact the Sheriff's Department. The Sheriff's Department responded, "Yes, we need you."

"I told the [Metro] dispatcher to contact every unit on patrol that was available to meet . . . out there," Nelson said.

When Allen, a security officer II, received the dispatcher's request for more first responders at the collision site, the import of the request stunned him. While he headed for Gateway, Allen turned to a news radio station for more details.

When Eckles, DEO System Safety & Security, finished his meeting, Cowden informed him of the Metrolink crash. They looked at news coverage on a television in a nearby conference room. Eckles recalls feeling numb.

"I think, after my experience in Iraq, I'm slow to really invest in [emergencies] on a personal level," Eckles added. Cowden and Eckles debated whether Metro Security should be on the accident scene.

Besides wanting to offer help, three reasons convinced them: Metro owns the track Metrolink uses, Metro Security being onsite would not complicate the emergency response, and Metro Security could learn from such a major transit emergency requiring so much coordination among agencies.

"It's one thing in a classroom environment to do it," Eckles explained. "It's different to see how it's really done."

The five met at Gateway and took the 5 (Golden State) Freeway north. Traffic was heavy but the Metro units followed a police car—with two ambulances behind them—driving in the far right fire lane of the freeway.

"We were flying down the freeway behind the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) General Services police cars," Lopez remembers. "We were trying to get there as fast as we could and as safely as we could."

When Metro Security Dispatch told the officers the California Highway Patrol (CHP) was closing onramps and offramps to the accident site, Lopez knew the situation was pretty bad.

Nelson called his wife on his way to the site. He asked her to turn on the television while she spoke to him. "Oh, my God," she told him. "Be careful."

"Approaching the site, there was a sea of police, fire and paramedic vehicles," Allen remembered. The five were forced to walk approximately half a mile west from their parking space on Vanowen Street because so many emergency vehicles ringed the accident scene.

Allen recalls the CHP being there, as well as Los Angeles City Fire, Los Angeles County Fire Department, LAPD and Burbank police. As they arrived at the site, 50 police cars flew past Allen and Lopez, offering

another sign of the emergency's magnitude.

When Metro Security first arrived at the scene, Lopez explained, they were simply keeping out of the way. By then, the second and third car had been cleared and emergency workers were devoted to the first car. Two or three of the most injured passengers were pulled out around 5:30 p.m.

"We assumed we'd be doing perimeter support, such as traffic control," Allen explained, "[but] as we approach the scene, the firefighters ordered us to assist in the triage."

According to Lopez, his recent Homeland Security training allowed him to put everything in perspective and begin working. Although some bodies had already been recovered, he saw three or four corpses. He smelled diesel fuel and firefighting foam and burning flesh and pungent smoke—the way a campfire smells immediately after it has been extinguished, Lopez explained.

"You won't forget it if you smell it," Lopez said.

To Lopez the scene looked worse than he and his colleagues had anticipated. He was reminded of a movie set or a war zone with controlled chaos. Helicopters were landing in a private academy parking lot and basketball court approximately 200 feet from the collision to pick up patients. As soon as one would take off, another would land. Ambulances were everywhere.

Lopez noticed an extra large gurney. "On top of the gurney was a yellow tarp and under [it] were bodies," he said.

"We saw a lot of people injured," Nelson said, recalling that people were looking for their spouses. "It was nothing like it was on TV. It was so huge. There are no words to describe that scene."

Allen was on the scene for four hours, and he was constantly busy. "Most of our orders were from Los Angeles City Fire. Basically, the Metro officers helped the fire department control the search area, protect the triage area and move equipment." That equipment included medical supplies, gurneys and oxygen tanks.

With members of the Sheriff's team, several Metro officers carried two basket stretchers stuffed with equipment. They ran one-quarter of a mile to the crash scene, gripping a stretcher Nelson estimated weighed 200 pounds.

"We had to run through residential areas, through backyards, just to get to the site," Nelson said. He remembers passing firefighters cutting through fences to reach the site.

When the stretcher carriers arrived at the crash scene, Nelson was surprised that firefighters directed them to the first Metrolink car, the scene of so much destruction. The firefighters had propped up the teetering rail car. Nelson began handing equipment to the firefighters working inside the first car. (Of the 25 people killed in the collision, most were killed in the first car.)

"You get tunnel vision," Nelson said of an emergency this large. "You have to snap out of it to do your job." Nelson recalls two dead bodies in the second car and water from the fire fighting everywhere. Wallets, cell phones, personal effects and laptops littered the ground.

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Continued in Part II: Witnesses to carnage and compassion, Metro Security officers help rescue efforts into the night.

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