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LA City Fire Department Inspector Shane Allen and Battalion Chief Michael Thomas rely on Metro's high-tech First Responder System to keep employees and patrons safe. *Photo by Michael D. White*

Fire Inspector Allen Provides Snapshot of Metro's First Responder System

By Michael D. White
Staff Writer

(April 20, 2010) Simply being the fastest to the scene during an emergency isn't enough.

It's "arriving on site armed with as much information as you can gather about what occurred that can make the difference," says Los Angeles City Fire Department Inspector Shane Allen.

Allen has spent the last five years of his 30-year LAFD career as half of the team that serves as the emergency/safety liaison between the department and Metro.

Joined by LAFD Battalion Chief Michael Thomas, Allen oversees Metro's "first responder" system, a high-tech alarm array designed to provide instant information on any emergency that might occur on Metro's underground rail network.

"The system [which was activated with the start-up of the Metro Red Line in 1990] detects emergency situations, responds accordingly and initiates whatever plans are needed to handle the situation. The information is channeled through the Metro ROC and then onto the fire department," said Allen, who stressed that specific details of the system – the first and most widely deployed of its kind in the country – are, for obvious reasons, "kept under wraps."

There are more than two dozen emergency scenarios – anything from an equipment fire or medical incident such as a heart attack to a chemical

spill, a natural incident such as an earthquake or a terrorist act – that have been dissected by Allen, Thomas and their counterparts in Metro’s bus and rail operations and safety departments.

Each of those types of “incidents” require a specific response from the fire department, he said, and that’s where assembling all of the available information on what happened, where it happened and how it happened “is the critical first step in being able to respond appropriately.”

Alluding to the recently completed Gold Line Eastside Extension, Allen said that “one of the really useful things we’ve been able to do is to interface with the CCTV cameras from any location on the alignment. We can then make a visual appraisal of an incident at, say, the Soto Station by tapping into the camera system at the Mariachi Station.”

That, he said, “is very useful because it keeps us from having to unnecessarily put people in harm’s way and saves valuable time.”

Effectively handling an incident “is based on the ability of the professionals who handle those sorts of things everyday to communicate, evaluate the situation and act accordingly,” said Allen.

“We’ve put a system in place that gives us the ability to evaluate situations and come up with solutions without having to shut an entire line down to find out what the problem is,” he said. “That way the trains can keep on running while we do whatever we need to do.”