April 13, 2021

The Board of Directors of the Utah Chapter of The National Emergency Number Association, is proud to present the award for Incident of the Year to Central Utah 9-1-1 during National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week 2021.

On May 6, 2020, the Central Utah 9-1-1 dispatch center received a call regarding 2 missing teenagers that didn’t return home after going out and tubing on Utah Lake. Family members of 17-year-old Sophia Hernandez and 18-year-old Priscilla Bienkowski called Saratoga Springs Police around 2000 hours when the two didn’t return home.

The teens were said to have been tubing near the Knoll’s area of Utah Lake along SR-68, south of Saratoga Springs. The mother of one of the girls called her daughter after not hearing from them for some time. A fisherman that heard the phone ringing on the ground answered, and the mother became concerned and contacted local authorities.

Upon arrival, Utah County Sheriff’s Deputies discovered one of the girl’s vehicles abandoned as well as some personal belongings, including car keys and a cell phone. They began to search the area, but the girls were nowhere to be found. The two pool tubes that the girls were believed to be using were discovered over 3 miles away from each other in the reeds along the shore.

Utah Lake continuously presented choppy waters at around 57 degrees. Four helicopters, Two airplanes, 10 boats, some with side-scan sonar, and 12 wave runners were used to search the water. High winds upwards of 40 mph remained an obstacle during the search and effected the equipment rescuers could use. Utah Lake can produce 6–8-foot waves during a wind storm, and due to the shallow waters, the waves typically are so close together that it is nearly impossible to navigate on a tube or in a kayak.

Rescue crews from Utah State Parks, Weber, Sanpete and Wasatch Counties assisted Utah County crews in search efforts. Around 60 individuals from a handful of agencies worked 60-80 hours each to try and locate the missing girls. In addition to the rescue crews from all over the state, Victim’s Advocates, Law Enforcement Volunteers, Shoreline Cleanup and Assessment (SCAT) teams, Sheriff’s Posse, and Utah County Fire members assisted with the operation.

Overall, rescue operations spanned 9 days total. Central Utah 9-1-1 dispatchers kept the rescue crews more organized than they could have hoped. Dispatchers provided weather reports, contact information, patched radio channels, and more. CU911 kept on scene crews up-to-date as they received new information, a lot of which was from psychics.

The operation was a very complex and prolonged incident that took a toll on the dispatchers of Central Utah 9-1-1. Deputy Justin Gordon of the Utah County Sheriff’s Office describes CU911 as a “Top Notch Agency”.

Thank you, Central Utah 9-1-1, for your outstanding performance during this incident, and your continued professionalism and dedication to your community, first responders and the 9-1-1 profession.

Sincerely,

The Utah NENA Board of Directors