

## Operations Center

### 24/7 resource at forefront of the Department

By Lia Miller, former Ops Watch officer, currently a public diplomacy desk officer in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

One of the first phone numbers officers learn on entering the Foreign Service is the one to the Department's Operations Center, an organization that is vast and dynamic and is part newsroom, part command center and part switchboard—on steroids.

Ops serves the Department's principals and colleagues overseas and the secretary of state, who says he "can't say enough about the Ops crew. I get to know almost all of them by their first names. No matter the time of day, the day of the week, whether it's a holiday or a snow day, they always answer when I dial their number." No matter how challenging the request, he says, "they'll make the connection I need in record time. Ops supports me with a capability few foreign ministries can match."



The Watch team headed by Matthew Miller poses in a Main State courtyard during a team building lunch March 6. From left are Christopher Davenport, Emily Schubert, Matt Miller, Craig Ferguson, Anjaly Ibrahim and Stephanie Kang.

*Photo by Lia Miller*

In 1961, Ops started 24/7 operations as the Department's communications and crisis management center. Ops' two divisions, the Watch and Crisis Management Support (CMS), are fast-paced, exciting and rapidly evolving places to work. Under Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy once said the "Department is very lucky to have its own '911' [calling ability] in the Ops Center—timely, accurate and always getting you what you need, even in the most critical times or at the oddest hour."

The Watch does alerting, briefing and communicating/coordinating. When a significant event occurs, the Watch alerts relevant bureaus, counterparts in other agencies and the Department's leaders. Watch officers must be prepared to brief the Secretary, Department principals and other officials on current world events at a moment's notice and do so succinctly and accurately. They also prepare written products for the Secretary and other Department principals, including breaking news alerts, daily overnight and afternoon briefs, and situation and spot reports on world events.

In CMS, program officers work with a network of contacts in the Department, the interagency community and overseas to develop crisis management expertise and an understanding of the long-term risks in regions and countries. Their analyses and recommendations to seventh-floor leadership, regional bureaus and posts are a key component in the Department's efforts to protect U.S. personnel and facilities.

When a crisis occurs, CMS manages the Department's initial reaction—whether it is political unrest, a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. When cross-border challenges strike, such as the Ebola outbreak or the unaccompanied child migrant surge along the border with Mexico, Ops launches into action to coordinate the U.S. response and assist American citizens. In the past year, Ops has managed 11 task forces, monitoring groups and working groups, each covering specific

events, such as the World Cup and crises in Yemen, Iraq, and Ukraine.

"It's not surprising that when the fighting in Tripoli began in July 2014 and the embassy came under indirect fire, my first call was to the Ops Center," said U.S. Ambassador to Libya Deborah Jones, a former Watch officer and senior Watch officer. "We maintained an open line (literally) during our 19-hour trek across the desert, mountains and oases of western Libya into Tunis, until we arrived at the C-17 awaiting us at Gabès Air Force Base."

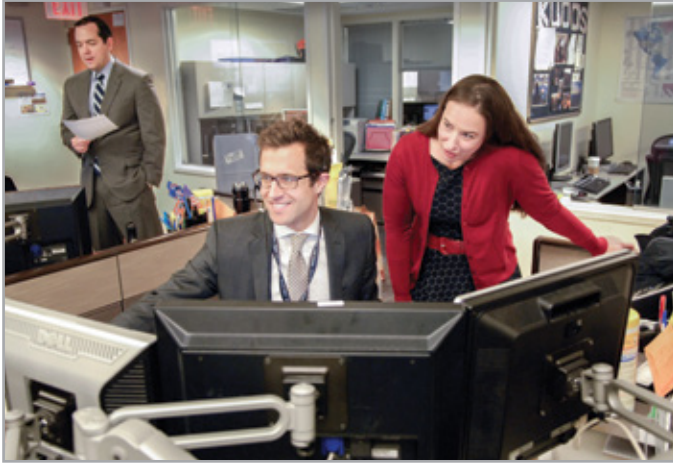


From left, the Department's executive secretary, Ambassador Joseph E. Macmanus, Crisis Management Support Program Officer Michael Gladstone, and DS Special Agent Katie Farrell discuss breaking events in March. *Photo by Barry Smith*

The Ops Center truly embodies the notion of esprit de corps, its greatest asset. Officers must be highly motivated, with strong interpersonal skills, a commitment to excellence, a sharp intellect, high energy and team spirit. U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan and Ops alumnus George Krol said he found his Ops assignment "the perfect introduction to the Department after my first two overseas tours, and highly recommended to all officers. The friends and contacts I made on the Watch have lasted throughout my over 30 years in the service."

He added that those in his Watch cohort group hold reunions at the global chiefs of mission conferences—another sign of how an Ops tour enhances a career.

The Ops Center's diverse employee pool includes Civil Service and Foreign Service



Watch Officers Jason Starr and Emily Schubert prepare in March to set up a call with the secretary of state and a foreign leader. *Photo by Barry Smith*

officers, IT specialists, a military attaché and Bureau of Diplomatic Security agents. Ops also works closely with operations centers across the interagency community, including the White House Situation Room and other important partners.

Teamwork is the engine of the Operations Center. Seven six-member teams staff the Watch in three eight-hour shifts per day, providing 24/7 coverage. CMS's team of 14 program officers together covers regional and functional responsibilities to ensure constant global coverage.

Operations Center officers say that, in many ways, Ops was the Department's quintessential team environment, since the tour involved a year assigned not just to one specific team but also constantly creating or joining new teams to perform the mission. Whether serving on an overnight Watch shift, coordinating a task force, preparing a post for crisis or finding innovative ways to improve upon Department processes, all of Ops' tasks are performed through teamwork. Ops' collaborative essence, grounded in mutual support and effective communication, ensures that the Secretary, senior decisionmakers throughout the interagency community and colleagues overseas have the information and capabilities to respond to crises and accomplish Department goals.

If all of this sounds enticing and you're weighing whether to work in the Operations Center, be advised that successful candidates need initiative, good judgment, attention to detail, crisp briefing and drafting skills, the ability to multitask under pressure, and a solid understanding of U.S. policy and interests around the world. They also need to be able to work effectively as part of a team and have a healthy sense of humor. The reward is an unparalleled view of the U.S. foreign policy process, the satisfaction of making a difference and the chance to develop skills critical to success in the higher ranks of the Foreign and Civil Service. More information is on the Operations Center's website. ■

## Ops Center FAQs

### Who are we?

The Watch: 3 shifts per day (24/7)

45 Watchstanders (34 Foreign Service, 11 Civil Service officers)

CMS: 14 Person Team (5 FS, 9 CS officers)

Other: The Ops Center also includes a military advisor, two Diplomatic Security Watch liaison officers, a management officer, an innovation officer and a staff assistant.

### What do we do?

On a typical day, officers facilitate communication between Department officers, posts overseas and interagency partners, track and alert Department officers and interagency partners on breaking developments, build four daily briefs for Seventh-floor leadership, distribute senior leaders' briefing material in advance of high-level interagency meetings and manage and prepare posts for crises wherever they may occur.

### Whom do we serve?

- Department Principals
- Assistant Secretaries and Special Envoys
- Over 250 U.S. Embassies and constituent posts overseas
- The full range of Department of State Bureaus
- Interagency partners, as appropriate
- American citizens in emergencies and after hours
- Foreign diplomatic corps in emergencies and after hours

The Watch	2012	2013	2014
Secure calls:	723	706	657
<b>Crisis Management Support</b>			
Hours spent on Emergency Action Plans:	186	1085	1850
Hours spent on Task Forces/ Monitoring Groups/ Working Groups/ Unofficial Task Forces:	642	3408	675
Hours spent on the Tripwire committee: <i>Projection for 2015 - 960</i>	0	166	875