

Always There When Called

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HARRISONBURG — Kelly Royston says the way her day goes depends on three things: the weather, the locals and the students.

Royston is one of the 51 highly trained employees of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Emergency Communications Center, where she's worked for the last 13 years.

"I started when it was the old center," she said.

According to the center's operations manager Dee Dee Sencindiver, the "old center" was Fire Station 4 on East Rock Street. All 911 calls had to be processed there before being transferred to other stations until the ECC opened in July 2005.

The new center, funded jointly by the city and the county, consolidated the area's three dispatch centers — city police, the sheriff's office, and fire and rescue — into one building.

Communicators work 24 hours a day in 12-hour shifts from 7 to 7. Up to nine communicators per shift sit in pods of two each, generally one call-taker and one radio operator. Each employee has four different computer screens to monitor.

According to Sencindiver, at least six communicators are working every shift.

"I think a lot of people have a misconception that it's just one person in a room with one phone," Sencindiver said. "And that's really not true."

"A lot of people think we just look at screens all day," Royston said, "but this is a mentally demanding job. You have to make decisions in a split second that can change someone's life."

Employees are trained in both radio operation and call-taking, so they're able to fill in if their pod partner needs to step away.

New staff must complete a six-week classroom "pretraining" course before being allowed on the floor, where they then train with an experienced communicator for a year before being "released" and allowed to work on their own.

According to the center, it received a total of 188,521 phone calls in 2015, including 51,344 calls to 911. Of those, 116,752 calls — about 62 percent of them — resulted in dispatch of emergency services.

Calling 911

When a 911 call comes in, the call-taker gathers some basic information about both the emergency and the caller, and inputs it into a computer-aided dispatch, or CAD, system. The center has four 911 lines each for landline and mobile callers, plus two seven-digit emergency lines, allowing it to process up to 10 emergency calls at once.

Most callers' information is displayed in the system automatically, including their phone number and service provider.

Landline callers' exact location is shown, while those who called in on a cellphone are tracked to their approximate location, courtesy of the cellphone tower through which the call was routed. The system also marks how confident it is in that estimate.

Receiving 911 calls isn't an exact science, said shift supervisor Jake Guinn, and sometimes callers must be transferred to 911 centers elsewhere in the state. Occasionally, callers must be transferred out of state.

"Voice over IP technology can be hard," he said. "Sometimes you get older people who move and take [the equipment] with them and just plug it in — because it works — but they didn't update their address with the provider, so when they call 911, it routes their call to the center where they lived before."

That call then must be transferred to the correct center, which can take precious time away from first responders in an emergency.

The ECC wants to upgrade its systems and add a text-to-911 capability, according to Sencindiver, allowing cellphone users to send text messages for help when they're unable to speak.

"We're hoping to have that in October," she said. "Our slogan will be 'text when you can, call when you can't', because we really want to keep people calling in if they're able to."

Once a call comes in, as the call-taker adds information to the CAD, the calls are color-coded — blue for Harrisonburg police, red for fire, green for EMS, yellow for the sheriff's office or white for any of the Rockingham County police departments.

In 2015, it took an average 1 minute, 28 seconds to fully process a call.

Once the call has been coded, it appears in the system and can be accessed by the radio operators.

On The Radio

Radio operators have their screen set up to show one set of calls at a time — either Harrisonburg police, the sheriff and towns, or fire and rescue — and as incidents appear in their queue, they call in the appropriate agency.

On law enforcement radio, each officer is identified by a "unit number."

In most agencies, Sencindiver said, the unit number and the officer's badge number are the same.

When an officer is needed, the radio operator announces the officer's number and waits for a response before detailing the incident and location.

Officers can also call in their own incidents, and the dispatcher will add the required information to the system.

Law enforcement radio operators also are responsible for using the CAD system to look up driver's licenses and car registrations from DMV databases across the country.

Fire and rescue operators, meanwhile, call different agencies by "toning" them.

Each fire department and rescue squad in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County is identified by a different pair of high-pitched tones.

Agencies are toned depending on the caller's location. The radio operator plays the tones and verbally calls for both the fire company and the rescue squad in that area.

If either squad doesn't reply within four minutes, the operator must tone them again. If another four minutes pass, or if the responders need more help, the operator must tone the "next due" company — the next closest to the original caller's location.

Because some of the county's volunteer agencies are not staffed 24 hours a day, Sencindiver said some calls require the next due company to be toned immediately.

The ECC can also call in one of the area's three medevac helicopters.

Once a rescue squad requests a helicopter, ECC staff check the availability of each company and can call for AirCare 4 based in Front Royal, AirCare 5 from Weyers Cave or the University of Virginia Pegasus helicopter based in Charlottesville.

Sencindiver said each helicopter company has its own dispatch center, but the ECC will track the helicopter crews while they respond to a call from the area.

'Becomes A Part Of You'

Communicator Laurie White joined the ECC staff as a part-time employee in 2009, and became a full-time communicator in January 2010.

"When I got here, I found out there was a lot more to it than what you see in the movies," she said.

The variety of calls routed through the ECC was a big thing she noticed.

During two recent Saturday night shifts, 911 call-takers spoke with everyone from residents complaining their neighbors were too loud, to a man who tracked his stolen cellphone from Staunton to Harrisonburg, confronted the alleged thief in a restaurant, and wanted the police to come "back him up."

Dispatchers even calmed a woman who was afraid she was in labor, and helped a man threatening suicide get help.

"This isn't a job where any two days are the same," White said. "When you pick up that phone, you have no idea what's going to be on the other end."

Tonya Keller said in her 11 years at the ECC, she had one call really stick out in her mind.

"I had an older gentleman call in one day, and he actually passed away while he was on the phone with me," she said. "I hate that that's

the one I remember most."

Royston said she remembers the 2004 fire that gutted downtown's Main Street Bar and Grill.

"It was really quiet that day," she said, "but suddenly all 10 lines started ringing at once."

However, for every serious call the center receives, White said, communicators answer at least 20 that aren't.

"There are some that are actually kind of humorous," she said, "but you have to remember that when someone has to call 911, it's generally the worst day of their life."

White had always wanted to help people on the "worst days of their lives." Although she had aspirations of becoming paramedic, asthma got in the way.

"I thought, 'Well, what can I do to still be a part of it without being a part of it,'" she said, which drew her to communications.

She sees only one downside to the job.

"You see the beginning and the middle of the stories, but never the end," White said. "You get the call, send help, and then the responders take them wherever they take them. For us, that's it."

White recalled a traffic crash she dispatched emergency crews to.

"It was a mom and a little kid, and the kid went to RMH, but his mom had to be airlifted to Charlottesville," she said. "We weren't sure if she'd make it."

That call affected her so deeply because her niece was about the same age as the child.

"I just kept thinking about this kid having to grow up without his mom, and it was heartbreaking," she said.

White called the hospital several times during the mother's stay, just to check on her.

"When I heard she was OK and had left the hospital, it was just the best feeling," she said.

Compassion is an important aspect of the job, according to White.

"This is not a job you go to just to get a paycheck," she said. "It becomes a part of you. And you have to care about people, because if you don't, you shouldn't be doing this."

Royston said during daylight shifts, the center sees a lot of older adults calling in because they want someone to talk to.

"They always pick the most inconvenient times to call in, but if you take that extra minute to talk to them, you probably make their whole day," she said. "And touching one person sometimes is enough to make your day, too."

Their compassion doesn't extend solely to the calls they answer. White said communicators often develop a kind of camaraderie with the first responders they dispatch.

"These guys are like family, and the minute they stop answering their radios, we get nervous," she said. "Having everyone go home safe at the end of the night is our No. 1 priority."

And those connections run deep. Sencindiver said three of her communicators are married to first responders, which can add another level of stress to an already difficult job.

"A lot of people can leave here and leave everything at the door, but we can't, because sometimes our significant other isn't home when we get there," said Royston, who is married to a Rockingham County sheriff's deputy. "You think, 'OK, he wasn't in the CAD when I left, where is he?'"

However, Keller is married to a Rockingham County firefighter, and she said that dynamic can help them decompress from the job.

"Sometimes it's easier to talk about it because you know they have that understanding," she said. "But usually when I leave here and he leaves there, we spend the time with our family and we just don't discuss work."

'We Take Care Of Them'

The ECC does its best to keep the employees mentally healthy, according to Sencindiver.

"Our people see and hear people at their absolute worst," she said, "and they see the worst things people can do."

If a 911 or radio call comes in about an employee's loved one, Sencindiver said the agency responds immediately.

"We pull [that employee] off the floor right away so they don't have to hear it," she said.

The agency employs a "critical incident stress management" expert, and can call in extra help for employees who are struggling, or for large-scale events. One such incident was the officer-involved shooting that killed Michael Pierce last September.

"There was a debriefing with the officers that were involved, and they opened it up to our communicators as well," Sencindiver said. "It really brought them all together."

Sencindiver, who began her career as a Harrisonburg police dispatcher in 1992, is well aware of the sacrifices emergency communicators must make.

"I always say we're here when you need us, and we're still here when you don't," she said. "But when you save that life, or you comfort the scared kid who can't get mom or dad to wake up, it makes you want to keep coming back."

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• Caption: Tom Schroeder of Elkton, a Harrisonburg-Rockingham Emergency Communications Center senior communicator, takes a 911 call. Last year, the ECC fielded more than 188,000 phone calls, including 51,344 calls to 911. (Photos by Daniel Lin) Senior communicator Jinny Lee of Linville updates information on an active call. Each computer screen used by a dispatcher is controlled by a separate mouse, which means the ability to multitask is a must. Ashley Burgoyne, a senior communicator at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Emergency Communications Center, dispatches Harrisonburg police officers to the scene of a traffic accident.

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