

## THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

When in need of immediate assistance for themselves or someone else, people call 911, and in that moment, they are the most important person in the crisis. The caller possesses the information necessary for an appropriate emergency response. However, the time it takes for help to arrive can seem like an eternity, and callers are frequently frustrated by the dispatcher's questioning. It is common for a telecommunicator to hear, "Why are you asking this? Just send someone!"

Emergency Services Director, Dinah Jeffries, and Kevin Medlin, Communications Operations Manager, assisted me with this installment of *The Lowdown* to provide the anatomy of a 911 call. The Orange County 9-1-1 Communications Division (AKA Communications) serves my office and the Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and Hillsborough police departments. They also dispatch all calls for Emergency Medical Services and county fire services, answering 6,724 calls monthly. Some of these are duplicative, such as multiple motorists reporting the same traffic crash.

Perhaps surprisingly, telecommunicators are involved in the dispatch of 9,399 calls – 2,675 more calls than they answer! Alarm calls, traffic stops, and officer-initiated activities account for this discrepancy. Examples of the latter include an officer assisting a stranded motorist or notifying dispatch about a suspicious condition.

All calls are answered with: "911. What is the **location** of your emergency?" Seventy percent of calls originate from mobile devices. Unlike landlines, mobile devices only provide a caller's general location. Additionally, people often call 911 to report an emergency occurring somewhere else. Thus, initially, the location is even more important than the nature of the problem. If the call drops, the caller loses consciousness, or otherwise becomes unable to communicate; the call-taker at least knows where to send help.

Once location is established, the telecommunicator continually assesses the situation through additional questions. Frequently, callers do not realize a telecommunicator is simultaneously dispatching units to the appropriate location.

Some 911 agencies have dedicated call-takers and dedicated dispatchers. Our telecommunicators handle both responsibilities, dispatching emergency units an average of two minutes and five seconds after answering the phone. Urgent calls, however, are generally dispatched more quickly. The average is skewed by calls that do not require an immediate response. For example, if a caller reports a belated break-

in and the area car is busy, 911 will appropriately delay dispatching the call until an officer becomes available.

Telecommunicators use the information they receive to efficiently manage or mitigate emergencies until units arrive. Perhaps they tell the caller to secure a dog or unlock a door. Often they keep the caller calm or move her to safety. Telecommunicators are trained to guide a caller through crisis situations using structured processes and procedures and to continually gather information to assist responding units as they prepare for the situation. The array of information telecommunicators assess, troubleshoot, and impart is staggering; it can literally be the difference between life and death.

In addition to emergency calls, Communications handles 9,355 administrative calls monthly. These include responding to 911 hang ups, working with alarm companies, and providing details emergency responders need for their reports.

Locally, a minimum of six telecommunicators work each shift. They sit at consoles with multiple computer monitors including one each for the phone and radio. Additional monitors connect to the Division of Criminal Information network and the Computer Aided Dispatch system (CAD), the front end of a database. CAD displays any known information about the location and nature of a call, and it receives information as the call progresses.

Telecommunicators routinely multitask their way through adrenaline pumping situations, but their involvement generally ends abruptly when responding units clear the scene. Not knowing the final outcome of a call tends to be difficult and stressful. However, for the right people, telecommunicating becomes a career and a calling; it provides camaraderie, opportunities for advancement, and the satisfaction inherent in helping others.

Candidates must be at least 18 years old with prior customer service experience. Before being hired, they are tested with the Criticall system which evaluates decision making, multi-tasking, data entry, map reading, and other job-related skills. Candidates must also pass a physical and a psychological examination. Those hired enter a nine-month training academy, sponsored by my office. Once certified by the Sheriff's Education and Standards Commission, they receive at least three months of on-the-job training. The job requires commitment.

Telecommunicators are truly special people who serve the county in a remarkable and generally invisible way. I want to recognize Director Dinah Jeffries who will retire in December after 37 years of service. She also served the state through NC NENA

(National Emergency Number Association) and NC APCO (Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials), including serving as president of each group. She has been a driving force for telecommunicator training both locally and across the state. It is no exaggeration to say her leadership has made ALL communities safer.