

911 Career Life

John Geib

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“911, where is your emergency?” It’s a phrase uttered over 8.6 million times every year by thousands of telecommunicator professionals in Pennsylvania. The response that follows that question is as varied as the weather in our great Commonwealth. From a minor vehicle accident to a violent domestic assault; from a small trash fire to a mother begging for someone to help her child breathe. Being prepared for every possible situation – that’s the role of a public safety telecommunicator.

The public is possibly more familiar with the term “dispatcher” to describe the core team that staffs the 61 911 centers in Pennsylvania. You can call us dispatchers, but please don’t refer to us as operators. There is far more to this profession than connecting a call and relaying basic information. The term “telecommunicator” provides a more accurate picture of our role in the emergency response chain. Telecommunication is the act of communicating from a distance. In an emergency situation, we may not be physically by your side, but we are trained to help you and guide you like we are right there with you. Here’s a glimpse into the career life of the first responder you will always hear but may never see.

Training

Before ever answering a call or dispatching a single emergency responder, telecommunicators attend an arduous training program based on national standards and requirements. This includes foundational training in vital communication techniques such as active listening, effective interrogation, and preventing a caller from entering the “hysteria threshold”, which renders a caller unable to actively communicate usable information about the situation they are facing. Basic communication training is essential to master before learning mapping, technology, and other advanced areas of knowledge. If we can’t obtain critical information fast, nothing else matters.

Following a classroom training phase, a crucial on-the-job training phase begins. A fledgling dispatcher is expected to complete the skills of the profession but under the watchful eye and guidance of a communications training officer, or CTO, who is paired in a one-on-one relationship with a trainee. The CTO becomes coach, counselor, and mentor to that new team member, and pours countless hours of heart and soul into an individual that will one day work on their own and become part of the safety net standing by to react and respond.

Part of the Team

It is a high achievement to successfully complete the training program and become a full-fledged member of a highly efficient 911 team. The excitement of knowing you have the ability as an individual and as a team to significantly impact someone’s life on a daily basis – even for the author of this article after nearly 30 years in the profession, I remember how that felt. It is easy to get swept into an early euphoria as a rookie. However, this is an industry based on emergent situations and tragedy. Mixed in with the good is the bad and the ugly. Walking a young couple through childbirth and hearing the first cries of a child is quickly balanced by helpless cries, misplaced angry retorts, and snide responses. Telecommunicators have been trained to maintain a high level of professionalism in all situations, but

there is a human under that headset. It is a daily struggle to fight a callous and numb point of view. Although we have handled a thousand fights between spouses, this situation is new to the caller; and we must handle the one-thousandth call like we handled the first. That is an expectation significantly easier said than done.

A member of the law enforcement, EMS, or fire response community have very hard jobs to perform in very difficult situations. There must be a very focused and proactive effort to protect the health and wellness of these first responders. But what about the telecommunicator? The individual who isn't physically present but mentally walking alongside the caller, hearing the first minutes of an emergency before anyone else is there, and making every effort to obtain information and organize chaos. There is research-based proof that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological and physiological responses to tragedy are as real for the telecommunicator as they are for any other member of the first responder community. Imagine listening to call after call of heartbreak, pain, and anger – day after day and week after week. Eventually, mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion occurs unless our effort to protect the health and wellness of our telecommunicators is as fervent as it is for our fellow first responders. Leaders within a healthy community will embrace and develop a culture whereby members of our team are free to say, "I am not okay", and expect a helping hand rather than skepticism and ridicule.

Challenges Faced

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an established challenge to maintain adequate staffing in 911 centers in Pennsylvania and across the nation. Individuals at, or even close to, retirement age left earlier than originally planned during or immediately following the quarantine and social distancing period. Additionally, some with just a few years invested in the career decided to seek out different opportunities as the remote workplace expectation began to increase in every industry. And now, it is not uncommon for a 911 center to experience a vacancy rate of 20-, 30-, even 50-percent; adding to the stress that is inherent to the nature of the career. Team members are asked or required to work an exorbitant number of overtime hours. The result? More time spent away from friends, family, and recreational outlets that allow an individual to refresh their energy and maintain health, wellness, and professional skills. It can quickly become a downward spiral leading to burnout. But to maintain the required staffing levels, the hours of extra effort are invested. Team member supports team member to ensure the mission is accomplished.

A grand majority of situations reported to the 911 center can be managed in a simple process of incident creation, incident dispatch, and incident management. A need is identified and a resource is dispatched to resolve or mitigate the issue. A medical emergency. A car fire. A fight on the street corner. But what about those incidents that require an "above and beyond" response? An active shooter in a school. A 70-car pileup in a snow squall. A train derailment. Preparing for these "high risk, low frequency" events requires a high performance team to focus their efforts in a number of incident management areas including, gathering all vital situational awareness information; maintaining coordination and safety of all responders; making necessary notifications to emergency management decision-makers, elected officials, and the public; and, developing a long-term plan to support the life of the event while maintaining the ability to manage all other calls and emergency situations. This could require additional personnel responding to the 911 center to assist, coordinating with a neighboring 911 center to support the effort, or deploying a specialized team of telecommunicators specifically trained to handle a heavily

complex situation. Our community handles unique situations every day, but when one of these events occurs, it adds a variety of challenges to the list of responsibilities.

If you have owned a mobile phone for any length of time, you are aware of the speed at which communication technology is evolving in our world today. The ability to quickly share your location, video, pictures, and other information in real-time has become an expectation in everyday life. In an emergency situation, an individual will gravitate to what is familiar when they reach out for help. Additionally, the ultra-mobility of devices and data is extremely different when compared to the legacy telephone network that the current 911 system was built upon. The support technology in a 911 center is rapidly changing and telecommunicators need to possess an ability to adapt and move forward without missing a beat. Adding different mapping systems, text-to-911, platforms that capture streaming video and other media requires active participation in a continuing education program – where telecommunicators routinely learn new technology, review updated policies, and sharpen their global professional skillset.

Not a Job – A Career

Being a telecommunicator is no longer a “stepping stone job” that progresses to a position with a local police department, EMS agency, or fire company. Are there some that stay for a short period and move on? Sure. Every industry has that. But overall, a successful telecommunicator has a career mindset. There is a proactive pursuit to acquire and maintain available professional certifications, participate in advanced training sessions, and seek out opportunities to lead. The generations entering the workforce desire to take an immediate active role in their work environment to sustain their mission, support the established ethics and values, and leave the community better than they found it. The leadership team of a 911 center would do well to encourage participation inside their center, the community they serve, and among our national associations such as the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) or the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO). These professional associations tackle issues specific to the 911 community, develop new standards, and offer the telecommunicator an ability to have a voice in the trajectory of the profession in the future.

So, why struggle through short staffing and technology changes? Why persevere through months of a demanding training program and risk mental health and wellness? Why become a professional 911 telecommunicator? Because a telecommunicator may struggle to find a sufficient challenge in a traditional work environment. Because those that gravitate toward this profession have a passion for compassion and often ask themselves, “if not me, then who”.¹ Because you have an opportunity to be “the good” in the lives of hundreds or even thousands during the life of a career. “911 where is your emergency?” We never know what response will follow that question. Regardless, you can be sure that every day, every night, every weekend, every holiday, every snowstorm, every minute—our team will be here when you need us.

John Geib is the Director of Emergency Communications for the County of Bucks, Pennsylvania and has over 25 years of public safety experience in both the public and private sector. John is currently the President of Board of Directors for the Keystone Chapter of NENA and is an active participant in a collaborative group focused on legislation specific to the 911 community.

¹ Travis Manion Foundation: <https://www.travismanion.org/about-us/who-we-are/#block-1991>