

UNTOLD STORY OF 911 OPERATORS



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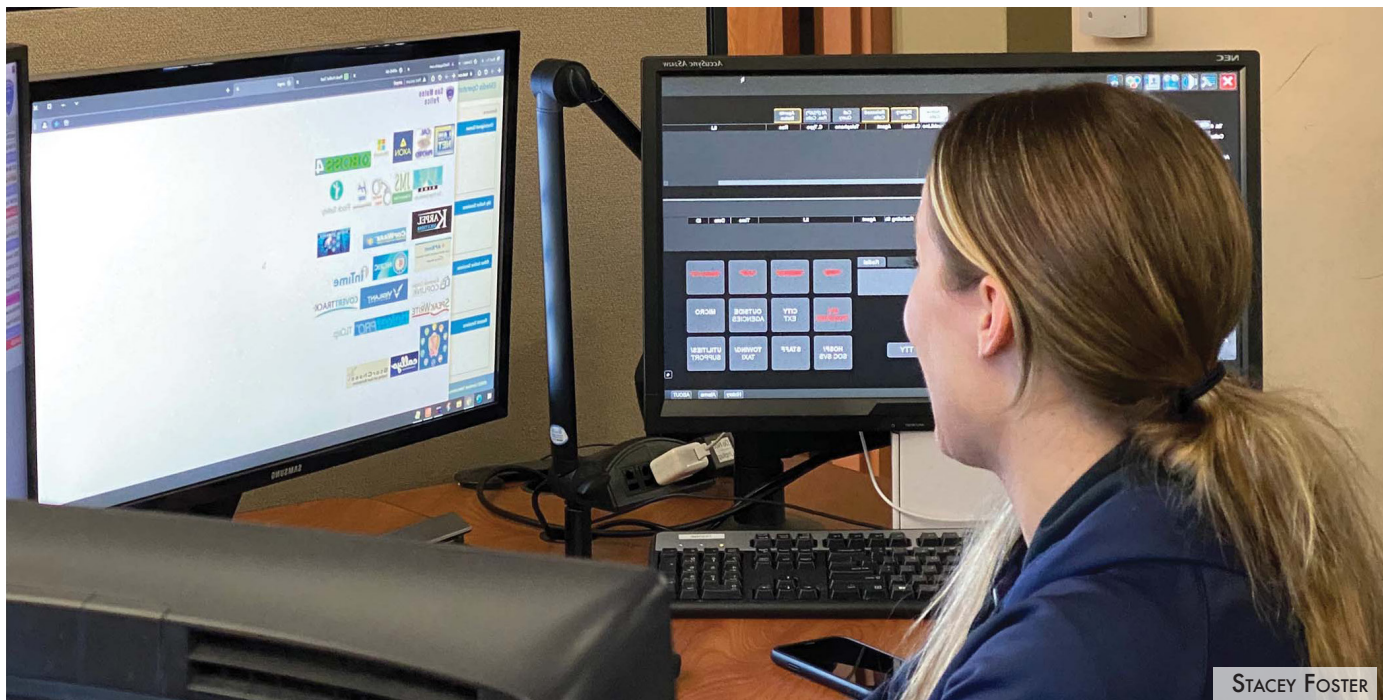
When people hear about the police, many images come to mind. They may picture officers they know in their community or school, the issues of police brutality and the protests of 2020, or even some of their favorite characters in movies and TV shows. However, many don't think about who they talk to when they call 911.

"Telecommunicators are often overlooked in the world of emergency services, but in reality, they are the foundation for all responders," said Anthony Green, an officer on the Belmont Police Department.

911 operators are tasked with a wide range of emergencies, whether it be welfare checks, domestic disputes, or even mental health crises. They are expected to respond to any situation, any time. Many incoming dispatchers drop out after the first six months.

Telecommunications offices also range in size and have different relationships with law enforcement and emergency services.

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For example, in San Jose, there is barely any connection between dispatchers and police officers since there are so many officers in the city.

On the other hand, the San Mateo dispatch team only consists of four people. Two of these dispatchers are Lisa Twito and Ashley Barros. Barros has been on the team for six years, while Twito only joined two months ago but was stationed in San Jose for 10 years prior.

Since the team is much smaller, dispatchers can get much closer with each other and the officers they are sending.

"At least for me, it is nicer working in a smaller agency because you become friends with everyone — we're all a team working together," Barros said.

However, teamwork isn't everything when it comes to being an operator, as dispatchers respond to a barrage of calls every day. According to many dispatchers, this can be mentally taxing, and it can be hard to focus. Incoming dispatchers are thrown directly in, with only a partner to help them manage calls.

"The number one [most important part] thing would be multitasking. Because if you can't do that, and you're one of those people that are focused on one thing, this is not the job for you," Barros said.

While juggling these calls, dispatchers must remain calm and keep the callers on the phone until authority arrives. Callers could be in danger if they stay on the phone. However, if they hang up, the dispatcher may not know the location of the crime.

"I tried to kind of slow my pace down, as far as my speech goes, lower my voice a little bit. Because sometimes if they're frantic, and you match the franticness in their voice, then you're not going to get anywhere you're going to hype them up as well," Twito said.

As a call taker, it is inevitable that not every call will go well. Not everyone gets saved. Operators have to get used to this reality on the job. This is simply normal for dispatchers, something they have to go through every day. Barros recalled a mental health crisis her teammate was forced to react to.

"She [her teammate] took a call with a guy that said that he had cancer and he didn't want to live anymore. He had a gun with him, and had one bullet. And that was that then he hung up on us. We tried calling him back; he wouldn't answer [...], And I think the call lasted hours [...] Unfortunately, the guy did kill himself. He shot himself," Barros said.

Operators have different ways to cope with stress. Some do therapy, others practice exercise; everyone's coping mechanism is unique. For Twito

and Barros, coping is often through conversations with close friends and family. Barros even has a sister who is a dispatcher and a boyfriend who is a former officer.

"You tell someone a story and my god and but it's like, whatever. It's like no big deal. Like you kind of become numb to it," Barros said.

But in moments of crisis, dispatchers can make the right call that can save lives. Twito recalled a situation she had back in San Jose, where there were three calls of a stabbing in a minute. While some officers thought the stabbings were all in one location, Twito made the split-second decision to dispatch officers to three different locations, saving two of the three victims.

"I was in control of a situation. It helps, you know, getting the people where they needed to go[...] And it worked out for the most part. But it's stuff like that where I'm like, wow, I really made a difference," Twito said.

Being a 911 operator entails a lot of responsibility. However, according to dispatchers like Twito, this responsibility and the reward of helping people in need is what keeps them going.

"It's such a rewarding career. You are the first responder. You are getting the person help, and that is an extremely rewarding feeling at the end of the day," Twito said.