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Emergency Dispatching: Not for the Faint of Heart

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7Share By Jorge Valencia, The Roanoke Times (Virginia)

The hallway to Roanoke County's emergency call center is lined with photos of recruits from recent years. The other day, Aleta Coleman, a longtime supervisor, was listing the places some now work. From 2003's class, one left for Carilion Clinic. From 2004, one left for the Internal Revenue Service. From 2006, one left for the Virginia State Police. From 2007, one left for a local restaurant. From last year, one left for Franklin County's call center.

"Do you know how much time we spend training these people? And we spend a lot of time before anyone even starts training," she said. "It's very disheartening."

The Roanoke County center and others in the Roanoke Valley fit a trend: They lose about two of every 10 dispatchers every year, which is the national average, according to the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials. This means that, even if one in 10 Americans doesn't have a job, the managers of these centers are permanently recruiting.

In Roanoke County, department managers are looking to trim their selection process from eight weeks to five by testing and interviewing people at an open house on Saturday. They have four vacancies.

"A lot of people withdraw their application because the application takes so long and they find a job somewhere else first," said Bill Hunter, assistant communications director in Roanoke County. "Work is work, brother."

It's a long process because, among other things, applicants are interviewed by several people and are given a criminal background check, a polygraph test and a psychological test. Many who pass the testing leave during their first year, and most leave during their first five years. The most common complaints: high stress and low pay. Dispatchers often get frantic calls from people living the worst day of their life or from officers in a potentially violent situation.

For Coleman, a rare dispatcher who has worked at the center for 20 years, the incidents she tries to forget are many. One she remembers easily was a time she was on the line with a police officer looking to arrest a suspect wanted in the city of Roanoke. The suspect sped off on U.S.220, throwing cigarette butts out of the window and leading officers on a two-hour, 13-minute chase to the Botetourt County Jail in Fincastle, where he surrendered. The suspect told police he was trying to avoid the Roanoke City Jail, Coleman said.

"The officer got very upset that day," said Coleman, 49.

More troubling calls are from people who are threatening to commit suicide. Sherre Oakes, a long-time dispatcher in Roanoke who quit in 2010, says she'll never forget a call she got in the late 1990s from a woman who had swallowed dozens of pills. The woman wanted to kill herself because her husband had recently died, but changed her mind after thinking about her children and her dog, Oakes remembered. Oakes spoke to the woman while medics arrived. The woman didn't survive.

"I'll never forget her name. Lee Ann," Oakes said. "I could hear her fading."

Oakes, now a security officer at a beachside hospital in Florida, said she left because she was losing sympathy for callers and because she disagreed with some management decisions, though she would not elaborate.

In some emergency centers, like Roanoke's, dispatchers work 12-hour shifts and are routinely changed from morning to evening to overnight schedules. Starting salary in Roanoke's center is \$27,613 and in Roanoke County's is \$27,240. Roanoke and Roanoke County employee salaries have been frozen since 2008.

Wayne Guffey, a dispatcher in Vinton and Roanoke County for seven years, left earlier this year for a job training people in other centers how to use emergency call software. He said he left for substantially higher pay, though he didn't specify how much.

"It's a very good career, but it's not for everybody," Guffey said. "You can get stressed out very easily. You have to keep calm while everything around you is nuts."

Chase Ferguson, 27, is in the new generation and in the rare breed of dispatchers who last more than five years. He joined Roanoke County's center in 2004 because he wanted to be a police officer, and he says his job is stressful but "addictive" because he likes helping people while staying behind the scenes. "I like what I do. Am I going to do this all my life? I'm not sure," Ferguson said, sitting behind a panel of six monitors. He added with a laugh: "It might send me to an early grave."

IF YOU GO

What: Roanoke County 911 Communications Center career and qualification day, including a presentation, typing and arithmetic tests, criminal background checks and interviews

When: 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Roanoke County Public Safety Center, 5925 Cove Road, Roanoke

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