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Public safety at heart of changes to 911 Center

March 4, 2012

By Kay Stephens (kstephens@altoonamirror.com) , The Altoona Mirror

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The Blair County 911 Center is going through a transition that has generated unprecedented salary increases and introduced 12-hour work shifts.

It's part of a plan, 911 Center Director Mark Taylor said, to bring some long overdue recognition to county employees who do an important job and to create better working conditions.

While 12-hour work shifts sound like they would run counter to that goal, Taylor said they should ease up on the extensive overtime the center has accumulated to staff its round-the-clock operation.

Plus, the 12-hour work shifts will give employees the opportunity to be off on some weekends.

"I love the new schedule," telecommunicator Cindy Emlet said. "I haven't had a weekend off since the last time I was on vacation."

"I never really got a weekend off either," telecommunicator Bobbi Schmitt said. "I enjoy the 12-hour shift. It gives me time off on other days."

The Blair County Salary Board, consisting of the commissioners and Controller Richard J. Peo, voted in December to approve the higher salaries after Taylor gave a half-hour presentation explaining how the department has changed. The raises took effect Jan. 1.

Taylor's presentation showed six veteran telecommunicators getting raises between \$9,018 and \$10,656, putting each at a 2012 base salary of \$39,620.

Salaries for shift supervisors were proposed at \$43,313 annually in 2012, meaning a raise of \$15,415 for one and \$12,711 for another.

Even larger raises were suggested for the department's Internet technician, taking the salary from \$30,394 to \$46,803, and the quality assurance trainer, from \$29,250 to \$44,596.

"When I first saw the proposal, I took a big gulp," Commissioner Diane Meling recalled Tuesday.

After learning that employees were earning close to the proposed salaries through overtime hours, though, she said she regained her focus.

"I was able to start breathing again," she said.

Controller Richard J. Peo said he was taken aback when he first saw the proposed raises.

"I know I have a history of voting against things like this," Peo said Thursday.

From reviewing W-2 forms, Peo said he saw that 911 staffers were already earning close to those proposed salary amounts because of extensive overtime, which Taylor's report linked to staff shortages and high turnover.

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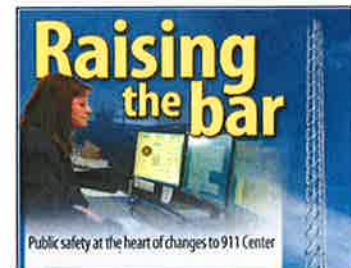
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"To me, that's when it became a safety issue," Peo said. "If you have a tired responder who makes a mistake because they're working so much overtime, then that's a problem. And as far I'm concerned, you can't have a tired responder."

Commissioner Terry Tomassetti also viewed Taylor's request as one of protecting the public.

"The risk and the liability are huge if we don't address this," he told fellow salary board members. "This operation is the circulatory system of public safety."

How times have changed

The employees in Blair County's 911 center answer about 180,000 calls annually. That equates to about 500 calls a day or about 21 calls every hour. Many callers are seeking help in the form of an ambulance, a fire department or police.

Others are calling to provide information.

Some are simply calling with questions.

In the early days of dispatching emergency crews, the dispatcher needed the ability to answer the phone, take good notes and talk over a radio, Taylor said. Most of their training occurred on the job and they generally dispatched one emergency crew as opposed to multiple ones.

Meling, a former dispatcher for Logan Township, did the job in the 1960s and '70s in her parents' home, where she lived, using only a phone and communications radio.

"It's just mind-boggling the array of computers they have now," Meling said.

The county set up the centralized 911 dispatching center in 1995 in the former St. Mark's Elementary School at 615 Fourth St. The equipment and responsibilities have since grown.

Commissioner Ted Beam Jr., seated in January, said he recently toured the center.

"I did not realize how involved their work has become," Beam said.

Supervisor Tim Crabtree said he remembers what it was like 25 years ago when he worked for the city as a dispatcher.

"When I first started, we just took the call and got the basics," he said. "We didn't even ask for any medical information."

Now Crabtree sits in front of four computer screens, monitoring multiple pieces of information as calls come in and help is dispatched. As a supervisor, he can monitor any dispatcher's conversation. When the center gets busy, he answers calls, too.

"We have a lot of tools to work with that we didn't used to have," he said.

Today's dispatchers use computer-aided police and medical dispatch systems offering guidance in asking questions and access to geographical data. The systems are designed to make sure the dispatchers collect the information that will be of greatest help to emergency crews and hospital personnel.

The geographical component allows dispatchers to locate emergency sites on aerial maps, along with nearby roads and water sources that could be important to a fire department. It also pinpoints such things as power lines that a dispatcher once used to help a lost hunter return to his truck.

"This hunter called the 911 Center on his cell phone," Taylor said. "When he reached those power lines, he knew where he was."

Stress on the job

The 911 telecommunicators say their job has the potential to become stressful every time they answer the phone. Callers generally think it takes a long time for ambulances, fire departments and police to arrive, Emlet said, especially in serious situations.

"Even in here, it can seem like forever," she admitted.

Crabtree said he took the first 911 call on April 6, 2009, when Nicholas Horner allegedly gunned down Scott Garlick in the Subway

sandwich shop, then fled on foot through Eldorado, where he allegedly shot and killed Raymond Williams.

He describes that as one of those "nervous-type calls" when a dispatcher has to react quickly.

Calls from children or about children meet that description, too, telecommunicators say.

When Taylor made his presentation and salary requests to the salary board in December, he played recordings of two callers seeking help, one because a baby was being born and another because a child had been burned by scalding water.

In both cases, the dispatchers provided guidance until additional help arrived.

Emlet said she took the call from the distraught Tyrone grandmother who reported the kidnapping of her 6-year-old granddaughter on Aug. 6. Emlet started dispatching emergency response crews and coordinating efforts to set up a command post.

A state police helicopter crew spotted the girl that day with Dennis Stehley in a wooded area of Tyrone Township. Stehley, in February, entered guilty pleas to kidnapping, assault and related charges. He is scheduled to be sentenced in May.

"Those are the kind of calls they don't immediately forget," Taylor said.

How the raises came about

Telecommunicator Roger Lingenfelter said he was surprised that Taylor came back from December's salary board meeting with an approval on the new pay levels.

"The way he was presenting it, I thought he might get us something," Lingenfelter said. "But I never dreamed in 100 years that we would get what he proposed."

"I wasn't expecting what he got us either," Schmitt said. "He really did an awesome job."

For Crabtree, the approval meant more than money.

"It was long overdue because what we do here deserves that kind of pay," he said. "But it also said to me that somebody cares, finally, about what we do here."

Taylor, the former manager of the Seton Co. manufacturing plant in Saxton, said he drew on his business experience to put the proposal together.

"I'm a big believer in justification," he said. "And I wanted to ask for something that would make the center more proficient."

In his proposal, Taylor revealed that the county had hired and trained 34 telecommunicators in the last five years, but only four remained employed at the 911 Center.

The others left, he said, to accept higher-paying jobs, get better work schedules or because they were unable to meet the demands and responsibilities of the high-stress work. In some cases, it was a combination of all three.

Taylor multiplied the training wage of \$7.25 an hour times 30 lost employees at 1,000 training hours each.

That equates to \$217,500 of wasted training money, plus overtime for understaffing, Taylor said.

"He showed us why we were having trouble getting people to come to work there," Peo said.

Taylor also told the salary board the raises could be covered with money collected via surcharges on landlines and wireless telephone bills. That revenue in the county's 2012 budget is listed at \$1.27 million.

The operating expenses, with the higher salaries, is estimated at \$1.08 million for 2012.

Taylor's accomplishments

When Taylor accepted the job of 911 director in January 2011, the salary board set his pay at \$43,000.

With the new salary schedule, his annual salary went up to \$55,192.

"Compared to other 911 Center managers in fifth-class counties, he was significantly underpaid," Meling said.

Peo called \$43,000 too much when Taylor was hired, but he raised no objections in December.

Taylor's salary aside, the controller said the presentation indicated that overtime could be cut, public safety would be improved and revenue from the telephone fees would cover the costs.

"I voted for the package," Peo said.

Meling said she also voted for Taylor's salary because of his on-the-job performance.

"Mark has really taken on a total revamping of the 911 Center operations," Meling said. "From the training to the scheduling, I think we're very lucky to have him and his abilities."

She praised him for taking on the county's work to meet a federal mandate requiring emergency communicators to begin using narrow-band frequency by next January.

On top of that, Taylor recommended upgrading and replacing communication towers, funded by an \$8 million bond issue, designed to improve emergency communications and put the county in a position to address future technological changes.

Those efforts took a step forward last week with a new communication tower set up outside the 911 Center. More work will be done throughout this year, and the looming deadline on the narrow-banding requirement is expected to be met.

"I think he's earning his money," Meling said.

In the future

Taylor said he is optimistic about the center's future.

Six people are completing six months of training needed to work in the 911 Center, with three expected to be hired for full-time positions. The other three are expected to be worked into the schedule as part-timers.

The next major improvement inside the center, he said, will likely be the purchase of a replacement telephone system that eventually leads to the capability of receiving text messages and video calls.

The 911 center is complex now, but in the future, Taylor predicts it will become even more so.

"If managed well, however, it becomes the best public safety tool there is," he said.

Mirror Staff Writer Kay Stephens is at 946-7456.

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