

The FreeLance Star, Fredericksburg, Va., 4/14/2/12
[The News Desk](#)

Dispatchers keep cool amid chaos, but turnover hampers staff



Training coordinator Chris Conley (foreground) answers 911 calls in the Stafford County Emergency Communication Center on Wednesday, April 11, 2012. The county's emergency communications department is seeking an increase in staff to manage the rising number of calls and turnover in the department.

BY KATIE THISDELL

One thing Stacy Ober can't do in her job as a Stafford County 911 dispatcher is play God.

But callers sometimes want her to.

"When's the next aftershock going to be?" was one question she remembers from Aug. 23, the day of the magnitude-5.8 earthquake.

On that day, much of Stafford's emergency communications center staff showed up voluntarily to work, even when they weren't scheduled. They knew that the 38 lines would be busy.

And they were. In the two hours right after the quake, they received 469 calls. During that same time on an average Tuesday, they usually get 65.

Carol Adams, director of Stafford's center, applauds her staff for their dedication that day—and every day.

This week was designated National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week. In Stafford, it wraps up with an open house 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. today in the dispatch center.

Related: [Thank you to our 911 Dispatchers](#)

"It's never the same thing twice," Ober said earlier this week, while standing in front of eight computer screens, wearing a headset and also listening to the radio for law enforcement with what her boss calls a "third ear."

“It’s so much more than I expected,” said Ober, 24. She has worked in the center for almost two years.

She’s among the 32 people who ensure that 911 calls are answered, police, fire and rescue crews are dispatched and warrants are entered into the computer system.

Though not physically demanding, the work is mentally and emotionally exhausting. But Ober says she thrives on the chaos.

“It’s not a job most people can do,” Ober’s boss said.

Adams has been in the field for 30 years and will be one of very few nationwide who may retire from emergency telecommunications.

Annual turnover in the 32-person center in Stafford is 28 percent, slightly above the national average.

That means the department is always hiring new staff to fill empty positions. The dispatch center could accommodate a much larger staff in the rear of the 114,000-square-foot Public Safety Building at Stafford Courthouse.

Adams said four to five dispatchers are hired each year, and they must complete eight months to a year of on-the-clock-training.

“We put a lot of time and commitment into them,” Adams said. No other education can prepare dispatchers for this job, she said.

REQUEST FOR FUNDING

Staffing in the emergency communications center hasn’t changed since 2006, while 53 positions have been added between the Sheriff’s Office and fire and rescue staffs.

Meanwhile, more calls are coming in, particularly wireless calls, which are up by 24.6 percent, Adams told the Board of Supervisors’ Public Safety Committee at a recent meeting.

Cellphones don’t have addresses attached, meaning dispatchers must somehow figure out where the call is coming from. Call time is 5 percent longer than those from landlines.

Warrant volume is up 41 percent—warrants and protective orders must be entered into the system shortly after they are filed. That lets deputies know immediately if the person they stopped is wanted and on what charge.

Combined, these increases all add more work to the already hectic 12-hour shifts.

The county averages 305,000 calls per year, one of the highest among similar-size

localities, according to data presented by Adams.

But staffing allocation is the lowest among those same localities, she said.

“The folks that do this job will stretch themselves thin to answer calls,” Adams said.

Dispatcher salaries average \$31,800 per year.

Adams presented a request to the committee to create four shift supervisors positions. The department lacks enough staff to provide around-the-clock supervision, putting the county in a noncompliance category for the National Fire Protection Association, she said.

Adams estimated this would require \$200,000 in the fiscal 2012–13 budget.

“We’re still in the midst of our budget,” said Public Safety Committee Chairman Jack Cavalier. He suggested the supervisors try to earmark money for the department soon.

UNSEEN FIRST RESPONDERS

Training coordinator Chris Conley, 28, works with new employees for their first several weeks of the training academy.

But he also fills in as a dispatcher as needed, including one day earlier this week.

Conley, who lives in King George County with his wife and two daughters, originally envisioned being a dispatcher as a steppingstone to being a deputy.

And a surprising number of deputies do go that route, said Bill Kennedy, spokesman for the Sheriff’s Office.

But Conley decided to stay in the communications side of public safety, where he has been for 10 years.

“You adjust to the lifestyle,” Conley said. “You learn to eat cold food doing this job. It’s an acquired taste.”

Mid-conversation, he pauses to respond to a radio call, quickly switching between computer screens.

Another dispatcher had answered a call for a cardiac arrest. When crews arrived, the victim was declared DOA—dead on arrival.

A little “oh no” escapes from a dispatcher nearby.

Conley picks up talking where he left off, a skill that many have in the dispatch center. He’s still listening to the radio, entering information about a prior breaking and entering,

looking up records on someone at a traffic stop.

Meanwhile, Ober searches for the cardiac arrest victim's regular doctor, tracking down an out-of-state phone number.

The dispatchers are called the "unseen" first responders. Ober said she wouldn't want to be one of the first people physically at a scene.

"It would upset me more than hearing it on the phone," said Ober, who used to work at a downtown Fredericksburg bar.

"You're constantly doing something to help somebody and make their day easier," she said.

And when a day is particularly tough on a dispatcher, he or she can take a break in a quiet room.

"In most cases, you don't know the outcome" of a call, Adams said. "You have to be trained just to put that aside."

SEE THEM AT WORK

Learn about Stafford's emergency communications center at an open house today. From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., staff will show visitors what happens in the dispatch center and how 911 works.

The center is in the Public Safety Building at 1225 Courthouse Road.

•