

When I started my career as a 911 Dispatcher 21 years ago I never imagined where it would lead me. On the job training literally was being handed a headset and a cord and “plugging in” with you trainer. You shadowed them until they felt you were “ready” to be on your own. Training at our Consolidated Center now consists of several weeks of classroom training, several certifications must also be complete. EMD (Emergency Medical Dispatch), EFD (Emergency Fire Dispatch), CPR, BCA and the list goes on. Not everyone can sit down and dispatch. Most of our trainees do not make it out of training. You have to be calm under pressure, able to multi-task and listen to several conversations and radio traffic and be able to comprehend what is being said. Officers handle one call at a time, Dispatchers handle several. We sit for 10-12 hours a day and are literally tied to our desks by a 3 foot cord. We have to time our bathroom breaks so not more than one person is out of the room at the time. Meal breaks the same way, must be scheduled so that there are enough people to cover phones and radio channels. If we are busy, well you have to hold it or go hungry. We are often the first people needed and the last remembered.

I also never thought of the long term stress this career can bring. Our Center has not been fully staffed since we consolidated in 2007. Staffing shortages are the norm around the Metro. Mandated Overtime also the norm. A mistake as a Dispatcher can mean life or death. Think of the pressure we are under. I have talked countless callers through CPR instructions, Narcan administration and other life saving measures. We go from one caller yelling about dog feces in their neighbor’s yard to the next call someone is not breathing. As a Dispatcher we handle several hundred phone calls a month. I would be lying if I said the stress hasn’t gotten to me at times. I believe it is the norm if you are in this career long enough that you will eventually wind up with some form of PTSD. I never thought the voices and screams would stay with me for years but they have. Often we do not get a resolution, did they live or die? We must go on to the next caller when that phone rings. We now have a video wall, meant to be able to watch MN-Dot traffic cameras and keep us up to date on the weather. First week it was up we witnessed a jumper on the freeway, and an Officer involved shooting all in real time. The Officer involved shooting was an incident our Center was working. We also now have text to 911 and technology is in the works to bring pictures in real time to us. I am not sure that is worth the emotional toll and cost it will have on your Dispatchers.

I often hear from Police Officers and Firefighters and Paramedics that they could never do our job. I am here to tell you that they are 100% accurate. We are not Secretaries as we are classified, they get to work M-F 9am to 5pm and go home. They got to work from home during Covid-19. Secretaries get nights and weekends and holidays with their families, Dispatchers do not. We are here 24/7, 365.

Most people when they learn I am a 911 Dispatcher ask the following question: “What is the worst call you have ever taken?” I have learned to lie to them because the true horror is that there are too many to remember and I could go on for hours. Was it the 4 year old that when I hung up the phone with the caller I knew in my gut they had done something to the child but it wasn’t until 2 years later when the caller was charged with homicide that I sadly learned I was correct. Was it the 12 year old who just witnessed their father beat and stab their mother to death? Was it the wife who came home to find her husband hanging in the garage? Was it the grandmother who found her grandson had shot himself on the couch? How about the sexual assault that was in progress that I had to listen to. How about the countless callers in crisis that call every day and we know them by voice and remember their full name and date of birth. Now we also have to determine if they just need Crisis or do they need Medics, are they really serious this time or just need someone to talk to? How about the female who could only scream and say one or two words after witnessing her boyfriend drown, I will hear her screams forever

in my head. I can't continue on as I am at work and just remembering these calls is making me come to tears. We shove them down, we try to bury them but we will never ever forget. I haven't even covered the Radio side of our job. Imagine the anxiety we feel when we hear the dreaded "shots fired" aired from an Officer or hear the "I was just hit by a car, send me an ambulance" or the dreaded times when there is Radio Silence in response to our hailing.

I am 49 years old and have measured hearing loss in my right ear from wearing my headset. When I work I have daily headaches from the multiple computer monitors I stare at all day long. My sleep is disturbed from my brain being unable to always block out the bad calls. My reaction time has slowed, I do not multi-task as fast as I did when I started this career. Notice how I keep saying Career? That is what this job is, it is a Career. We are professionals, we are highly trained, highly skilled and this is not something just anyone can do. You do not want me in this chair as a Dispatcher longer than age 55, we do have an expiration date. This is a career that takes it toll on your mind, body and soul.

Anyone that wants to come and see this career firsthand is free to contact my Center and ask for a sit-along, I would be happy to have you.

Signature redacted