


DISPATCH Magazine


On-Line

Stories from the on-line edition at www.911Dispatch.com

Sleeping Dispatcher's Third Strike for Sleeping

Officials in Warren County (Ohio) say they've given a dispatcher accused of sleeping on-duty a three-day suspension without pay, taking into account his previous incidents of sleeping, and mitigating by some personal issues. Shawn Mason was sleeping earlier this month and missed an EMS call, officials say. He was given a written warning about sleeping on-duty two years ago, and received a verbal warning last September. According to the officials, a calltaker entered an EMS call in CAD, but then noticed that the call had not changed status indicating it had been dispatched. The calltaker walked over and found Mason asleep, and reported that to a supervisor. According to a county report released later, Mason is a good employee, but was having, "child care issues that may not have allowed him enough sleep to endure a 12-hour shift that can be rather mundane and boring." 

Fed Board Rules on Helicopter Crash

The National Transportation Board (NTSB) has issued its final ruling on the circumstance surrounding the crash of Maryland State Police helicopter in Sept. 2008, and the dispatchers for the state police and Prince George's County were cited for insufficient training and failing to follow procedures after the accident, leading to a delay in locating the downed aircraft. The helicopter was on a medical mission in low clouds with five persons on-board, and was attempting to find its way down to land at Andrews Air Force Base. The chopper crashed into a Maryland suburb, killing all but one of the occupants. According to the NTSB, "The lack of adherence to effective flight-tracking policies by Maryland State Police System Communications Center personnel created an institutional mindset that allowed duty officers to assume that aircraft had landed safely when the Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast signal was lost; over time, safe landings were taken for granted." The NTSB issued several recommendations, including additional training for dispatchers. 

Sheriff Warns on Merger: 'You're Going to Die'

The city of Fort Wayne (Ind.) and surrounding Allen County have been hashing out a proposal to merge their public safety communications operations for several years, with no degree of success until Monday, when the mayor and county commissioners came up with a tentative agreement. However, the plan is opposed—strongly—by sheriff Ken Fries. During a Monday meeting, the commissioners outlined that under the plan, the city and county would each select three members of a joint control board for the new consolidated center, and that group of six would select a seventh member. Sheriff Fries arrived 20 minutes after the meeting began with his chief deputy and six comm center employees, all in uniform. According to the local newspaper, "(Fries) criticized the proposed merger saying it would reduce accountability and hurt public safety—adding he plans to conduct a news conference after such a merger costs people their lives." Then, the report says that Fries shouted at the city and county staffers as they left, "You're wrong, you're wrong. People are going to die." Read more about the debate here. Another story has been posted here.

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Check the Icons!

Check any icons at the end of each story to see if there is on-line material to enhance the story:

 — there's a logging tape posted

 — there's a link or Acrobat (pdf) file posted



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What's Up?

Sometimes the world of public safety communications reaches out to other professions, including aircraft pilots associated with emergency medical operations. You may know that over the past two years there have been several fatal crashes involving EMS helicopters, prompting the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to issue tighter rules on EMS flights.

But the two agencies also have raised questions about how EMS missions are received, evaluated, screened and accepted. They have also questioned how the missions are monitored by their ground-based dispatchers, what actions the dispatchers take if the aircraft goes silent, and how well the dispatchers operate during a downed aircraft search.

The latest NTSB investigation is complete on a Maryland crash that occurred in Sept. 2008, and consists of thousands of pages of documents. Despite the length, it's valuable material, especially for the post-crash coordination effort. Check the story on the front page of this newsletter and find the links on-line.

Also this month there were allegations of sleeping on-duty. One incident occurred in 2008 but was just revealed to the public, and then a second allegation arose this month at the same agency. The agency has now installed surveillance cameras to monitor their dispatchers—apparently in-person supervisors aren't enough.

Elsewhere, a dispatcher died of the H1N1 virus, financial troubles generate lay-off notices, and a dispatcher wasn't stumped by a 911 call about a "flying saucer"—quite a month!

Gary Allen - Editor

DISPATCH Monthly Magazine was founded in 1988 by Alan Burton (1934-2007) with the goals:

- Improved training
- Improved working conditions
- Improved self-esteem
- Individual and collective recognition
- Enhanced professionalism

FCC Upgrades On-Line Database Searches

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has just completed a major upgrade to its Filed Comments and Proceedings databases, creating a system that is vastly more flexible for searching, more concise when displaying results, and very flexible in finding data related to the search results. The database of filed comments is a valuable source of information, opinions and ideas on the many public safety topics that the FCC is handling. Previously, searchers could enter one or more search terms, leading to a simple text display of results. Now search results include a summary explanation of the related docket, a configurable list of the comments, links to related documents, and the ability to create an RSS link to the search results so you can track them without future searches. The FCC has also overhauled the Web page for the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, which you can visit here. ☞

Family's Tragic Story Details EMS Realities

It seemed like the ambulance took 30 or 40 minutes to arrive, according to the Porter Bush and his family after his 2 year-old daughter choked on popcorn at their rural Elmwood (Ill.) home. Actually, it was 17 minutes, still too long to save the little girl who had stopped breathing. Shannon Bush died three days later in a hospital, her brain unable to recover from the initial lack of oxygen. Now Porter is recalling the details of the story, including his absolute frustration with Fulton and Knox County dispatcher who he says never told him, "Help in on the way." So Porter hung up the phone and drove to a nearby ambulance station, which he found empty. Read Porter's account, including a cellular phone battery that fell out of the handset, 911 call transfers and EMS unit staffing. ☞

Second Dispatcher Tagged, Sleeping On-Duty

A second Warren County (Ohio) dispatcher has been suspended during an investigation into allegations that he was sleeping on-duty. Shawn Mason was put on leave last Thursday, and officials say he'll face a hearing to determine the facts and any discipline. According to county officials, he was disciplined two years ago for sleeping on the job. The action comes just a week after another allegation of sleeping on-duty was revealed, occurring just before a 911 call that later was determined to have been a murder. In that 2008 incident, officials say they are investigating if dispatcher Ron Kronenberger was sleeping just before he fielded a call from a man who claimed his wife had drowned. On the 911 tape of the call, Kronenberger seems confused and is slow to ask questions. Later, police determined the woman had

been murdered, and arrested the call, Ryan Widmer. The allegation was only revealed last week when Widmer's second trial was getting ready to begin.

Hang-Up 911 Call Was A Murder

New Jersey State Police officials are investigating the handling of a hang-up 911 call, probably from a priest who was later found murdered. According to records from the West Trenton state police comm center, a 911 call was received last Thursday from the rectory of St. Patrick RC Church in the city of Chatham, but the call was lost before a dispatcher could hear any words or sounds. A state police dispatcher then called the number back and reached voicemail. A second call-back was answered by the church janitor, Jose Feliciano, who said there was no problem at the church. Based on that statement, no police were dispatched to investigate the 911 call. Police later arrested Feliciano for the murder of Rev. Edward Hinds. 🗨️

Congress Considers 'Ping' Laws for Cellular

The murder young Kansas woman in 2007 has prompted the state's legislators to introduce bills in the U.S. Congress to require that cellular carriers provide handset "ping" information to public safety agencies without a subpoena or search warrant. Kelsey Smith disappeared from Johnson County, and it took two days for investigators to obtain a list and map from Verizon Wireless of where her cellular phone had been received at antenna towers. Smith's family complained that she might have been found alive if the company had acted quicker. The Kansas state legislature passed a bill last February requiring prompt, no-paper delivery of cellular pings to public safety agencies who claim an emergency exists. It's the first and only such legislation in the United States. Now Kansas Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R) has introduced similar legislation in the U.S. Congress, hoping to make the requirement nationwide. 🗨️

Lightning, Fire Deplete Fund, Prompt Layoffs

All four dispatchers for the city of Hubbard (Ohio) have received lay-off notices after the police department fell \$49,000 behind on its budget. The notices are expected to be rescinded when and if the city council votes to cover the budget shortfall, but were issued to satisfy union notification requirements. The police headquarters was struck by lightning in Sept. 2008 causing damage, and an electrical fire this summer also created an

unexpected budget expenditure. The city's insurance carrier has made an \$18,900 payment, but hasn't yet sent the remaining \$30,000. If the council doesn't act by Nov. 23rd, Trumbull County could take over dispatching operations, officials said. 🗨️

TV Show Spotlights Florida Murder

The husband of Florida murder victim Denise Lee appeared Tuesday on the ABC-TV "Good Morning America," explaining why he's sued the Charlotte County sheriff's office over how several 911 calls were mishandled. Nathan Lee said he doesn't want another family to go through the same experience. Denise Lee was kidnapped from her home and murdered in Jan. 2008. Two dispatchers were suspended without pay for mishandling the 911 call from a witness who saw the suspect driving along a highway, with Lee pounding on the windows from the back seat. "There's no doubt in my mind that Denise would still be here today if (a witness') call had been dispatched," Nathan Lee said during the TV show. 🗨️

Questions About Dispatcher Sleeping

Officials in Warren County (Ohio) now say that a county dispatcher was most likely not deeply asleep when he fielded a 911 call in Aug. 2008 from a man who said his wife had drowned in a bathtub. But officials cannot say definitely if Ron Kronenberger was dozing off just before the call came in, and can't explain why Kronenberger sounds dazed and confused during the call. The caller, Ryan Widmer, was later charged with murdering his wife, and the 911 call has become part of the evidence against him. His first trial ended in jury misconduct, and now he faces a second trial. The allegations of Kronenberger sleeping arose only recently after a report on the call was made public by a local newspaper. The report included statements from fellow dispatchers that Kronenberger had been sleeping earlier in the shift. The report took county commissioners by surprise, and prompted the resignation (pdf) of county emergency management director Frank Young two days after the report was made public. He was a county employee for 20 years. But in response, county officials say Kronenberger handled two other 911 calls in the minutes before Widmer called. They say it's unlikely that he was completely asleep between those calls, and Widmer's call four minutes later. The district attorney says the situation won't affect the 911 evidence or the re-trial. At least one county commissioner said they would install video cameras in the comm center to monitor dispatchers. 🗨️ 🗨️

City Backs Off on Wireless 911 Call Handling

After a year of study, the city of Lynchburg (Virg.) has updated its policy on handling wireless 911 calls, hoping to reduce the number of unnecessary responses to hang-up and accidental calls. LynCom center director Bill Aldrich says 10 percent of wireless calls are unintentional or hang-ups, or about 12 out of the daily 400 calls that dispatchers receive. Some 911 calls can take 10 minutes to screen, Aldrich says. The current policy requires dispatchers to take “extraordinary measures” to insure that 911 calls are accidental or mistakes. So now, if a 911 call has no voice or audible background noise, and it’s not coming from a TTY or similar device, there will be no emergency response. If the call is a hang-up, the dispatcher will call back the phone once, and if there’s no contact or voicemail, likewise, there will be no emergency response. There is no national standard for handling accidental or hang-up 911 calls. However, the policy seems to be in compliance with guidelines developed by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) for handling these calls. NENA allows a single callback to hang-ups, and no police response if no contact is made. Their guidelines also generally require evidence of an emergency before taking extraordinary measures to locate the caller. ☞

Follow-Up: Two Suspended After Delay

Officials at Chicago’s Office of Emergency Management and Communications say they have suspended two dispatchers without pay after an investigation found they mishandled a telephone call from an off-duty CPD police officer who had been shot at by gang members. Spokesperson Ray Orozco did not name either employee, but said one was a dispatcher and the other a supervisor. He also declined to say how long the suspensions were for the two employees. The officer was driving his car on Aug. 28th when several men in another car fired shots at him. He dialed 911, but officers weren’t dispatched for over six minutes. By that time, the suspects had driven off and the officer had reached the safety of a district police station with three bullet holes in his car. The suspects were later arrested and charged.

Fed Agency Urges Pipeline Coordination

In a just-released report on the rupture of a liquid propane pipeline near Carmichael (Miss.) in 2007, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) cited insufficient training for Clarke County sheriff’s dispatchers on pipeline emergencies, and said the pipeline operator didn’t include public safety comm centers among its emergency preparedness stakeholders. Two persons who lived near the 12-inch, 46 year-old pipeline

were killed, seven were injured and a 71-acre area was incinerated when 430,000 gallons of liquid propane escaped after a weld seam failed. The liquid immediately vaporized into an enormous cloud of flammable gas and was ignited. In its preliminary findings, the NTSB stated, “At the time of the accident, the Clarke County Central Dispatch emergency 911 personnel were not sufficiently knowledgeable about the dangers of a large release of propane and the appropriate actions to take.” But the board also said that Dixie Pipeline Co. failed to include comm centers among those participating in its public awareness campaign, as outlined in industry standards. ☞

‘Flying Saucer’—Dispatcher Not Stumped

When an hysterical woman dialed 911 in Fort Collins (Colo.) to report that her son had taken off on a “flying saucer,” a Larimer County sheriff’s dispatcher simply started gathering information, including whether there was a tracking device on-board. The bizarre call kicked off a six-hour ordeal for the parents and the nation, as TV station helicopters, police and fire departments along a 50-mile stretch followed what turned out to be a home-built balloon filled with helium, though to contain 8 year-old Falcon Heene. The unnamed dispatcher was unflappable during the call, and never sounded skeptical of the situation. About four minutes into the telephone call Richard Heene came onto the line to finally describe the craft as a “balloon,” and to confirm that it had taken off 20 minutes before. Heene apparently called the FAA and others before dialing 911, officials later said. As the nation watched live on TV, the balloon drifted southeast for 50 miles, and then settled into a field undamaged. Meanwhile, Falcon had been hiding in a box in the attic of the family’s garage after a scolding from his father. Falcon took a nap at one point, woke up, became “bored,” he later said, and then emerged from his hiding place hours after the craft came down. ☺

H1N1 Flu Fatal for Dispatcher

Lee County (Fla.) health officials have confirmed that a woman who died from the H1N1 flu on Wednesday was a dispatcher for the Cape Coral Police Department. Michelle Olson, 30, was a mother of three and worked at the police department for two years. Police chief Rob Petrovich said Olson’s fellow dispatchers are in shock and saddened by her death. County health officials said Olson had no pre-existing medical conditions. She was the fourth person in the county to die from the new strain of flu, and the first in Cape Coral. She was also the youngest person in the county to die from H1N1. About 10 of the city’s 1,500 employees have reported sick with flu-like symptoms over the past several months, city of-

ficials said, including the city's fire chief. County health officials are urging employees who feel ill to stay home, and are urging hand washing and use of disinfectant wipes for work surfaces. Vaccinations won't be available until later this month for city-county employees. [↗](#)

Police Vote 'No Confidence' In Comm Center

Police officers in Ada (Okla.) have expressed their lack of confidence for the consolidated dispatch center that serves county agencies, saying the dispatchers have made mistakes that created serious safety problems for officers. In a 30 to 1 vote, the officers' union said in one case dispatchers didn't tell officers that a citizen had fired shots at an incident, and in another case gave a wrong location. City officials say they're in talks with the union to resolve problems, but declined to be more specific on issues or solutions.

Husband Files Lawsuit Over 911 Call

The husband of murder victim Denise Lee has filed a civil lawsuit against the Charlotte County (Fla.) Sheriff's Office, alleging that "poor law enforcement communication" and the mishandling of a "crucial 911 call" caused her death, and asking for unspecified damages and attorney fees. Lee appeared in front of the sheriff's office at a press conference to announce the lawsuit, which includes a copy of a previously-unreleased letter written by dispatcher Susan Kallestad to the sheriff. In the letter, Kallestad expresses concern over the "inappropriate" handling of a 911 call by fellow dispatcher Millie Stepp. Kallestad wrote that Stepp took a witness' 911 call about spotting Lee and the murder suspect, but didn't enter the information into CAD for 12 minutes. "That is an unacceptable amount of time for almost any type of service call," Kallestad wrote. She added that Stepp took three minutes to update the incident once the 911 call ended. In August a jury deliberated two hours before convicting suspect Michael King of murder, and a judge sentenced him to death. [↗](#)

DOT Finishes NextGen 911 Procurement Study

A lack of resources, aging equipment and new consumer technology have created challenges for public safety communications professionals looking to implement Next Generation 911 (NG911), according to the U.S. Department of Transportation in its 104-page toolkit just released to help agencies procure NG911. The document collects an enormous amount of knowledge and resources on the subject of NG911, helping to formalize definitions and systems. It includes a self-assessment and planning tool, and also covers procurement and post-implementation evaluations. [↗](#)

Update: CAD, 911 Info from Drowning Death

On Sept. 23rd a woman driving home from work at 5 a.m. drowned when her car was swept off a residential road in Gwinnett County (Geo.). Seydi Burciaga died as floodwaters from torrential rains filled her car, which had drifted off the roadway, past the backyards of homes and into a field of trees near a school. She was on the telephone with a county 911 dispatcher for 16 minutes before the telephone went dead. Arriving police and fire units couldn't spot her car and rescue her. About two hours later the water receded enough, and it became light enough for rescuers to see the car and find her body. Now the logging tape of the 911 call is available, along with the CAD print-outs from the incident. Both seem to show the calltaker properly handled the call by obtaining critical information and advising Burciaga, "Do whatever you can to get out of your vehicle." At about five minutes into the 911 call, the calltaker noted in the CAD comments, "****FEMALE ALMOST DROWNING***." The conversation turned desperate as the dispatcher told her, "Don't tell me you can't," and telling Burciaga to look outside for anything recognizable that might help firefighters locate her. At this point the CAD notations read: "WATER IS UP TO HER NECK NOW," and then "LOST PHONE." The calltaker dialed back Burciaga's telephone, but it went to voice mail. [↗](#)

EMD, Staging Errors End In Man's Death

A series of EMD, priority assignment and ambulance staging mistakes by Toronto dispatchers and paramedics ended with the death of a man from what the coroner says was a heart attack. It took paramedics 38 minutes to finally arrive in the hallway of an apartment building where Jim Hearst had collapsed. Another tenant reported Hearst's condition, but mentioned that, "he might be drunk." That remark ended the dispatcher's standard EMD questioning—for some reason—and for the call to be classified as a lower priority. The responding paramedic crew stopped about two blocks away from the building and waited for police, who didn't arrive for another 29 minutes. Five employees were given unpaid suspensions of from 10 to 17 days, city EMS officials said, and will receive additional training. [Read more here.](#) [↗](#)

Fed Official Announces D Block Position

The Obama administration has stepped into the debate over the future of spectrum management on Monday when U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder spoke before the annual International Association of Chiefs of Police conference in Denver, telling the audience that he

supports removing the 700 MHz allocation of spectrum known as D Block from a federal auction. The D Block was put up for auction by the FCC to meet a Congressional mandate, but the spectrum failed to receive sufficient bids. In his speech, Holder argued that “new approaches” to law enforcement, “help us augment the traditionally reactive approach to law enforcement with one that can actually prevent crime before it even occurs.” He mentioned crime mapping and forensics as two areas of interest. Holder then told the group, “In this regard let me be clear on one point—I strongly support removing the D Block spectrum from auction so that it can be allocated directly to our nation’s public safety officers.” He added, “It is long past time to build the nationwide interoperable communications network we so desperately need in order to keep our nation safe during emergencies. Let’s get it done!” In the original auction, the winning bidder would have had to create a nationwide public safety communications network, and was burdened with other requirements that potential bidders didn’t want to tackle. The FCC is still debating what to do with the spectrum, and hasn’t decided if another auction for the 700 MHz frequencies will be held. ¹³

911 Call Preserves Shooting, Now a Lawsuit

A Phoenix (Ariz.) homeowner’s 911 call to police is the primary evidence presented in a civil suit filed by the caller and his family against the police department, claiming an officer mistaken shot the man and the department then tried to cover up the error. Anthony Arambula was holding a burglary suspect at gunpoint and was talking to dispatcher, while outside police were already looking for the intruder after he fired shots and broke into a nearby home. Arambula says his wife warned a sergeant outside that he was holding the intruder at bay, and that his gun was always pointed at the suspect. But police say Arambula pointed the gun at them, prompting an officer to fire six shots. Much of the lawsuit is based on conversations that were picked up by the logging recorder for the 911 call. ¹⁴

Emergency Alerting Studied by Fed Agency

The national Emergency Alerting System (EAS) is an important tool for notifying the public of critical situations, but a federal examination of the system found that it has “longstanding weaknesses that limit its effectiveness.” According to the General Accountability Office (GAO), the EAS doesn’t fulfill today’s communications needs, and despite some attention to improvement by FEMA, there are many technical and other issues to bring the

system into the 21st century. Among the problems noted by the GAO are no geo-targeting of message recipients, no redundancy and lack of capacity. ¹⁵

Mayor’s Son Arrested on Pornography Charges

Indiana State Police detectives have arrested a Mitchell (Ind.) police dispatcher on charges that he had photos of a naked 13 year-old girl on his cellular phone. Isaac Terrell, 23, is facing pornography possession charges and could receive up to three years in jail if convicted. State police say they received a tip about the photos in July. According to police, Terrell knew the girl and he allegedly sent messages to her asking for nude photos of her. Terrell was arrested on Tuesday. He is the son of the city’s Mayor Dan Terrell. The city’s attorney advised the police department to re-assign Isaac Terrell to another job while the incident is investigated, but he remains on the payroll.