

So You Want to be a Dispatcher ...

Cindra Dunaway on March 21, 2013



So you want to be a dispatcher?

Have you thought about what goes on in a communications center? Or better yet, have you thought about what goes on out in the field? People often have a preconceived notion about what it's like to work in the public safety field. I think we have movies and TV shows to blame. As much as I love to watch crime shows and action movies, they sure don't do us public safety folks any favors when Mrs Smith wants us to take tire track impressions from her yard after her trash cans get knocked over. I once

watched an episode of *CSI Miami* where they calculated how long it would take a vehicle to run out of gas after the fuel tank was hit with a bullet at a shootout. I have never worked in, or even seen a comm center where the equipment and computers are as sophisticated as the ones they carry in their vehicles. The response and images they get in an instant always make me laugh. I would love to work in the center that has access to these computers! Maybe NASA or the NSA, but not here in little ol' Florida.

Do you know what it takes to be a public safety telecommunicator?

First the logistics of the profession are enough to send most sane people running for the hills. So let me get this straight. I will be working under moments of extreme stress that may turn into hours or even an entire shift? I may be mandated to work overtime, even after I just finished a 12-hour shift and haven't had a day off in a week? I am responsible for every call I take, dispatch or transfer? Every mode of communication in my center is recorded and may be pulled by the media, supervisors and members of the general public? I will be scrutinized for any mistakes I may make, and those mistakes have the potential to harm someone and may prove to be fatal? I am expected to be professional and polite to every member of the public that I come into contact with no matter how they treat me? I get to work nights, weekends, holidays and my daughter's birthday? I will probably not get a raise, and may even face working short staffed due to budget constraints? I will be expected to be able to multi-task under the most demanding situations ever and be expected to do all of this with absolute accuracy? I will be exposed to some of the most horrible situations, see and hear the worst of the worst—so much so that I will need to be aware of things like crisis situations, critical incident stress and accumulative stress? And I can have all this for under \$25,000 per year, with little to no recognition? Where do I sign?

And that is just the beginning. We are ever evolving in our profession. Technology is changing at lightning speed, introducing Next-Gen 9-1-1, interoperability networks, VoIP, FirstNet, and

much more. We are expected to know and stay up to date on new trends and policies in our field. Some of us are now required to be certified by the state, which requires hours and hours of classroom and hands-on training, and in addition to our on-the-job training. Training is moving toward standardization and, hopefully, someday soon we will see a national training standard for all 9-1-1 public safety workers. We have multiple screens in front of us every day and are required to know how to operate and monitor all of them. Our phones are now computerized, and you have to be logged in before you can even answer a call. Continuing education is crucial now.

Sometimes our work environment can be as trying as the job itself. Some of us work in cramped spaces, with little time for breaks—if we are lucky enough to get one at all. Eating at our work stations, our food usually goes cold because we have discovered that there is a direct correlation between a foot chase and the bell on the microwave. Personality can be a big problem for some of us. Stuck in close quarters with a roomful of type A personalities can make for a long shift. Cranky fields units, even crankier members of the community calling in to complain to us, and about us. They like to tell us how to do our jobs and want everything immediately. Calls for service that don't really fall in our line of work, like parenting or civil issues or my personal favorites, electric or plumbing problems. When does the parade start? When can we take our kids trick or treating? When is daylight saving time? What time does school start? Did they cancel the fireworks? The school bus didn't pick up my kids. Wow, I could really go on and on with this but I think you get the idea.

So, you still want to be a dispatcher?

If you can take on all the things that I just mentioned and many more that I am sure I missed, then you my friend are in for the most demanding and challenging job you will ever love. If you can overcome and adapt, if you can perform on a team and be a forward thinker, if you can prepare for the worst day in and day out, then you just might find yourself in the most rewarding career there is (in my humble opinion): public safety. If you can handle all the cons, let me tell you about the pros:

You will find the most awesome people in public safety. It is so true when we say “family.” We have that love-hate relationship that you find so common with siblings. You might hate your co-workers one minute, but the next, when the chips are down, they will be the first ones to back you up or if needed, pick you up. We all feel the pain when one of us falls or makes the ultimate sacrifice. We are the first ones to have that bake sale or car wash to raise funds for someone in the family in need.

Along with the bad, there is good. Helping bring a baby into the world that didn't want to wait for mom and dad to get to the hospital, assisting in locating a lost child, helping calm someone who has just been victimized, getting that officer his backup when he can't speak for himself, organizing all your resources for your command staff on scene at a huge multi-jurisdictional incident and giving pre-arrival instructions until help arrives can be the most gratifying moment of your busy day. Of course, getting that call from someone in the field to say thank you for doing a good job on a particularly challenging incident is always wonderful. We adrenaline junkies live for that high or catching the bad guy or that rescue just as much as the field units do. Hearing them say “one in custody” after a rough foot chase, “scene secure” on a search warrant,

or “no injuries” will start you breathing again. Just yesterday, the whole comm center could be heard cheering when our K9 finally caught an armed bank robber that had hit his 3rd bank in five days. We love when our K9s get their man.

There is always going to be the good, the bad and the ugly when it comes to the public safety industry. But if you are strong enough to get through the bad and the ugly, the good can be pretty great. If you think you have what it takes to be on our team of gold, I would suggest you go to your local communications center and sit in. Get an idea for the real deal and meet your hidden heroes. We all have our highs and our lows, but if you are part of this family, we will celebrate your highs with you and be there to comfort you during your lows. And to the rest of you:

Be safe my family.

About the Author

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