

# Dispatch center a constant hum of activity



Sue Keast keeps an eye on three monitors in the South Lake Tahoe dispatch center. Photo/Lesia Witkowsky

**By Kathryn Reed**

*"When you pick up the phone and hear screaming, you know it's not going to be a good call."*

Those are the words of a South Lake Tahoe dispatcher. It's something they deal with around the clock, seven days a week.

But then there are the calls from people wanting to know what the weather is like or asking when power will be restored. They end up tying up one of the five dedicated 911 lines. Those questions are not why the emergency system was installed nor are they questions dispatchers should have to deal with.

Sometimes people are surprised to get a busy signal when they call 911. But if everyone calls when they see a wreck, those five lines will get tied up pretty fast.

Besides phones going off, the dispatchers are monitoring three screens. Soon there will be a fourth that will have mapping software.

A new phone system is coming, too.

They are dispatching for city police officers, and fire calls for the city, Lake Valley and Fallen Leaf Lake, and all ambulances on the South Shore.

### **Stressful work**

One ear is paying attention to the person on the phone, the other to the officers, firefighters or paramedics. Sometimes they are helping direct CalStar to a scene.

All the while they are typing what's going on.

And multiple calls at a time are the norm.

They work in a relatively small room that only has artificial light. The one window is covered because it looks out to the front waiting area. This is where they take breaks. A trip to the bathroom better be fast.

They work as a team and consider the other person their partner.

While there are four desks, no one can remember when four dispatchers actually worked at the same time. The dispatch center is so understaffed that often only one person is working. Otherwise it's two people. And it's always two people on Friday and Saturday nights. Fourth of July and New Year's Eve often warrant three dispatchers.

"We try not to work more than 14 hours except in cases like

New Year's Eve. Sometimes you might have to work longer, or if there is a fire or some sort of incident where you can't leave," Sue Keast, who supervises the dispatchers, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Checking probation status, driver's license, warrants – it's all part of the job. They are the records department after normal business hours. Dispatchers enter citations and warrants.

Not that long ago they didn't provide a caller with much medical help. Today there are a slew of issues they can help with. A computer program prompts them to ask questions based on the answer given.

Linda, a dispatcher who doesn't want her last name used, says the goal is to calm people down, to try to provide whatever assistance they can before paramedics arrive. It could be a life and death situation if a person can start CPR before the ambulance arrives.

### **Personal involvement**

Being such a small area it's not unusual for the dispatchers to know the caller or victim.

"I was on the fire radio and my mom called 911. My partner took the call. She recognized the address and tried to get my attention. When I saw the address you could hear my voice shaking as I dispatched an ambulance out to my parents' house," Keast said. "Everyone's fear is they are going to dispatch to a family member."

Coming this year people will be able text 911. It's a federal mandate. While this is seen as a good thing for when there is a prowler or another circumstance where it's best if the intended victim doesn't say something, the use of pictures is what worries dispatchers.

It's bad enough hearing everything that is going on. They don't need pictures.

For Joe, who also just wanted to use his first name, someone died every day the first two weeks he trained.

Everyone has stories to tell – like the lady on the phone whose husband was face down in the bathtub. She was too frail to turn him over and could only watch him drown. The dispatcher could only listen to her tears.

Debriefing for dispatchers is only now becoming part of the norm. They were not included in the debriefing after the Angora Fire – yet they all knew people who lost their homes – including one of the dispatchers.

It's not always a single event that lingers, but the accumulation of calls. Last summer, the dispatchers say, was one of the worst. There were two murders, several deaths, the child at Camp Sacramento who went into anaphylactic shock and died, the swimmer who drowned at Emerald Bay.

“It was pretty devastating to our staff,” Keast said of all the tragedies. She said the department is getting better at addressing the stress involved with being a dispatcher.

### **Ambulance issues**

South Lake Tahoe believes it is subsidizing the CalTahoe JPA by \$60,000 a year in dispatch services. The JPA contract pays \$90,000, but the city says the cost is more like \$150,000.

Funding for ambulance JPAs in the county differ.

“The West slope JPA was started before the passage of Prop. 13. Accordingly, the West Slope ambulance JPA gets a portion of the base 1 percent of each tax bill on the West Slope. That is what state law requires,” Joe Harn, El Dorado County auditor-controller, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The CalTahoe Ambulance JPA was after the passage of Prop. 13. Accordingly,

the CalTahoe Ambulance JPA does not get a portion of the base 1 percent of each tax bill in Tahoe. That is what state law requires.”

Counties can decide how ambulance service is provided. Mike Applegarth who works in the chief administrative office chose not to answer the following basic questions:

- Why is the county in the ambulance business?
- Why not let the fire departments run it themselves?

“As part of the JPA contract we have to provide dispatch, ambulances have to meet certain criteria. It’s a comprehensive package,” Jeff Meston, South Lake Tahoe fire chief, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It favors the county.”

Meston said the county is getting money via taxpayers and by billing for ambulance service, but all of it is not returned to the CalTahoe JPA.

“The money exists in accounts we cannot get our hands on,” Meston said.

Last year the JPA board sent out a request for proposal for dispatch service, but it wasn’t done properly so it never went anywhere. The board is made up of two Lake Valley Fire Protection District board members and two South Lake Tahoe City Council members. North Tahoe Fire used to be part of the JPA, so then there was a fifth vote.

CalTahoe Ambulance JPA has been without an executive director until Monday when Ryan Wagoner was hired. He recently took a medical retirement from the city police department. He has also been on Lake Valley’s board. He is also an emergency medical technician.

Other than being dispatched to calls, Wagoner said he is not yet privy to the intricacies of issues surrounding dispatch.

“I heard it will be one of the first things the chiefs want to talk about,” Wagoner told *Lake Tahoe News*.