

Published June 15th, 2016

Dispatchers: The Unheralded Heroes of the Fire Departments

By Nick Marnell



Chuck Barker of the ConFire Communications Center dispatches a medical emergency call May 12. Photo Nick Marnell

complete emergency medical dispatcher training, offered by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch in Utah. The dispatchers work 24 hours on, 24 off, over five days, then take four days off. With the merger of ConFire with American Medical Response in January, the center also maintains a staff of at least three ambulance dispatchers per shift, but those dispatchers handle only tasks like ambulance deployment. They do not answer 911 emergency calls.

The dispatchers must follow a protocol, asking questions in a proper sequence. Occasionally, there is room for human intercession. "A caller told me that the patient had just vomited," said Steve Limrite, a ConFire dispatcher for 11 years. "I told the caller to turn the patient on their side. That is out of order, but in this case, it helped."

In 2015, ConFire responded to more than 5,600 calls in Lamorinda, according to Kiel Lamar, communications center manager. All Lamorinda 911 calls are routed through the Contra Costa County Sheriff Department and if they are fire or medical related, the calls are transferred to the ConFire communications center. Lamar recommends that Lamorindans program 925-933-1313 into their cell phones as their medical and fire emergency number and dial that number instead of 911; the call will go directly to ConFire. "But if law enforcement should still be involved, 911 is the best number," he said. Lamar also explained that calls from cell phones are transmitted to the nearest cell tower, which may not be close to your location, so the dispatchers may have to ask a series of questions to locate your address.

Calls handled by ConFire dispatch can become life-changing in unforeseen ways. Matulich was dispatched on a call and over the radio he sounded to the dispatcher as if he was having a bad day. The dispatcher called the fire station and she asked why that firefighter was so cranky. When Matulich returned to the station, the rest of the crew came down on him and teased him relentlessly.

Public safety dispatchers, like many doctors and lawyers, deal with people at often the worst moment of their lives - and on top of that, have to help the callers sort through it all.

"People just do not realize the amount of stress the dispatchers work under," said Capt. Vince Matulich of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District operates the Contra Costa Regional Fire Communications Center in Pleasant Hill, and is responsible for dispatching fire, medical, public service and rescue operations for most of the county. MOFD pays ConFire \$170,000 a year as a client of its dispatch service.

The center operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year, and maintains a staff of 18 fire dispatchers, with five dispatchers every 24-hour shift. Dispatchers must be CPR-certified and

"I called her up," Matulich said. "So you're the one making problems for me? One thing led to another, and we started to date." Matulich married the dispatcher, now Kelly Matulich, who is still with the communications center after more than 15 years.

Limrite was able to meet a patient whom he helped through a cardiac arrest emergency, one of the only times he has had a chance to put a face to a name. He said that the cooperation of the patient's son, who engaged Limrite throughout the phone call and patiently answered all of the questions, was key to the positive outcome.

That is the message he stresses to the public. "Know your location," Limrite said. "And let us be the one to terminate the call. Don't get frustrated by the list of questions we ask you. We do that for a reason.

We are here to help you."

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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