

BRACING FOR IMPACT

Public safety telecommunicators confront life and death during any given shift.

By Maggie Eastman

It's such a strange job. Everything I say is recorded and can be listened to at any time. Of course, that's to make sure that I'm protected if a caller complains — did I give the correct information, did I handle the call appropriately, did I say or do anything that negatively impacted the outcome of the call. Every priority call I handle goes through a quality assurance screening. In addition to that, calls are chosen at random to be QA'd. It's in the back of my mind on every single call — someone might have to listen to this call. Maybe it will be QA'd. Maybe the prosecutor will listen to it, and it will be played in court. Maybe the media will request a copy of the tape, and it will be played on the nightly news. Each of these scenarios has happened to me.

My calls are frequently QA'd, and I am given feedback on my call handling. A prosecutor once recommended I be fired for my handling of call, and it was determined I had followed policy so I was safe. The time during the investigation was miserable, and

I thought about quitting every day. On my third day working on my own, I handled a call that was requested by the media and made headlines across the country playing on the news and radio. That call still lives online and anyone who might want to hear it can

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Warning: Some may find the stories in this feature triggering of past trauma.



still listen. All of these individual incidents have shaped my perspective of media and how information is relayed and how situations are presented.

In addition to these stressors, I happen to work in a county that has the smallest officer-to-citizens ratio in the country. I constantly wonder if units in the field are safe and have enough support responding to calls.

These things, as well as the content of many calls, have given me pause to reflect on the untold and sometimes unknown impact of answering emergency calls. These elements come into play every day as we show up to put on the headset and brace for impact.

The following is a collection of a few calls over my 16-year career. Some I handled; some were handled by my partners. All have left their imprint one way or another.

ALIVE ONE MINUTE

Every time a motorcycle crashes, I check the call to make sure it isn't you. We have been married for six years and I still worry you're going to crash one day and die in the road.

It wasn't you again tonight. Thank the universe. But it was some other poor soul. Wasn't even going that fast. Alive one minute, dead the next. I had taken a call from someone who lived nearby and heard it. It was dark out, and they didn't leave their house. It went out as an assumed motor vehicle crash. Other people started calling it in shortly after, and they all reported that the rider was obviously deceased. I'm sure it was traumatic for each of them. Seeing a body lying in the street; not knowing who it was but knowing the blood coming from under the helmet meant he was gone. Sometimes I think about those people. The ones that aren't really involved but sort of second-hand involved. What story do they tell their families when they get home? Do they wake up in a cold sweat at night, reliving the crash, seeing the blood again and again?

Forty minutes after the crash your husband's fatality call was on my screen. I looked

at it and lied to you. You called and were trying to hold back tears, saying something was wrong. Your husband wasn't home yet, and did we know if there were any accidents in your area involving motorcycles? I told you I wasn't aware of anything but would have an officer call you and check into it. That's our policy. I can't tell you your husband is lying dead in the street half a mile away from your house. That he almost made it home but now he's never coming home again. I hang up the phone and imagine the officers coming to your house to tell you. You already know, in your heart, that something is very wrong. You mentioned you had a son. I wonder how you will tell him.

I leave myself on not-ready mode for a few minutes so I don't get another call. I grab a tissue and dry my eyes. My chest hurts. I'm crying for you, but I'm crying for me too. I love someone too, and he is also dying. A much slower death, from pancreatic cancer. Some days I can't concentrate at work, and I just take a break, walk around the parking lot and cry. I guess we are all losing people all the time. I just see it more than most.

THE FAVORITE

I'm sitting next to one of my work favorites. He is funny and wonderfully drama free. He's very nice and my day always seems more mellow when he is here. He is slow to get frustrated, and even the meanest callers don't bother him. On this day, we're sitting next to one another at stations that are so close you can hear when callers are screaming on the other person's line. Or, as it happens, you can hear gunshots. The phones weren't busy; it was just another dull day. We were chatting about nothing important when his phone beeped and he answered with the normal greeting, "9-1-1, what are you reporting?" An irate screaming male was on the line. I couldn't make out exactly what the caller was saying. My favorite was focused, as he always is. He tried to calm the caller down, to find out what the issue was. His voice is so soothing. I like to sit next to him, because it helps me stay calm. He was talking calmly, and I just watched him. Serene face, kind voice. And then I heard it. The unmistakable

bang of a large caliber gun. Then silence. My favorite looked at me, the color draining from his face. "My caller just shot himself," he said. My phone beeped. I had a call. Someone was reporting their basement flooding and they couldn't get the water shut off. My fingers felt like lead as I tried to type her address. I watched my favorite leave his desk. He didn't come back for an hour.

THE SHOOTING

I have a co-worker who is always quiet. You never hear her raise her voice. I've been at work for hours sometimes and have not even realized she was there. I'm sitting next to her one day and her phone beeps. Her voice strong, but quiet, "9-1-1, what are you reporting?" "You've been shot?" Oh crap, I thought. I mentally prepared myself for the phones to start going crazy. A shooting. Questions flew through my head at rapid speed. Multiple casualties? Public place? Suspect on the run? Her next question chilled me to the bone and stopped my heart. I immediately knew it was going to be a long night full of confusion, chaos, media and utter hell. "Wait, you're saying the officer shot you?"

I wanted to know what was happening. And I really, really did not want to know what was happening. She was on the line with the caller when she took her last breath, crawling on her hands and knees through the forest behind her

house, trying to escape her son-in-law, one of our own deputies, who had just killed her husband and shot her. I'd never been more frightened in my life.

GOING PUBLIC

There are stories about us in the news all the time. Mostly for not doing our jobs. Sometimes for going above and beyond. Most of us hate the media because they almost never get it right. We're told in training our calls are subject to public disclosure. People can request copies of the tapes and sometimes they are played on the news. I remember that part of training well. We've had some major calls in our area, and I remember hearing calls played on TV and splashy headlines in print. In training, I remember thinking how maybe one day, years into my career as a call taker, one of my calls might end up on the news. I might experience that feeling of going from anonymity to being the object of public scrutiny by thousands of people who have never done the job. I could never have imagined it would only take three days.

It was my third day working alone. I went on my last break, and I came back feeling glad I only had another two hours. Home stretch. I was feeling more confident since I had been working on my own the past few days. It was exciting. I still had some nerves, but I was finding my stride. It was about 9 p.m. when the call came in. "9-1-1, what are you reporting?" Screaming caller, crying, very hard to understand. "My dad's been shot!" I get medical aid on the line. They ask their questions, and I ask mine. Where are the suspects? What do they look like? I'm talking to a 10-year-old boy. He doesn't have the information I need. The suspects left. He doesn't know what they look like.

The next day, and the day after, and the day after that, his 9-1-1 call is played repeatedly on the television and radio news. I heard it — my voice sounding foreign to me — in the car on my way to work. My sister calls and asks if I'm OK, because she recognizes my voice in the call. That call was two minutes of a crying kid who just saw his dad murdered in front of him in their house. Why would anyone want to listen to that? Exactly

what was gained and who was helped by playing it repeatedly on the news? I walk into work and sit at my desk. I'm starting to understand why most of us hate the media now. Even though I am developing a growing distrust for the media, I also need them. They're the only ones that can bring closure. They're the only ones that can tell me details as they unfold. Through the media is how I learned four suspects were arrested. I was glad, but that closure never came.

LANGUAGE

"9-1-1, what are you reporting?" The calmness in your voice made me think it was a routine call. You said you were reporting a train accident. We have lots of train tracks in our county. We have agricultural trains and we have transit trains. Ok, accident, I think to myself. "Anyone need medical aid, any injuries?" I ask. "Um, yeah. A train just fell off the overpass onto the highway," you say, your voice suddenly void of the calmness from seconds before. "Oh, crap," I say and connect you to medical aid. I listen as they get the location and information they need.

In my head: shit, shit, shit. This is going to be all over the news. People are dead. The highway will be shut down. This is national news. I said crap on a recorded line; I'm definitely getting in trouble for that. The rest of my shift was caller after caller after caller with issues, questions and concerns about the train derailment. My best friend was texting me — her sister was at the scene, just happened to be driving by. She was trying to pull bodies from the train and provide whatever aid she could. We were so inundated with calls I couldn't comfort my friend. Another caller asking if their loved one was on the train, because they aren't answering their phone? Crying, sobbing, panic, grief. And then this guy: jerk calls 9-1-1 to complain about the police not doing enough to help with the traffic flow due to the back-up caused by the derailment. I was nice to him, and as soon as he hung up I muttered, "You asshole, people just died." It did not make me feel any better calling him an asshole. ●

The second part of this feature will appear in the May/June issue of PSC magazine.

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