



Tacoma, WA - Thursday, May 28, 2009

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At 911 agency, lives on the line

pierce county: Audit finds understaffing at call center

IAN DEMSKY; The News Tribune

Last updated: May 28th, 2009 12:43 PM (PDT)

At Pierce County's major 911 call center, the operators never know who's going to be on the other end of the line.

It could be a woman whose teenage son has just hanged himself in the garage, or just someone looking for a football score.

As veteran call taker Dave Lovrak will tell you, a heart-wrenching tragedy can be followed by a frivolity.

"People are calling us at the most pivotal moments of their lives," he said recently. "And sometimes those moments become pivotal for us, too."

Lovrak, 50, exudes an inner calm. One would never guess that he and other call takers at the Law Enforcement Support Agency handle more than twice as many calls per year on average than their counterparts around the state. Last year, agency call takers each answered an average of 22,764 calls, compared to 9,526 elsewhere.

Or that until a small increase last year, staffing levels at LESA had remained flat for more than a decade while the county population and calls for service both grew by double digits.

During peak weeks last year, call takers worked an average of 14 hours of overtime and dispatchers, who route information to police, worked 20.

At the extreme, one dispatcher worked 21 days straight, often pulling 12-hour shifts.

LESA, a joint Tacoma-Pierce County agency, has 34 authorized call taker positions while a recent performance audit found it needs 44 to handle the workload. It also needs eight more dispatchers and another supervisor, according to the audit report.

Worse, current call takers and dispatchers have to worry about being laid off later this year as the agency struggles financially.

The understaffing and underfunding of the agency present "an unacceptable risk to public safety when seconds can mean the difference between life and death," the report found.

Even with these challenges, Lovrak called the job deeply rewarding.

"I've been doing this for 16 years and I can honestly tell you that I love this job," he said.

But there are times when operators can't get to the waiting calls fast enough, he admitted, causing a nagging chime to ring on an electronic reader board.

"On a pretty day like this," Lovrak said, "it can seem like that audible never stops."

MORE LAYOFFS EXPECTED

The LESA call center is in a nondescript building next to the Pierce County Annex on South 35th Street. The agency serves nearly 90 percent of the county, taking calls and dispatching and providing support services for Tacoma, unincorporated Pierce County and smaller jurisdictions like Roy, University Place and Gig Harbor.

On a recent Thursday morning, Lovrak sat facing three computer monitors, a double-screen model and a second terminal that serves as a phone.

There were no pictures of his family or other personal items on the desk, which faced a small, sun-lit courtyard. That's because there are no assigned seats at the LESA call center. At the beginning of each shift, the operators choose their stations and often wheel over their favorite chair. It's kind of like church, Lovrak explained – people have their regular spots.

An electronic reader board on one wall keeps track of how many 911 calls are waiting to be answered, how long the longest call has been waiting and how many seconds it takes on average to pick up.

The national standard is to answer 90 percent of calls within 10 seconds. LESA does not meet that standard and has one of the slowest response times in either the state or the nation, the audit found.

Last year, LESA answered 80.6 percent of its calls within 12 seconds, the audit found.

It did, however, point out that LESA has been getting better, largely due to the creation of a unit to take reports of minor incidents like car prowls.

That unit likely is on the chopping block as the agency girds for a second round of layoffs, director Tom Orr said in a recent interview. Five records specialists were let go earlier this year.

LESA is facing a budget shortfall that could be as big as \$1.8 million, Orr said. That would require cutting about 28 full-time positions from the 172-person agency, which also handles police reports and other services for 14 local police agencies.

In the communications center, there are 34 authorized call taker positions, 32 of which are filled, one by a trainee. There are 37 authorized dispatcher positions, 34 of which are filled, three by trainees.

While dispatchers and call takers were spared in the last round, some layoffs among them are “inevitable” given the size of the deficit, Orr said.

The financial crunch is due in part to the recession, which means less tax revenue for the agencies that pay LESA for services and rising costs for administrative services the agency buys from the City of Tacoma.

Orr said one likely solution would be introducing a ballot measure asking for a small sales tax increase.

ROUTINE CALLS

Both calls to 911 and the non-emergency dispatch line ring through to the center, giving the call takers the ability to put a non-emergency caller on hold if an emergency call comes in and no one is free to pick it up.

On this particular morning, the first call Lovrak took was from Brinks Home Security reporting motion in the dining room and garage of a home in the 11800 block of 98th Avenue East.

It turned out to be a false alarm. Lovrak ran a computer query that showed that out of 18 residential alarms in the previous 12 hours, only one was an actual burglary.

Next came a call from a Puyallup woman whose 90-year-old father needed to go to the hospital.

“He can't take care of himself and I can't transport him,” she said.

Lovrak transferred her to fire/medical dispatchers.

The next call was from a woman who said she'd dialed the wrong number.

Over the next half hour, Lovrak took a call about smoke that turned out to be a routine test of the sewer system, a request for a welfare check on a man walking down the street talking to himself and screaming, a woman whose in-law was driving by their house, possibly with a gun in his lap, and someone who found an empty Bank of America money pouch.

TOUGH CALLS

Calls like this make up the bread and butter of the job. But sometimes things get a little crazy.

“It has all the excitement of police work without the danger,” Lovrak said. “We are the first of the first responders.”

When a caller is on the line going through some awful situation, the seconds tick by just as slowly for the call taker on the line with them.

“It’s like being in the scariest movie you’ve ever seen,” he said.

Last summer, Lovrak tried to keep a suicidal man on the line while deputies raced to his location. Unlike similar calls Lovrak has fielded over the years, this man wasn’t calling to be talked out of it. He admitted to molesting his daughter and wanted his body to be found promptly. After he hung up, he shot himself to death.

“It’s strange how someone picks you to have their last conversation with before they step into eternity,” said Lovrak, who walks, bikes and hikes to cleanse his emotions.

The upside is, of course, helping people – making sure rescuers arrive quickly or relaying a critical piece of information to catch a criminal.

“Overall, it’s a fantastic job,” he said.

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WHEN TO CALL

Want to help your 911 system? Here are some tips from Law Enforcement Support Agency call taker Dave Lovrak:

- In Pierce County there are two different numbers to call: 911 and LESA’s non-emergency line, 798-4721. Calls to 911 are given priority, so if 911 is used for non-emergencies, it can take longer to answer genuine emergency calls. “I tell people to use 911 if a speedy response could change the outcome,” Lovrak said.
- Don’t hang up. If you misdial or if the screaming you heard turned out to be kids playing, stay on the line and tell the operator what happened. If you hang up, a call taker will have to stop taking incoming calls to call you back and make sure everything is OK.
- Don’t let little kids play with cell phones. Even when the keypad is locked, cell phones by design can still call 911. All too often, operators get googoo-gaga calls from babies mashing buttons.
- Write down your license plate number and put it in your wallet or purse. “It’s the most important piece of information you can have about a vehicle you’re responsible for,” Lovrak said.

Originally published: May 28th, 2009 12:18 AM (PDT)



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