

So You Want To Be A Dispatcher?

By Karen Clark, Dispatcher and Communications Training Officer

Dispatching at the Santa Cruz Consolidated 9-1-1 center is a challenging, fast-paced job that isn't for everyone. But if you're a quick-thinking decision-maker who thrives on stressful challenges, then it may be a career with your name on it.

So what's it like during a typical day at the center? The answer is that there are no typical days. Even the most routine calls often have twists you've never heard before, and routine radio traffic can be interrupted in a blink of the eye by an officer needing emergency assistance.

Often the work is routine, especially if you start your shift at 6 a.m. Citizens are still asleep or just getting ready for work, bad guys have called it a night, and graveyard officers often are in the station writing reports before going off duty. By 8 a.m., the community is starting to come to life, and unlucky citizens just discovering their cars were burglarized while they slept begin calling in to make a report with an officer. The call volume continues to increase, often becoming a frenzy as more and more citizens call requesting assistance. Sometimes they need an officer, or they may just need a referral to the appropriate agency.

At this point, you're answering phones and keeping an ear out for your radio traffic. Day-shift officers are starting to make car stops, or put themselves out on follow-up calls. Dispatchers never loses track of officers because we never know when an officer is going to frantically radio for "Code-3 cover," which means they need immediate assistance from surrounding officers.

The call-volume ebbs and flows throughout the day, and it's not all routine. Even during the daylight hours, couples are engaged in physical fights in their homes, burglars are trying to break into houses whose occupants are gone for the day, wanted felons are spotted by citizens or officers and arrests must be made, or drunks are making a nuisance of themselves.

As a dispatcher you'll be coordinating all of this. You'll be prioritizing calls, sending officers immediately to people are in danger, and holding the other calls until someone is available to handle them. You'll be assisting officers in the field by running people for warrants or finding out if they're on probation, or simply ensuring they have a valid driver's license. Officers often need help making calls to various agencies to assist citizens in the field, or to complete their reports.

As night falls, the volume of emergency traffic typically begins to pick up. Citizens begin drinking, and arguments and fights often are a direct result. The bad guys are more likely to be up to no good, thinking they're protected by the cover of darkness. You could be dealing with a carjacking, and still have to handle a call reporting a suicidal subject or a homeowner who just interrupted a burglary at his house. It will be your job to make sure officers are going where they are needed, and when they are needed.

Then, as dawn approaches, the call-volume and work done by officers in the field may wane again. Although, there are nights when the fast pace never stops and everyone is exhausted by the time a new shift arrives at the center at 6 a.m.

Are you up for it? If so, it will be a challenging yet rewarding experience. You'll be helping people during some of the worst moments of their lives. And you'll be making a difference.