

# Call Boxes: They aren't just there for decoration

Reporter discovers that there really is someone behind "push to talk"

**W**hat should you do if: You observe a strange person hanging around the Esslinger locker room, or you witness a mugging in front of Oregon Hall, or when leaving Beer Gardens, your slightly loopy roommate takes a tumble down the E.M.U. steps, or you've fallen, and you can't get up?

As recently as 20 years ago, you might have been up the proverbial creek, having no quick way to call for help.

In 1972, however, your options changed.

That's the year when the Office of Public Safety installed the first emergency telephones on campus—you know, those little boxes that say, "POLICE: PUSH BUTTON" or "PUSH TO TALK."

Those boxes aren't installed near the showers in campus locker rooms so you'll have a convenient place to hang your towel.

The boxes aren't posted on two sides of Oregon Hall so that after you've picked up your student loan check, you can call the proper authorities to find out how much you owe in parking tickets.

The boxes are there for people who need help in crisis (or potential crisis) situations.

For example, it should comfort female students to know



Photo by Sid Neriman

*Call and Response: Experienced OPS Officer Otis Scarborough responds quickly to all call box emergencies.*

that there are 13 emergency phones in the three women's locker rooms of Gerlinger and Esslinger Halls.

Twenty-four hour buildings on campus, like Lawrence Hall, are also favored locations for the phones. According to the OPS statement, "This building is unlocked 24 hours and the level of minor crimes within it reflect a grave safety concern for our students."

When someone pushes the button on an emergency phone, it activates an alarm signal at OPS through a bell and a light on a security panel, which tells the OPS dispatcher from which building the call was made. In some cases, the light will also point out the exact phone the caller used.

According to Officer Otis



Scarborough, a 12-year veteran of OPS, a dispatcher also answers the call, saying, "This is Public Safety. Do you have an emergency?"

If there is a vocal response by the caller, the dispatcher will then ask for the caller's exact location and for information about the caller's emergency.

An OPS officer checks out every call made from an emergency phone, whether or not the caller responds vocally to the dispatcher. Scarborough explains that often this means an officer will go to the box only to discover that the call was made by a long-since ske-daddled jokester.

But they answer every call personally because the worst case scenario is that the caller may have passed out or is un-

der threat by an attacker and cannot respond.

Unfortunately, Scarborough says, "A large percentage of the time" the calls are fakes, especially during day shifts.

Scarborough and a colleague, Criminal Prevention Officer Robert Guse, would like to get the message out that joke calls on the emergency phones are not at all funny. "If you punch (the call button) as a practical joke," says Guse, "be aware that you may be cutting off someone with a real emergency."

This is because with only a couple of exceptions, all of the emergency phones are routed through a single line into the OPS office.

Guse and Scarborough described an incident in which an individual who had broken

his leg called in and, while giving information to the dispatcher, started to lose consciousness, and then was cut off by a second call that turned out to be a joke.

If you need another reason not to tie up OPS time with fake calls, consider the fact that to do so is a class C misdemeanor, and could mean a \$500 fine. A fake caller is also violating Student Conduct Code 1, which can lead to a probational file with the Dean of Students.

OPS officers are extremely concerned about student safety, explained Guse and Scarborough, and are more than happy to respond to a caller who feels he or she may be in danger in any way.

"We would rather respond to a situation that doesn't require our assistance," Scarborough points out, "than not respond to one that does."

Guse says students should not hesitate to use an emergency phone even if they are simply locked out of their dorm, or if they want an escort from one place to another. Many normal daytime situations become dangerous ones at night, and Guse says that because of that, the percentage of callers in real need of help rises sharply during "graveyard" shifts.

"We're not going to go out there and judge people for calling in a situation on the emergency phones. But if the person punched the button for a joke, and the situation is that the person needs an attitude adjustment, we'll be glad to help them with that."

— Sarah Pagliasotti

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