

Coast Guard: Majority of disabled calls received come from Buoy 10

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Several operations specialists, trained to be the eyes, ears and voices of the Coast Guard, immediately keyed in, hyper-focused on finding more information and dispatching rescuers.

Eyes

The command center, the Coast Guard's version of a 911 dispatch center, is filled to the brim with radio, satellite and other communications equipment.

Manning the command center at all times on 12-hour shifts are teams of operations specialists overseen by command duty officers. During their shifts, they are in charge of handling search and rescue, pollution, security and other cases along the coast from Pacific City to Queets, Washington, and the Columbia River to Lewiston, Idaho.

"Our role here is to roll out any type of response efforts," said Petty Officer 1st Class Darlene Harrison, an operations unit controller who oversees the planning search and rescue missions.

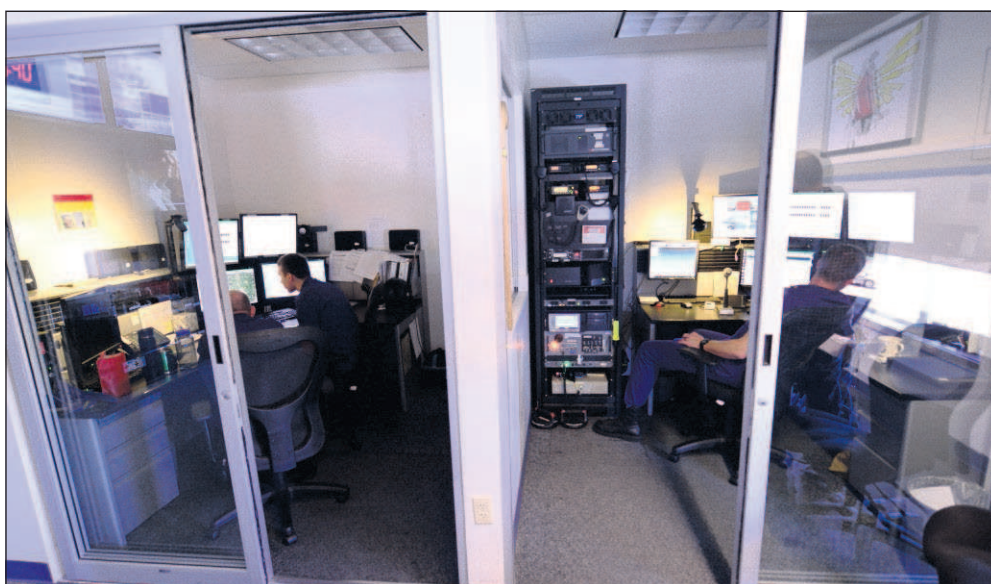
"That's a pretty big weight to have on your shoulders," she said, adding sometimes she has to track tens of cases concurrently.

Next to Harrison on Friday sat Lt. j.g. Issac Yates, a unit situation controller providing situational awareness of the Coast Guard's assets and weather conditions. Backing them up were Petty Officer 2nd Class Kasey Tarbox, breaking in Yates, a recent transfer from Maryland. Overseeing all of them Friday was Lt. Kristen Caldwell, a command duty officer who stays in the secure command center 24 hours at a time.

Ears

Harrison said cases often start in the command center's two radio rooms. One person monitors radio traffic along the coastline. The other tracks communications from the mouth of the Columbia river. Both send out broadcasts to mariners about weather conditions, restrictions and obstructions in the water, such as logs floating down the river.

Siems said he listens for excited voices and key terms like "mayday," "help," "taking



Photos courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard

The U.S. Coast Guard's command center at Air Station Astoria includes rooms to monitor radio traffic along the coastline from Queets, Washington, to Pacific City, and up the Columbia River to Lewiston, Idaho.



An unofficial illustration made from the U.S. national animal incorporates the multiple skillsets of operations specialists with the U.S. Coast Guard, who oversee the agency's response to emergencies using advanced communications, information-gathering and cartography.

on water" and "I see a flare" to assess whether someone is in an emergency. "You can hear the excitement level," he said.

Helping the command center are tools such as Rescue 21, a network of radio towers spanning the coast and Columbia and allowing operators to communicate with and ping the position of people in distress. Specialized software helps the operators guess the position and survivability of people in the water.

Buoy 10

Over the last three years, Sector Columbia River's command center has handled more than 1,800 calls, more than 40 percent of those are disabled vessels.

"I would say the majority of our disabled calls come from Buoy 10," Caldwell said. "They run out of gas. They're

out there fishing and not paying attention."

Activity spikes during the Buoy 10 summer salmon fishery in August, which lures thousands of fisherman out on the water from Tongue Point to the mouth of the Columbia.

Much of the Coast Guard's work during Buoy 10 is prevention. As part of Operation Make Way, radio operators in the radio room send out broadcasts telling boaters to move for large vessels navigating the Columbia's thin commercial channel. Hundreds of auxiliaries provide free boat inspections and patrol as part of a community watch.

Caldwell said the Coast Guard continually cautions boaters to be prepared when they go out on the water by getting their boats checked and carrying a powerful radio,

a positioning beacon and life jackets.

"Our chances of finding you with a life jacket on is 99 percent," Harrison said, adding the odds are drastically lower for those trying to tread water in the on average 54 degree water.

Always Ready

The command center ultimately handled 12 cases Friday. The person in the water near Ocean Park turned out to be crab pots. The Coast Guard sent its helicopter back shortly after takeoff, when the disabled vessel on Grays Harbor bar was towed to safety by a good Samaritan.

Each case the command center handles is followed by at least an hour of paperwork, Caldwell said, "but that's our job."

What especially angers the operators in the command center are hoax callers, which cost the Coast Guard thousands of dollars to respond to and divert attention away from real emergencies. Sector Columbia River has a continuing issue with a person placing hoax calls from near Megler Mountain in Pacific County.

"We pretty much know when it's him," Caldwell said. "People could die because of it. We don't like it."

Housing: Urling suggested relaxing carport, garage rule

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resist the idea of placing residential and commercial structures side by side. But "we're in a different environment now," he said, "with much of the emphasis on trying to create affordable housing."

Urling also suggested the city allow him to relax a rule requiring duplexes and multiple-family dwellings to have either a carport or a garage.

And, he said, if the commission wanted to be really aggressive on the issue, they could stop allowing single-family dwellings in high-density residential zones.

"I don't know how palatable you may find it, but it would, I think, have a really good effect in terms of providing opportunities for more multiple-family dwellings," Urling said.

In other business:

The commission directed Urling to come up with concepts for regulating homes used as vacation rentals.

City staff has received an increasing number of inquiries about where and how such rentals can be operated in Warrenton, Urling wrote in a staff report.

However, "the development code is silent on the issue," neither prescribing a zoning district where vacation rentals would be permitted outright or by commercial use, nor laying out operating standards and criteria, he wrote.

The city believes that "some unquantified number of property owners" are using their structures as short-term rentals, though the city hasn't received any complaints so far, he wrote.

"Unless people are honest and ask to get a business license and pay the transient (room) tax, we really have no way of knowing about it until the neighbors start complaining — if there's a reason to complain," he told the commission.

Kujala said, "It sounds like people want a mechanism in order to have this as an option rather than not have anything, but it needs to be licensed and regulated, or have some type of permit."

• During public comment on the hiring criteria for a new city manager, Ken Yuill, who serves on the Planning Commission, urged the City Commission to hire City Recorder Linda Engbretson, the city manager pro tem, for the permanent position.

"I'm a very strong supporter of taking care of people who take care of us," Yuill said. "In this situation, I'm totally in line that you picked the correct person for the pro tem, and I would like to see that person become the new city manager."

Engbretson was appointed pro tem when former City Manager Kurt Fritsch resigned in late June. Engbretson's interim role lasts four months, per the city charter; however, that timeline can be adjusted, City Attorney Hal Snow said.

The commission adopted a resolution laying out directives for finding Fritsch's replacement, but Kujala said the commission doesn't necessarily need to go further in the hiring process at this point.

"I don't think we're in any hurry, myself," Kujala said. "I think we're doing very well."



Mark Kujala

Seal: Ribbon seals 'are known to be exceptional travelers'

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white lines wrapping around their bodies, could only be the same species as the one seen on the peninsula. But ribbon seals are usually found high up in the North Pacific Ocean, in the Bering and Okhotsk Seas and even in the Arctic Ocean.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration confirmed this identification later in the day. Now there's another data point charting the varied journeys of ribbon seals outside of their usual hunting grounds. It's a connect-the-dots with very few dots.

The last time anyone reported a sighting in Washington was four years ago, near Seattle. Before that, in the 1960s, a ribbon seal was reported down in California.

"They are known to be exceptional travelers," said NOAA wildlife biologist Michael Cameron, who works with the agency's Marine Mammal Lab and the Alaska Fisheries Science Center in the Polar Ecosystems Program.

But these longer trav-

els usually take place when the animals are younger, and the seal in Surfside looked like a healthy adult male to Cameron.

"It's not uncommon for sub-adult animals, marine mammals, to make long migrations until they're old enough to breed," Cameron said. An adult ribbon seal this far south, however, "is more unusual."

Ribbon seals normally stick to the far north seas, moving with the ice. They are relatively solitary, according to NOAA biologists, spending much of their time in the open ocean and hauling out on ice floes.

Not a sign of the times

The sighting of a ribbon seal in Surfside probably doesn't point to anything larger, like shifting climate change patterns or troubles with ribbon seal populations in the Bering Sea, Cameron said.

"It's interesting from a natural life history perspective," he said. But it's not something wildlife biologists are going to

rush out and research. NOAA has radio-tagged a number of ribbon seals in the Bering Sea; none of those have made the journey down here, yet.

The worldwide population of ribbon seals is believed to be between 200,000 and 240,000 — an estimate based on surveys conducted in the 1970s. According to NOAA, Siberia and Alaska Natives have hunted the seals for many generations and currently take less than an estimated 200 seals each year. Soviet sealers hunted for ribbon seals as well. During this time, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Bering Sea population is thought to have declined from 80,000 or 90,000 animals, to 60,000.

The program Cameron is involved with — the Polar Ecosystems Program — is, according to NOAA, "actively studying and monitoring ribbon seals to support a more reliable assessment of their status" and to discover more about their life cycles and health and any threats they face.

Safe zones: Committee spent years working on signs, developing routes

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Inspired by blue lines indicating tsunami safe zones in areas of New Zealand, the markings are accompanied by signs notifying pedestrians and vehicles that they are leaving the tsunami hazard zone.

Wierson said the blue lines

raise daily awareness, reduce the number of signs needed and allow people to plan their own evacuation route.

"If people don't have a map, they will see it with signs and by the mark in the pavement," he said.

The emergency preparedness committee has worked

on the blue line project for about a year and a half, chairwoman and founder Carolyn Adamson said. The committee has spent many years working on signs and developing routes.

"We've made a lot of progress, but we still have a long way to go," she said.

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