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In Your Community: Dispatchers work behind the scenes to keep people safe

By Andrea Di Salvo
"911 emergency."
It's the phrase people hope they never have to hear, but it's also the sound of a lifeline in times of trouble—a lifeline anchored right here in the Morrow County community.



Dispatcher Marcy Walton at her workstation at the Morrow County Sheriff's Office in Heppner. Along with a headset and keyboard, each station has six monitors that display maps, real-time tracking, and law enforcement files like warrants and arrest records. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

On a recent Friday night, it turned out to be an open line 911 call—a call on which the emergency dispatcher can hear sounds on the other end of the line but no one speaks. It could have been an accident, but it also could have been someone in trouble, so Morrow County Sheriff's Office Communications Deputy Andrea Acosta-Garcia tried to call back. When no one answered, she used a new software called RapidSOS to plot the call's location and dispatched a patrol deputy to check it out.

It's only one of the duties of a communications deputy, or dispatcher, whose job exists behind the scenes yet on the front lines of emergency response.

"People think we just answer the phones. That's a small portion of it," says 42-year-old Sarah Baker, MCSO Communications Sergeant.

"They think we just relay information to other people," adds Acosta-Garcia, 27. "They don't know we're doing everything they need while we're on the phone with them."

Baker, who was born in Heppner and graduated from Heppner High School in 1998, says she took some classes at Blue Mountain Community College with an eye on a psychology major. While the job doesn't require a college degree, only a high-school diploma, she says the psychology she learned comes in handy sometimes. Baker has worked for MCSO since 2011. Prior to that, she worked for the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office.

Baker says most of the training is on the job, but there's also the question of who's cut out for the job.

Baker says it is helpful, if not downright necessary, for a dispatcher to be a Type A person.

"You have to have a certain personality," she says. "We tell people where to go, what to do, how to save a life. We like to be in control."

"It's definitely a tough job," she adds. "It does take a certain type of personality to handle the stress and the emotions that come with it."

"I think once you start working here, you will adjust to what is needed. I know this job is not for everyone," adds Acosta-Garcia. "I don't think there's one specific personality you have to have."

Baker agrees that, even if it doesn't come naturally, it can be something that develops with time.

"You have to be able to know in yourself that you can handle the job," she says, adding that it's the people who doubt themselves who don't last as dispatchers. "If you can get past that and do the job, then you can do the job."

Personality or not, college degree or not, dispatchers do have to go through rigorous training of their own. Emergency dispatchers are required to go through three weeks of training through the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training (DPSST) just to start.

After that, there is an annual training requirement of 12 hours per dispatcher. That training isn't set; it can happen throughout the

our committee to reach out and bring to life our timed course and having the Nichols family organize with their running expertise," says Hisler. "Janelle Ellis has done it for 15 years, so combining all their efforts will give it a new fun and exciting twist. There also will be a few awards handed out."

The committee didn't take pre-registrations for the timed run, so runners are asked to come early to register. All walkers and runners are also asked to come early so a group picture can be taken before they set off.

Back this year is the social hour before the run, complete with lots of "eats and treats."

"If you're not a walker or runner, come and enjoy the social hour in a clean and warm environment," says Hisler. Doors open at 8 a.m. The committee wants to remind everyone that this is a family-oriented event, and kids are free. Hisler says many families choose to walk with multiple generations. Dogs are also welcome but do need to be on leashes, with waste taken care of on the route.

All proceeds from the event and the tee-shirt sales will go to Willow Creek Terrace assisted living. Donations can be sent to Friends Helping Friends, c/o Kathi Dickenson, Box 566, Heppner.

Remembrance Walk shirts available now



Patty Matheny, Sandi Matthews and Susan Hisler of Friends Helping Friends stand with the new batch of shirts available for this year's Remembrance Walk/5K Run. -Contributed photo

This year, after "15-ish" years, the Friends Helping Friends committee is bringing back its Remembrance Walk/5K Run tee shirt.

Friends Helping Friends has not had tee shirts since the inaugural year of the event, saying they wanted to use all of the proceeds to benefit each year's cause versus an added expense. This year, thanks to the support of sponsors like Pam and Mark Wunderlich, they are again offering their iconic shirts with just a few changes.

"It really signified our event, using the Donna Schonbachler logo, but getting away from pink and using green," says Susan Hisler of Friends Helping Friends.

The shirts are newly de-

signed, green and available with short or long sleeves. Short sleeves are \$15, long sleeves \$20.

Shirts are currently for sale at Pioneer Memorial Physical Therapy and Flood Town Books, and will also be for sale Friday at noon in the Methodist Church basement and at the event this Saturday beginning at 8:30 a.m.

Also new this year is a 5K timed event.

"Susan Hisler approached us about having a timed event, so we're adding that as one more additional option for those who feel more competitive," says Russ Nichols.

The Nichols family, both parents and children, are well-known for their involvement in track and field and cross country, so they seemed the perfect addition to the 5K team.

"It was a great time for

Barbershop to sponsor chili cookoff

Faded Joe's Barbershop will hold a "Wee Bit o' Chili" chili cookoff on Saturday, March 18, during the Wee Bit O' Ireland celebration in Heppner. All proceeds will go to Tupper Outdoor School.

Cooking will begin at 10 a.m. with judging from 12-1 p.m. Limited entries are available for teams of three. Contact Faded Joe's Barbershop for entry forms.

Wee Bit O' Ireland this weekend



Get ready for the wearin' o' the green as Heppner's Wee Bit O' Ireland celebration returns this weekend. See PAGE SIX for a full schedule of events. -File photo

County is making plans for a new circuit court building

Seeks funding for courthouse through senate bill



Morrow County is seeking to build a new circuit court building in Heppner, saying that the current courthouse, while "historic" and "beautiful," is no longer practical for court trials. The current courthouse would not be torn down, but a new facility would be built elsewhere to house the Morrow County Circuit Court. -File photo

By Andrea Di Salvo
Several Morrow County officials traveled to Salem last week to show their support for a bill that could help fund a new courthouse for Morrow County.

Morrow County Commission Chair David Sykes and Morrow County District Attorney Justin Nelson both appeared before the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety last Thursday to voice their support for Oregon Senate Bill 5512. Joining them was Judge Daniel J. Hill of the Sixth Judicial District, which serves the circuit courts in both Morrow and Umatilla counties. Morrow County Sheriff John Bowles, while not present, wrote a letter of support for the bill.

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners had authorized Sykes to move forward on the circuit court building at its March 1 meeting. Sykes told the other commissioners at the meeting that it has been an ongoing process for some time. Melissa Lindsay had been the previous point person during her time on the commission.

Sykes said he has been scrambling to get up-to-date and has been working with Judge Hill and Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney among others to get the project culminated. He told Morrow County Commissioners Jeff Wenholz and Roy Drago, Jr. that SB 5512 created a good opportunity to further the project.

Senate Bill 5512 would -Continued to PAGE NINE

Boardman council hears concerns about rising rent prices



Port View apartments in Boardman were part of the rent stabilization discussion at the Boardman City Council meeting last week. -Contributed photo.

By Andrea Di Salvo
A Boardman teacher appeared before Boardman City Council March 7 to ask the council to take action on rising rent prices for rental complexes in Boardman.

Stephen Fuss, a music teacher at Sam Boardman Elementary, told the council last week that he had concerns about both the cost

and availability of affordable housing in Boardman. His presentation centered around rental complexes, not homes for rent or purchase, though he said those were areas of concern, as well.

Fuss told the council that Boardman currently has 10 rental complexes, but only two have availability right now. One of those, Castle Rock, is specified for farm labor and is classified as low income, with cost based on income and family size. Port View, where Fuss said he rents, is in a higher rent bracket. According

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