

Morrow County Dispatchers work behind the scenes

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year and can be fulfilled by any training that is relevant to work as a dispatcher. That training can also be either in-house or in various locations in Oregon, Washington or Idaho—the other two states share training standards with Oregon.

On top of that is another four hours of training in Emergency Medical Dispatch, which teaches dispatchers to give medical instructions over the phone, such as guiding a caller through CPR.

Baker says some people don't last very long, but that's okay. It's best to figure it out early, she says. "There's so much in-



Andrea Acosta-Garcia

A friend kept telling her she would be a good 911 dispatcher and urged her to apply when a position opened at MCSO. She decided to apply to appease her friend.

"I got myself into something I had no clue about," says Acosta-Garcia.

The shifts rotate every three months on a rotating shift bid. Shift bid means they rotate through dispatchers so everyone has a chance to pick their shift (and get weekends off) regardless of seniority. Baker currently works the weekday day shift, while Acosta-Garcia works weekday swing, 4 p.m. to 2 a.m.

There are 10 dispatcher positions, but right now MCSO is down three, so the seven dispatchers do a lot of shift trading to balance their lives and the demands of the job, Baker says.

"We just kind of back each other up," she says.

The number of dispatchers on a shift depends on the shift. On a weekend swing shift, they like to have two or three dispatchers working. During the week, there is usually only one, though that's due to staffing issues. If they were fully staffed, Baker says, they would almost always have two on a shift.

There were three working that Friday night—Acosta-Garcia, Marcy Walton and Jessica Trujillo, plus Baker, who stopped by to check in. There wasn't much action early in the evening. In between providing deputies with information on arrest warrants and addresses, the four caught up on paperwork and talked shop.

"We do a ton of paperwork," says Baker. That paperwork includes warrants, restraining orders and stalking orders, to name a few. Communications deputies manage not one, but four 911 lines, as well as 10 business lines and radio traffic from countless frequencies. "There's a lot more to it than just answering the phone."

During a down moment, Baker asked the others if they had received any 911 texts. The ability to text



Sarah Baker

911 is fairly new, but, Walton said she had received a couple, though they turned out not to be urgent.

"I think the text 911 is a good thing in this day and age, especially with kids," says Baker. "I think it's easier for them knowing they can text."

"I feel like the text 911 is more when you're trying to be discreet," Acosta-Garcia added. She then shared a success story about using a new app called what3words. The app assigns a unique combination of three words to every three-meter square on earth. Acosta-Garcia used it when she received a 911 from a family stuck in the snow.

It was storming, and the family was lost.

"I had an idea where they were, but I didn't know exactly where they were," says Acosta-Garcia.

Fortunately, the family had cell phone reception, so Acosta-Garcia asked them to download the app and give her the three words for their location.

"And it worked," she says. "I was like, 'Found you!'"

Each dispatcher gets his or her own equipment, which includes a headset and keyboard. Each station has a bank of six computer monitors, as well as phones and radios.

When a dispatcher gets to work, she first gets her equipment and plugs it

in, and then logs into the system. The dispatcher going off duty then gives a full briefing on everything that's been going on, including pending calls or calls units are on currently.

"That way, when the next radio call comes in, when the next phone call comes in, they know what's going on," says Baker.

At the heart of their system is a program called Computer Aided Dispatch, or CAD. Most 911 dispatch centers have some version of CAD, Baker says. When a call comes in, the dispatcher takes the information and enters it into the CAD system. It's the records management system, but it also tracks the position and availability of response units within MCSO territory.

Their area covers all of Morrow County. They used to dispatch for Gilliam, Sherman and Wheeler, as well, but Frontier Dispatch now covers those counties in its territory.

Some nights are laid back and relaxed. Patrol deputies or parole and probation deputies might stop by to ask for information or stay for a few minutes to join in the conversation. This night in particular, a deputy new to the Heppner patrol wandered in to ask where Balm Fork Road is—and possibly how she was supposed to find the road without a road sign.

The dispatchers launched into an explanation of several area roads, trying to help the newcomer get her bearings.

"I feel like a lot of people think 911 dispatchers are far away from where you're located," observes Acosta-Garcia. "Your 911 dispatchers are local, and they know your area."

However, they never know when that one call

will come in.

"I've kind of seen it all. I've gone through officer involved shootings. I've been through bomb threats. I've had CPR go great and I've had CPR go wrong. I've kind of been through everything," Baker says.

She says they tend to develop what she calls a dark sense of humor in their field.

"That is how we cope. We have to find humor in something," says Baker. "It's how people deal with the stress of everyday life and of your job, if you have a stressful job. Not everyone understands it."

"For me, the ones that stand out the most are the traumatic ones, because you just keep thinking about it," says Acosta-Garcia. For instance, she says, if she has to dispatch responders to a house where there was a suicide and later drives by that house, she remembers. "If there was a terrible wreck on the interstate, when I drive on the interstate, I'll remember."

Baker says it can be a very stressful job, depending on the call.

"There's always going to be a call that's stressful, that rubs you the wrong way or gets under your skin," Baker adds. "Not every call, but that one call."

"When things happen, you just go into training mode and you get the job done," she says.

"It depends on the day, sometimes even the time of year. Some days it might be the Q word," Acosta-Garcia laughs, adding that they don't like to say "quiet" because it might jinx it. "Some days from the time you put your foot on the pedal... When you get a moment's break, you take a deep breath and keep going."



Along with six monitors at each station, four larger wall monitors help all of the dispatchers, and any other law enforcement in the room, share information and keep track of current situations. - Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

involved in the job," Baker says. "This is a serious job. There are lives at stake."

Acosta-Garcia says being a 911 dispatcher wasn't in her plans, either. Born in Hermiston and raised in Umatilla, she also took classes at BMCC, though with the goal of becoming a physician's assistant. Then she got married and had her first child, and her plans changed. She decided to put her education plans on hold and focus on her family. She worked in security for Amazon, first doing rounds and then in the control center, monitoring cameras and doing investigations.

She didn't think she really had a shot. She was only 20, for one thing. Still, she applied and went in for interviews and testing.

"There were a lot of people in the same room who looked really smart," she recalls. "I didn't think I would be the chosen one."

But she was. She turned 21 the day of her interview.

Dispatch, by its nature, operates 24/7. Each dispatcher works four 10-hour shifts every week. Those include a 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. day shift, 4 p.m. to 2 p.m. swing shift, 12-10 p.m. mid shift and 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. graveyard shift.

Making plans for new circuit court building

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appropriate money from the state's general fund to the Judicial Department for certain expenses, including county courthouse repairs and replacements throughout the state. The bill would provide a 50 percent match up to six million dollars, and Morrow County is asking for the full six million. Sykes and Morrow County Finance Director Kevin Ince said financing is available in the county's budget to meet the senate bill match assuming it rolls out in the upcoming fiscal year.

"So it's all coming to a head, and it's coming to a head soon," said Sykes at the March 1 meeting.

The county is currently looking to build the new circuit court building in Heppner. The City of Heppner gave the county a list of nine sites, which the county has narrowed to three or four possibilities. Sykes requested having the DLR Group team come in and look at those and give the county an analysis on which one they think is most doable and best financially.

DLR was the firm that assessed the current courthouse and determined it was not feasible to bring it up to safety standards and court requirements. Sykes said he requested DLR because they are familiar with courthouses and with the grant process in Salem. He said he was looking for authorization to spend up to \$10,000 to do initial analysis on the potential sites.

"I'm just asking for the okay to engage them," said Sykes.

The request did not approve a specific site or

building cost but would, Sykes said, move the project forward. Drago asked if they would hold a public hearing on the options, but Sykes replied that he felt they should look at DLR's recommendations and the commission should make a decision from there. Nelson added that they had to keep in mind that the circuit court also had a say in the final selection.

Wenholz agreed.

"The circuit court actually has a pretty good say on what the building is and location and everything, because it is state dollars," he said.

Sykes said he had been talking with Judge Hill quite a bit.

"And he's tuned in to how much say the court has. They have the final say where it goes," said Sykes, "so we're trying to look at sites that will meet as close as we can to what they want. Then it comes down to economics."

Nelson said he also wanted to clarify for the sake of the public that the current courthouse would not be torn down or changed but that a new space is needed.

"When we think about the spacing issue, we think to the future," said Nelson. "Right now we've built the new Bartholomew Building. It's pretty full already. You think about 10 years down the road, where do we expand?"

"You're talking about spaces that could open up for other departments to utilize. There's a benefit to that," added Nelson.

Sykes and Nelson both pointed to the need for

things like a sally port so the jurors couldn't see a defendant being brought in in handcuffs, which would be cause for mistrial. Nelson said they had been lucky so far in that there had been no mistrial.

At the March 9 meeting in Salem, Judge Hill addressed the committee to show his support for both a new Morrow County Circuit Court building and repairs to the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton. Hill stressed that both projects would benefit the citizens of their respective counties.

"Beautiful. Beautiful facility, which is no longer remotely suitable," Hill said of the Morrow County Courthouse, which was built in 1902. He told the subcommittee that there are no assembly areas for juries and that the court actually has jurors come in from the Bartholomew Building next door "through whatever weather it might be" to assemble a jury. "It's a tiny, tiny quaint courthouse. It simply needs to be replaced," he said.

"I'm not going to belabor the subject. We need two facilities, and really appreciate your support," Hill concluded.

"It's very important for our county that we get a new circuit court built," Sykes told the subcommittee. "Our courthouse is old. It's elegant and historical, but it is old."

Sykes mentioned issues such as no auditory or visual privacy and lack of security.

"All three commissioners voted unanimously to support this new court-

house. We have the funding, we've talked over our finances, we're ready to go on this. We have some sites picked out," said Sykes. "Now is the time to do it."

"The courthouse, as you've heard, it is beautiful," Nelson said in his address to the subcommittee. He recounted how residents of Heppner had stayed inside the courthouse during the town's recovery after the Heppner flood. "This courthouse is about the same as it was then."

Nelson said the courtroom is historic and reminds people of something in movie but that, while beautiful, it is "not workable for current jury trials." Some of the issues, he said, were technology and jury space.

"When there's a jury room right next to us, and we have the jury go out for attorneys to argue legal issues, the jurors can hear the courtroom," Nelson said. "We have to play a white noise or some country music or something in the jury room, and I'm not joking about that. That is true, to block out the sounds, so they can't hear us talk about things they're not supposed to hear."

"That is an issue for appeal. That is an issue for justice," said Nelson. "And these cases can get overturned."

Nelson ended by saying that the Morrow County Courthouse in Heppner worked well for its time, but not anymore.

"Times have changed, and now this courthouse must change," concluded Nelson. "We are ready. We just need that support."

Neighborhood Center bag sale Friday

The Neighborhood Center is having a bag sale on Friday, March 17, from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at 441 N Main Street, Heppner.

The first bag purchased is \$15, while a second bag is a discounted price of \$5. Bags can be filled with items for the entire family—clothing, shoes, books, games, music and movies. All other household merchandise is 50 percent off that day only.

Proceeds from the sale help fund the food pantry and other emergency assistance programs.

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