

911 system on line, but some callers aren't

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Post staff reporters

A throbbing hub of tension and activity, it's not.

You would expect the office where all 911 emergency calls come to be bustling with activity, punctuated with the sharp rings of telephone calls from people desperate for help.

But it's strangely quiet on the third floor of the offices of Cincinnati Police District One on Ezzard Charles Drive.

The phones don't ring; they whisper. The main sounds are little computer beeps and keyboard tapping. The cool blue lettering on the computer terminals glows in the dimly lit room.

In its first three weeks of operation, Cincinnati's 911 system is taking an average of 500 calls a day and the mechanics are working smoothly.

However, many callers haven't quite got the hang of using it.

Residents in Butler, Warren, Hamilton and Clermont counties in Ohio and Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties in Kentucky began using the three-digit emergency telephone number Aug. 17.

The system, more than 10 years in planning, is designed to speed service to residents during emergencies.

Even the backup system kicks in smoothly. When a malfunctioning circuit board took the system down for four hours one day last week, the

back-up system clicked right into place, routing calls automatically to the Hamilton County Communication Center.

"It was the first time the back-up system was tested in reality," said Assistant City Safety Director Dave Rager. "It worked just fine."

Eventually, the circuit board was replaced and calls were again routed to the Ezzard Charles Drive answering point.

Many people with emergencies are still calling the police department's seven-digit number when they could call 911, said Sgt. Joseph Atherton, of the Cincinnati telecommunications center. The number is still taking 700 to 800 calls a day, although calls to the

fire department's seven-digit number have fallen from about 200 a day to about 100.

That's not a problem as much as people who call and hang up. They're either testing the lines or think they do not have to give names and addresses to the operators.

When a caller dials 911 for help, the caller's address automatically appears on a computer screen at the emergency telephone center.

Dispatchers can then send equipment to help the caller, even if the caller is unable to give his address or the nature of the emergency.

"911 can be good for someone who absolutely cannot talk," said operator-dispatcher Diane Dennis. "We have

at least some information to go on. But if people can talk, they should stay on the phone because we need as much information as we ever did before 911."

Operators must call back anyone who calls and hangs up. If no one answers, a police car must be sent to the address. Most of the time, there is no emergency.

During one afternoon shift, Ms. Dennis received several hang-up calls within a two-hour period including one from a telephone booth that did not take incoming calls.

She had to send a police car to the booth.

However, Atherton said fewer people

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are testing the system now. "We're answering about 98 percent of our calls within four rings," he said. "People seem convinced now that it works."

"We get what we call civil calls and most of these deal with money where one person is mad because another person isn't paying money he owes him and wants to get police in-

involved," Ms. Dennis said.

"We also get a lot of funny calls, usually where someone uses the wrong word. One time, someone called about someone being armed. I asked, 'What are they armed with?' and they said a '.357 magnet.'"

The city's old emergency answering system came under attack for the number of calls being put on hold.