

An answer to calls for help

City's 911 system marks second year

BY WILLIAM A. WEATHERS
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On a recent fishing trip, Cincinnati Police Capt. Kenneth R. Schneider's young sons kidded him by singing the lyrics to the popular Public Enemy rap song decrying the 911 emergency response system.

But Schneider knows better. He is the commander of the police division's communications section who supervised the installation of the 911 system, which celebrates its second anniversary next month.

"It's a good system," he said last week. "It saves lives."

Schneider recalled an incident late last year when a woman's life would have been endangered if the communications center hadn't had the 911 system.

A call came into the communications center on the 911 line, but someone hung up without saying anything, he said. With the 911 system, a caller's telephone number and address automatically appear on the operator's computer screen. Following standard procedure, the operator called the number back to see if there was an emergency.

"A man answered and said there was no emergency, but the operator could hear a woman screaming in the background," said Schneider, 45, a 23-year veteran police officer.

The operator relayed the information to a police dispatcher who sent an officer to the scene. When the officer arrived he heard a woman screaming and broke down the door.

"The man had the woman in the bathtub holding her head under water," Schneider said. The officer rescued the woman.

"If it hadn't been for 911, we feel she would have drowned," he said. "With 911 we can verify your address."

System traces calls

With the 911 emergency phone system, the source of hang-ups and calls with no responses is immediately known.

"We have to call back," said Mary Wilkins, a 911 operator. "Someone has to answer the phone and let us know everything is all right. If not, we have to send someone."

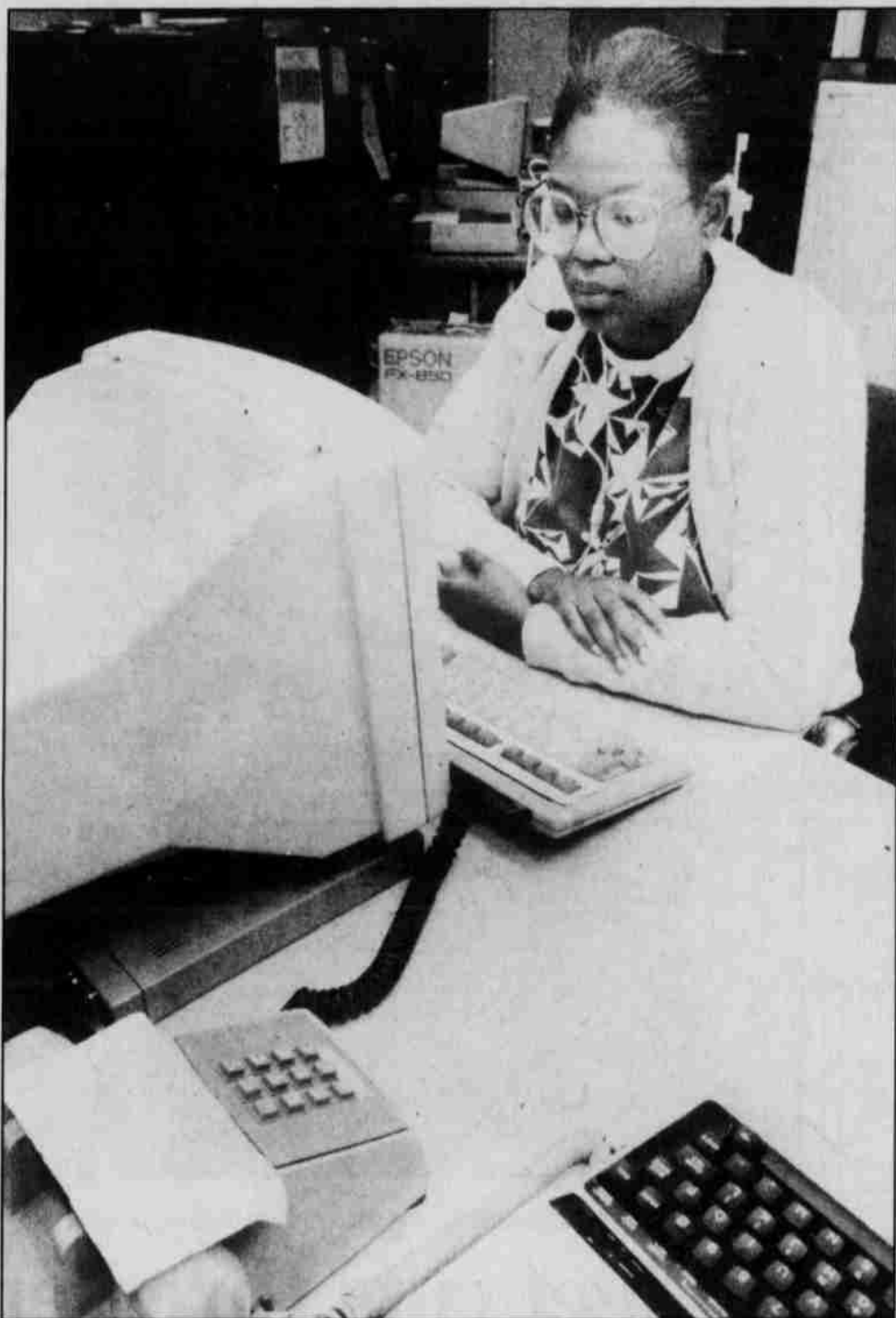
Last Thursday, 25 disconnect and eight silent calls had been received during a 24-hour period.

It takes a police officer an average of 42 minutes to respond to a run — whether legitimate or not — and complete the necessary paperwork.

"We always did get a lot of hang-ups (on emergency lines)," Schneider said. Before the 911 system, "there was no way we had of knowing what was going on. There was nothing we could do."

Before 911, operators were at times confronted with people on the line who were hysterical, had a speech impediment, had suffered a heart attack or stroke, or were deaf — none of whom could communicate an address, Schneider said. Deaf callers would try to tap out Morse Code.

The communications section now has a specially equipped telephone that allows deaf or mute persons who have a similar type phone to send and receive typed messages via the 911 emergency line, said Schneider.



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Mary Wilkins, left, and Deborah Heater staff the 911 phones.

911's first year

Cincinnati Police Division 911 System
Statistics for its first full year of operation.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Calls received..... | 196,962 |
| Silent calls dispatched..... | 1,313 |
| Disconnect calls dispatched..... | 8,806 |
| Other emergency calls..... | 221,238 |

During the 911 system's first year of operation from Aug. 15, 1988, to Aug. 13, 1989, only 47%, or 196,962 of all emergency calls came in on the 911 line. The other 221,238 emergency calls came in on the police or fire seven-digit numbers.

The communications center has been mandated by city council to answer 99% of the 911 calls within 20 seconds, Schneider said.

"We missed our mark," Schneider said of

the first year's average of 97.8%.

With its second year of operation almost at an end, the hiring of additional operators has helped increase that average to around 98.6%, he said.

911 sometimes misused

Unfortunately, Schneider said, the 911 system is so convenient and easy to use that many people dial the number for things other than emergencies.

"People dial 911 and ask for phone numbers," Wilkins said.

"We're the government after five o'clock," said Schneider. "If they don't like their tax assessment, they call us."

Other typical questions: Where to park for the ballgame and what time are the fireworks.

"We don't have time for those calls," Schneider said. "We're not rude. We tell them this is an emergency line. Check your directory."