

911 operators in their own crisis

Life-and-death calls, high stress, low pay take toll

BY LUCY MAY

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Seven seconds shy of 3:25 a.m. Tuesday a call comes into Cincinnati police communications.

"911. What is your emergency?"

The screaming voice of a woman is all the operator hears. "Oh pleeeeeease," she wails.

"Please hurry up, please - that's our friend down there!"

The operator gets a calmer woman on the phone. She gives him the address.

"They pistol-whipping somebody and robbing them in the hallway!" She gives him a name of the man with the gun - Pope - and a description. All in about three minutes.

Thanks to the operator, the police know whom they're looking for before they get to 3362 Reading Road. They find Pope. They chase him. Police say they struggled. Three officers shoot him to death.



For eight hours a day, sometimes without even a 15-minute break, Cincinnati's emergency 911 operators take calls when life is on the line. In the city of Cincinnati, that work pays less than tending flowers in city parks, collecting garbage or reading water meters.

"Imagine the stress - all you've got is what this person's telling you," Lt. Alan March said. "Everything you do is recorded. All they have to do is make a mistake, and that's what (Please see 911, Page A12)



Cincinnati Enquirer/Glenn Hartong
911 operator/dispatcher
Mark Henriques says you
have to love the job to stay.

911: High stress, low pay take toll

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they're playing on the news. We've had a lot of people listen to people get murdered."

Other jobs with "better hours and less accountability," as Lt. March put it, have left the city's police communications division short by 11 trained operators. That's a 26 percent vacancy rate.

100 calls a day

The number of vacancies in the 911 operation is far higher than the city's average of 2 percent to 3 percent, said Frank Spataro, the city's assistant director of human resources. City officials expect higher turnover in departments with such high stress and difficult hours, he said. Union leaders think higher pay would reduce that turnover.

The vacancies mean those who are left often take more than 100 calls during an eight-hour shift, said Lt. March, assistant director of the police communication section, which houses 911.

The combination of high stress, a short staff and low pay can create anxiety, anger and depression among the employees left doing the job, said Dr. Barbara Hensley, a licensed professional clinical counselor whose Cincinnati Trauma Connection in Clifton specializes in helping employees in high-stress workplaces.

Ultimately, she said, that can affect job performance.

For 911 operators and operator/dispatchers, job performance means saving lives of callers and not putting the lives of police officers in danger.

It's a job where any mistake - any split-second lapse in judgment or wrong decision or confusion - can lead to much bigger trouble.

In December 1997, two emergency 911 employees were at first blamed for a 47-minute lapse before anyone went to an apartment where two Cincinnati police officers had been shot. Labor arbitrators ruled the women deserved their jobs back.

But the deaths prompted rank-and-file officers to complain about putting their lives in the hands of primarily civilian 911 operators and dispatchers. Plus, the people who call 911 are often combative and hostile, employees say, raising tensions even higher.

The union that represents emergency 911 operators and dispatchers has recognized

that 911 employees are underpaid and has recommended a pay increase, said Yodie Mitchell, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1543. The union wants higher pay and a clergyman or, at least, a special place where 911 employees can go to decompress after a particularly stressful incident, she said.

"I would absolutely never minimize the importance of anyone else's job, but these guys are unique," Ms. Mitchell said. "Our guys don't get paid near what they're worth, and we're trying to do something about it."

Cincinnati's salary rates list an emergency 911 operator's salary range as \$29,169.13 to \$30,601.46 a year.

That compares to \$30,601.46 to \$33,122.01 a year for a florist in the city parks department and \$26,364.70 to \$31,792.91 a year for a water-meter reader.

Dorothea Suggs has been an emergency 911 operator for 11 years. The night hours served her well while her son was in high school and allowed her to work part time during the day to help put him through college.

But now she's looking for another job within the city. One that offers better hours and less stress.

"A clerk/typist III is a demotion, but it's only \$20 less a pay period," she said, and a lot less stress.

"Every call you're taking, you're making a decision. It's not like TV," Ms. Suggs said. "You're dealing with this person who's hollering at you and maybe even calling you names."

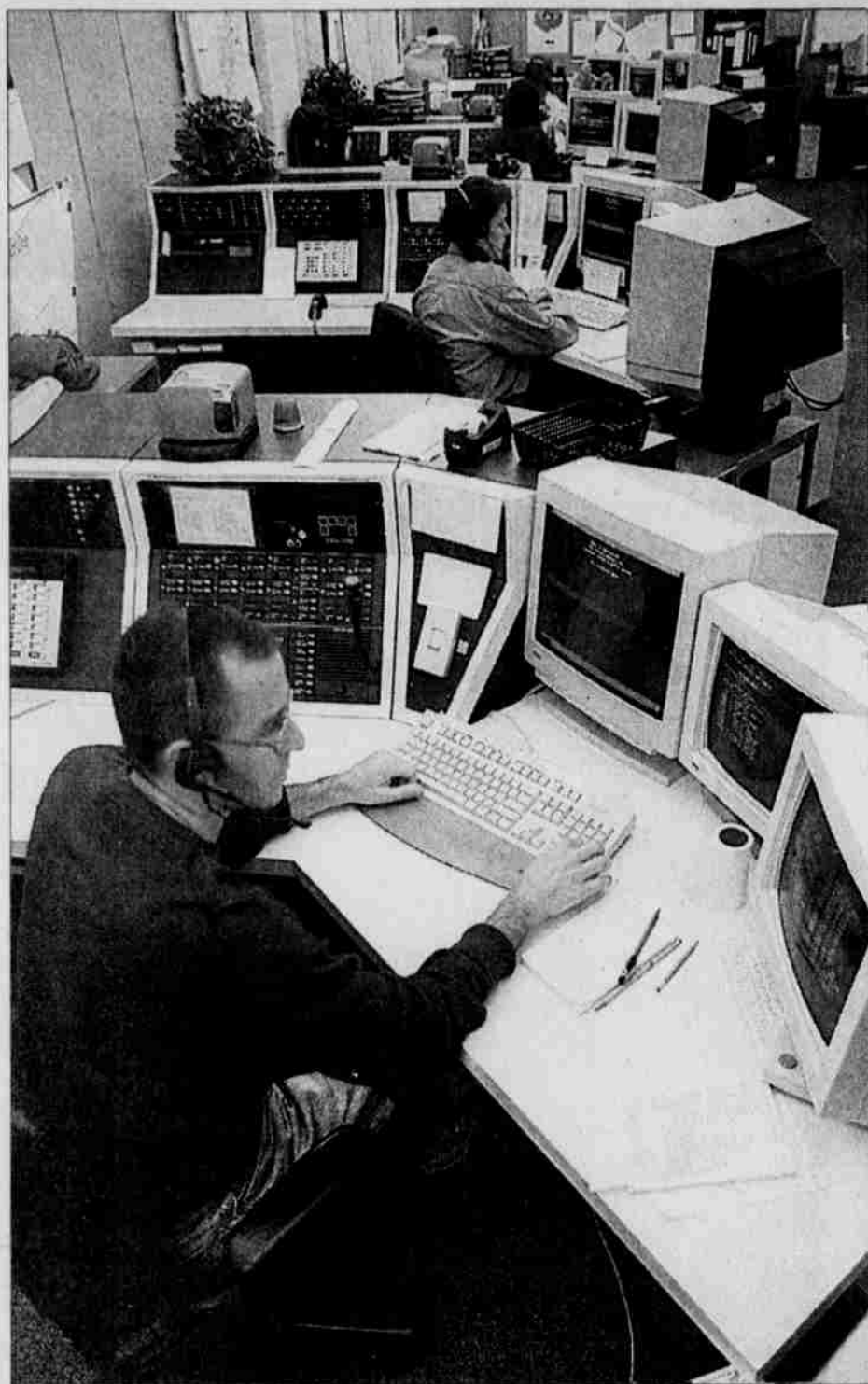
Pay lower outside city

The operator/dispatchers who dispatch police and fire earn considerably more than operators.

The city salary rates list those pay ranges as \$31,164.92 to \$35,167.27 a year for an assistant operator and dispatcher and \$36,526.47 to \$39,313.70 a year for operator/dispatchers. The city has five openings for those positions, Lt. March said.

When the 911 operator jobs were created, the city already had assistant operator/dispatchers and operator/dispatchers, and officials wanted to set a pay range that was in line with those other salaries, said the city's Mr. Spataro.

City officials never consid-



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Cincinnati 911 operator/dispatcher Mark Henriques, here talking to a District 5 police officer, said he has worked a whole shift with only 15 seconds between calls.

ered whether that would mean 911 operators would earn less than water-meter readers, sanitation-truck drivers or florists for city parks, he said.

The pay in Cincinnati is higher than what other local cities and counties pay.

In Covington, for example, 911 operators, who also are certified to dispatch, start at \$24,587.68 a year with pay topping out at \$34,534.76 a year. They also get holiday paychecks twice a year that range from \$1,329.55 to \$1,868.16.

In Hamilton County, the lowest-paid operator makes \$28,000 a year and the highest-paid earns \$35,800 a year.

Cities across the country have problems with high turnover in their 911 departments, said Randall Larson, editor of *9-1-1 Magazine* and a senior dispatcher for the San Jose, Calif., fire department.

"Most centers nationwide are understaffed," he said. "Where else is there a job where everything you say is recorded and could show up on the 6 o'clock news?"

Much like police work itself, the jobs require working late hours, weekends and holidays.

In Cincinnati, 911 operators and operator/dispatchers work six days in a row before getting two days off. After four weeks of those shifts, employees get two consecutive five-day weeks with three-day weekends. But with the department so short-staffed, it's nearly impossible to take vacations or comp time.

In Hamilton County, employees work four consecutive 8-hour shifts and get two days off.

A labor of love

Mark Henriques, an operator/dispatcher, filled in one recent night as a 911 operator. He checked after the shift, and for the first two hours, he never had more than 15 seconds between calls, he said. And some operators take even more than the 100 calls a shift that many operators average.

"One guy takes 160 to 180 calls in a shift," he said.

While union leaders are negotiating for higher pay for the staff, some who work in the

city's police communications aren't sure it would make a difference. Mr. Henriques said you have to love the work to stick it out.

"I just have always had an interest in police work," he said. "The day I'm not happy with the job is the day I leave - regardless of the pay."

Anne Gronefeld, an operator/dispatcher, said she doesn't think there are private-sector jobs that pay as well as hers.

"Tell me another job out there that - without a college degree - that makes \$40,000 a year," she said, adding that new hires act surprised that they have to work weekends and nights, even though they know that's part of the job when they take it.

Still, Mr. Henriques said, 911 operators are paid less and have jobs that can be even more stressful than a dispatcher's.

"I just pray the day never comes that something bad happens and you make that one mistake," he said. "I just go home every night and thank God if nobody gets hurt."