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911 EMERGENCY: CALL CENTERS CAN'T FIND WORKERS

Tight labor market has made it harder to recruit; 'We need a warm body'

By Sarah Krouse
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Cities across the U.S. are struggling to find 911 dispatchers as a historically tight labor market makes it harder to fill a job that was already a tough sell.

Dispatchers are a linchpin of the nation's emergency-response infrastructure. Their responses to 911 calls directly impact how quickly police, firefighters and other first responders are sent to help and whether they go to the right place.

They are also hard to hire, since the job can require workers to make snap judgments on life-or-death situations, often based on incomplete information, for about what they could make working as a manager at a retail store.

With the U.S. jobless rate currently at 3.9 percent, just above the 18-year low of 3.8 percent it reached in May, a daunting situation for emergency call centers has turned urgent.

"For a lot of them, the requirement is, 'We need a warm body'," said Christy Williams, director of 911 for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. The problem is exacerbated because many 911 centers are small and lack the resources to pay up for workers or training.

The Cowlitz County 911 Center in Washington is trying to hire six new dispatchers, said its director, Deanna Wells. In the meantime, the center's 16 current dispatchers are working more than 200 hours of overtime a month.

"There are a lot more options for people" because of the low unemployment rate, Ms. Wells said. For workers choosing between a job with fixed hours and weekends off that doesn't deal with trauma, "you know what they're gonna pick," she said.

Officials charged with staffing centers in several regions of the U.S. say they have struggled to hire 911 telephone operators as the unemployment rate has ticked down.

Emergency call-center jobs can be emotionally taxing. Callers are often in distress and sometimes still in the throes of a traumatic event. They can cry, yell at or grow frustrated with 911 center employees trying to gather information to help them dispatch first responders.

A 911 center operator may hear gunshots, callers being wounded or killed while they are on the phone, or be the first person to speak with someone who has found a deceased loved one. Some centers offer counseling with local religious leaders or trained therapists, but not all have those services.

Operators are “getting negative information all the time. The aura is kind of negative,” said Andrew Dziegielewski, emergency communications director for the Portland Regional Communications Center in Maine.

Portland regional 911 call-center employees, for example, have talked callers through three child births in the past three years. The area has a population of about 100,000 and receives more than 60,000 calls to 911 yearly.

Portland has struggled to hire both police and call-center employees in recent years and now offers applicants a \$10,000 bonus. The incentive, spread over two years, requires employees to commit to five years of service and has broadened the pool of applicants, Mr. Dziegielewski said

There are more than 95,000 emergency call takers in the U.S., according to the most recent Labor Department data. The mean hourly wage for those roles was \$20.20 as of May 2017, the most recent period available. By comparison, workers in other types of call centers made about \$18 an hour, including nonphone operators.

Emergency call-center telephone operators work nights, weekends and holidays in addition to weekdays, typically in shifts that can range from four to 12 hours. They play detective, trying to suss out where callers are located, the severity of a situation and the danger first responders may face. Worker turnover is high, 911 call-center managers say.

In centers that are short staffed, dispatchers may have to listen to multiple radios for police, fire and private ambulances simultaneously while maintaining a neutral tone of voice and clearly typing out notes for first responders.

Large emergency call centers tend to be better funded and can afford to hire experienced dispatchers and offer raises to woo them. At smaller centers, “many are paying minimum wage, so they’re competing with fast food and the mall,” said Ms. Williams of the Texas agency.

Some emergency call centers have instituted rolling shifts that change weekly or monthly to give all workers a chance to have some weekends off.

There aren’t a lot of obvious candidate pools. One option is the families of first responders, 911 center directors say.

Another is students. Some roles can be filled by high school graduates interested in becoming first responders. Emergency call centers typically require workers to be 18, while many police and fire departments often have a minimum age of 21.

The jobs typically require a high school diploma and typing skills. Applicants generally must pass a criminal-background check as well as a psychological exam. Many departments seek workers with customer service experience or law enforcement experience who know how to use telecommunications equipment, according to job postings.

Once hired, new dispatchers undergo several weeks or months of training, though there are no uniform nationwide standards. Few states have mandatory exams and the vast differences in resources between 911 centers can mean that the bulk of some new operators’ training comes from simply sitting beside longer-tenured colleagues.

"The great debate is the idea of some mandatory level of certification or training," said John Kelly, general counsel for the National Emergency Number Association, a 911 industry group.

In Cowlitz County, the new dispatcher-training program lasts about 10 months, but officials recently started a more-formal education program to bring new workers up to speed faster. None of the three most recent trainees made it through. One was let go and two quit because of the working hours, Ms. Wells said.