

North Shore News

The voice on the line

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Byline: Jane Seyd

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Illustrations: News Mike Wakefield / THE ability to type fast is one job requirement. But so are compassion, confidence and common sense.; News Mike Wakefield / 9-1-1 operators must be skilled multi-taskers, capable of getting key information and relaying it in seconds, while making critical decisions.; News Mike Wakefield / THE job of a complaint desk call-taker is part investigator, part researcher, part social worker and a lot of "spidey sense."; News Mike Wakefield / 9-1-1 operators have complex technology at their fingertips. But more than anything, they are a human voice of help in times of crisis.;

IT was a December night three years ago when the phone rang in the radio room after 3 a.m.

"I think there's somebody in the house upstairs," a terrified man whispered.

He had called 9-1-1 after being woken up by the sound of smashing glass.

"Can you hear footsteps?" the 9-1-1 operator asked. "Yes," the man whispered.

"Are you still hearing the noises?" she asked. "Yes, yes," he whispered.

Then his voice was changed. "Holy f**k. They're coming," he said.

A moment later there was shouting as the intruders entered the room, followed by muted sounds in the background. Minutes passed followed with only muffled voices, and the sounds of someone whimpering and crying.

"There are certain calls that never leave you," the operator told the judge last year when the tape was played in court.

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The 9-1-1 operators who work in the RCMP's radio room have all taken calls like that - from people who've been robbed or stabbed or beaten up. From people who are frightened.

"People don't call the police when they are in their moments of glory," says Michelle, a 9-1-1 operator working on "C Watch" on a recent Friday night. "They call when things are wrong."

Those who answer the calls have learned to take charge of conversations and extract key information in seconds: who, what, when, where - and weapons.

Of those, where is most important. "That's the first thing you want to know," says Gayle Hammer, manager of the telecommunications section. "If you lose the caller and you don't know where they are, the rest of the story doesn't matter because you can't find them."

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At 10 p.m. on this Friday night, 9-1-1 operator Natalie sits at the complaint call taker's desk, her face

lit up by three bright screens.

Nearby, another operator talks to a man who says a group of drunk teens are threatening his neighbour.

"What are they saying to him?" she asks. "Is he yelling at them? Have they damaged anything?"

An hour ago, there was a robbery of someone taking money from a bank machine in lower Lonsdale.

At the moment, it's surprisingly quiet. But that could easily change.

"Every time you pick up the phone you never know what's going to be on the other end," says Natalie. It could be quiet for an hour, "Then the phone rings and you have to go from zero to 60 in a second and a half."

"We're paid to be ready," she says.

When the serious calls come, "You don't get to do it twice."

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If police are the eyes and ears of the law on the street, the radio room is the nerve centre. Five people are working a regular 12 hour-shift here tonight from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. There are four regular watches, made up of four full-time operators plus a fifth casual dispatcher who works a shorter shift to cover breaks. North Vancouver has 16 full-time operators and as many casuals. All but two of them are women.

On this Friday night - often the busiest shift of the week - the room seems to hum expectantly. The women sit at their stations like plugged-in versions of the oracles.

The dispatchers here tonight come from varied backgrounds - Kristin, in her early 20s and the youngest operator here - tended bar while putting herself through university while Michelle used to work as a Telus operator. Some are single, some are married, several of them are mothers. Their time on the job ranges from five years to 20. But once they plug in, most stay.

On paper the requirements aren't onerous - operators must be able to type 40 words a minute. The first real hurdle is security clearance - a lengthy process that often takes months. At least 30 per cent of applicants don't pass. That's followed by six months of

on-the-job training on the complex databases.

But much of what makes a good operator is less easily defined. They have to make split-second decisions, sometimes based on very little information.

They learn to trust their gut, but never to assume. They have to own all of their decisions.

"You have to be able to justify everything you do and take responsibility for everything you do - or didn't do," says Kristin.

"I act as if everything could go completely sideways at any minute."

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A call comes in from a father, who has called to report that his son has missed his curfew by 12 minutes. "How old is he?" says Gail, the operator who takes the call. "Do you know where he is? Has he gone missing before?"

She pauses for a moment, listening.

"Does he have a cellphone? Have you called it? Why not?"

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Tonight, the operators are answering multiple emergency lines - which are patched through from EComm's 9-1-1 centre - plus the RCMP's non-emergency number. There's even one line for the number that used to be for emergencies - before 9-1-1 existed.

Most calls that come in on the emergency lines are not real emergencies - immediate threats to life or property.

On an average Friday night, there might be calls about 60 incidents. The majority are not urgent.

But "everybody has a different idea of what an emergency is," says Hammer. "When you're in the moment, it's an emergency to you although it may not be prioritized that way when it comes here."

There are couples having custody battles, drunk teens and noisy parties, people's cars that have been broken into. Parents who've lost control of their kids and want the police to sort it out. People who are delusional.

People call because their neighbours lit a bonfire. Or they want to get the number for Sears.

One person phoned because their french fry order was left out when they went through the McDonald's drive-thru.

"You've got to be prepared for weird," says Kristin. Often, people are surprised when their call doesn't get an instant response. Or the case isn't solved inside an hour, the way it is on TV.

"Everybody thinks they are a number 1 priority," says Michelle. "We have people phoning to report their dog's run away, and the only number they can think of is 9-1-1."

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A call comes in of a car driving in the wrong lane on the Dollarton Highway. Armed with a vague description, police catch up with the vehicle on Main Street near the bridge. The driver quickly fails a roadside screening test.

Another 9-1-1 call comes in as a hang-up. Michelle phones the number back and gets an evasive teen on the other end. She asks

if they've been drinking, where he is, if there are any adults in the house. The teen's story keeps changing. An officer is dispatched to check things out.

"You know when you're getting snowed," she says. "I tend to break out the mom voice quite often."

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Abandoned 9-1-1 calls - like the one that just came in from the teenager - are a huge problem for police. Since cellphones with emergency buttons went into wide use, 9-1-1 hang-ups regularly make up between 30 and 50 per cent of all emergency calls.

"I know you're 13 and world revolves around you, but don't sleep with your phone under your pillow," says Natalie.

When someone hangs up on a 9-1-1 call, operators have to call back and make contact. If they can't reach the person, or something just doesn't feel right, a police officer is sent to investigate. A person who says they're fine might be fine. But they also might say they're fine because they have a gun pointed at them.

It's up to the 9-1-1 operators to make that judgment call.

When people phone to 9-1-1 on a land line, an address and associated name automatically pops up on a computer screen in front of the operator. While she's on the line, an operator can then quickly plug that name and address into the Canadian Police Information Centre - which tracks any past history with police or the law. With a cellphone, all an operator will get is the phone number and closest cell tower. If the phone is turned on, it's possible to "ping" the phone and get a GPS reading. But "it's not all that accurate," says Natalie.

Most of the call-takers have had 9-1-1 hang ups that turned out to be serious. In one case where Kristin couldn't make contact, officers discovered a home invasion in progress. "I've had full-blown domestics, with kids stuck in the middle of it," she says.

9-1-1 operators rely a lot on intuition - really an advanced kind of listening.

"I call it my spidey sense," says Michelle. "Every one of us has that ability. You know when something's not right"

It's often just a slight inflection in a voice.

"You really learn how to listen between the layers of what someone's saying and pick it apart," says Kristin. "I had a call one time from a guy and he was telling me he didn't have any weapons on him but just the way he was talking I knew he was getting more and more aggressive. I started asking him things. He actually had a concealed knife on him and he was planning on using it."

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Across the room, Gail is on the phone to a woman who's having a dispute with her ex-husband in North Vancouver. She wants the police to go and get her daughter.

"You can't call in a domestic in progress if you're not in the same municipality," Gail tells her. She tells the woman she'll have to work out her differences with her ex in court.

On the other end of the line, the woman keeps talking.

"If your daughter calls and says come and pick me up I would go and pick her up," she says. "It's 10 to 11. I'd get in the car and start driving if I was you."

Kristin runs his name on the computer. "The ex-husband, he's got some stuff."

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You have to have a thick skin to be a 9-1-1 operator. "We get sworn at on a daily basis. We get yelled at and cursed at," says Michelle.

"They're not calling to share some joy with you," she says, noting wryly, "My vocabulary has expanded, working in this environment."

"But when you pick up the next call, it's a brand new call," she says. "You can't treat that next person like the person was treating you before."

They have all had calls that stayed with them - calls from elderly people in distress or from children who called because one parent was attacking the other.

Years ago, when she worked as a 9-1-1 operator on Vancouver Island, "I was once on the phone for six hours with a guy who was sitting in his living room with a shotgun and threatening to shoot kids at the school across the street," says Hammer. "I finally got him to put his gun down and come out of the house."

After a call like that, you feel, "absolutely wrecked. Like you've been run over by a truck," she says.

In her first year on the job, when she was 19, Kristin

got a call from a mother who'd walked in and found her child dead. "The hair on the back of my neck stood up," she says. "Her voice reached octaves I didn't know existed."

All call-takers have access to post-traumatic stress debriefing as well as further counselling if they need it. It's a job where people learn a lot about themselves.

"You learn how you cope with stress, how you cope with emotions," says Kristin.

They learn that a crisis isn't always what it seems. Once, when she was working up north, Natalie took a call from a woman who was bound and gagged. "She had a cloth in her mouth and I could barely understand her." It was in a rural area, and it took about half an hour for the police to reach the woman while Natalie stayed on the phone with her.

However, "It turns out she did it to herself," said Natalie. "It was part of getting back at somebody over a drug deal. . . . To hear that she'd set that up, it was kind of a slap in the face."

Sometimes, you need to feel sad, says Kristin. "Then you need to go and live your life and not be affected by someone else's pain."

In their off time, they do yoga, or kickboxing. The dispatchers also talk to each other a lot. There is plenty of dark humour.

"I don't like the word tough," says Kristin. "I like the word strong."

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A call comes in from transit security. A woman is setting up camp in the bus loop and refuses to leave.

A man calls on the nonemergency line, wondering when he can get his TV back. That's not uncommon, says Michelle. "We have people phoning at three in the morning, asking if they can talk to a police officer."

A message comes back from the officer who went to talk to the teen about hanging up on 9-1-1. "They say they're sorry about how they acted on the phone."

"Sometimes people will call back to thank us," says Natalie. "Very infrequently."

A call comes in on 9-1-1. A woman tells the operator her roommate is "going nuts." She's in the bedroom. He's in the living room. Both of them have been drinking. An officer is quickly dispatched while operators run both names over CPIC. There's a history of mental illness.

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The operator who sits in the dispatch desk is in charge of sending out police officers. Tonight there are 14 officers working, some in general duty, others in specific sections. Police cars show up on a map,

generated by GPS, colour-coded to show if they are actively dealing with a call and how serious it is.

Another screen shows a list of officers' names with brief notes on what they're doing.

It's the dispatcher's job to juggle competing demands on their time and to ensure police officers' safety.

When police go to check a situation or pull over a car, the dispatcher sets a timer. When the timer goes off, the dispatcher checks in over the radio.

All officers have a panic buttons, both on their belt and in their cars. "If they hit that it lights up the whole screen red and the air opens up for eight seconds," says Natalie. "If they have been attacked or whatever, they have eight seconds to scream out where they are. That is the highest priority.

"There have been times when an officer hits that button and there's just been dead air," she says. "It's a horrible sinking feeling. Even if we know where they are and it's a minute (to get there), it's a long minute."

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It's after midnight now and several police officers have set up near local bars. There's a domestic call, with yelling and sounds like things being thrown.

Another call comes in from a woman who sounds confused. She says she's at her house but she doesn't know the address. She tells the operator people are yelling. But there are no sounds of yelling in the background. After a minute, the woman says she's fine. But she doesn't sound fine. Her voice is still shaky.

Kristin decides to send an officer to check on her.

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There's a lot of social service work involved in the job. There are "regulars" who call, sometimes many times a night. Most have mental health problems, which make up a large percentage of files in North Vancouver.

They take many calls from people who say they're suicidal.

Whenever that happens, "I try to get them talking," says Michelle. "As long as they're talking, there's hope."

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Another call comes in. "Do I want to shoot some coyotes?" Natalie asks. "No I'm an animal lover. We live on the side of three mountains. It's part of the beauty," she tells the caller. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

It's now approaching witching hour. "Around 2 o'clock it sometimes hits the fan," says Kristin.

Sure enough, around 2: 20, the 9-1-1 lines start to

light up. There's a call from a woman whose ex-boyfriend is pounding on her back door. A man who calls to report a brawl outside a house party. People are throwing bricks at each other, he says.

A taxi driver calls about a woman who's passed out in his cab.

Another call comes in from a woman who's in Europe. She was supposed to phone her brother and wake him up so he'd catch his flight, but he isn't answering, she says.

A breathless caller says a sports car has just reversed the length of the Second Narrows at 100 kilometres an hour, narrowly missing her. "There's a road block," she says, "I think he saw it."

There's a low crackle in the air as fingers fly over the keyboards and police codes are relayed.

When the burst of activity dies down, operators have handled 11 files in less than an hour.

Usually towards morning - after 4 a.m. - it gets quieter. But if something happens, the people in this room are ready. Much of the job comes down to common sense, they say.

Their tasks are complex, but also profoundly human.

"I hear you," they say when they answer that call. "I will help you."

"You form an attachment," says Michelle. "When you're on the phone with somebody who's in their moment of crisis, whether it's for a minute or 10 minutes or half an hour."

They don't usually give out their names to callers. But there have been times when she has.

"I don't think any one of us would be in this room if we weren't caring people. You are reaching out to them, to give them a little bit of hope when they're calling you in their darkest moment."

jseyd@nsnews.com