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## Dispatchers recognized

Appreciation week draws attention to invaluable workers



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Toni Grove and Tesmond Hurd sit in front of their computer monitors on Thursday afternoon, making small talk with the occasional addition of work information. The second they hear the tone, though, they turn their attention to the police officer or emergency call coming in.

Last week, dispatcher appreciation week recognized the people answering 911 emergency calls. They're the ones who make sure first responders get to the scene quickly and the ones vicariously holding the caller's hand until help arrives.

Both Hurd and Grove are 23 years old and seem to have fallen into their work as dispatchers. Hurd was a volunteer firefighter who needed a job when he was 18 years old. Grove had dreamed of being in law enforcement since middle school and figured dispatch was a foot in the door for that. However, she may have found her calling in a different area of law enforcement.

"I like this side of things," Grove said, indicating the computer monitors.

She said she likes being able to direct people to safety and the sense of accomplishment that being a dispatcher brings.

Hurd said he didn't really know what being a dispatcher entailed when he began working at the call center. However, he was familiar with the codes dispatchers used, which helped him settle into the job.

Both dispatchers said their training was "cut short" because they were able to get a grasp of the job more quickly than the usual six months.

Dispatchers are required to go to the police academy for initial training and learn the laws, with more hands-on training with dispatchers locally, Grove said.

"I loved the academy," she said. "I have previous military experience, which was helpful. They teach you a lot in the academy."

Hurd said a dispatcher needs to be disciplined, meticulous, organized and be able to multi-task.

Grove said being a dispatcher is a huge responsibility. Not doing the job properly could mean someone's life. The job isn't for the faint of heart.

"It's mentally exhausting," Hurd said.

There are currently eight dispatchers in Union County, including three supervisors and one trainee who is not officially on staff yet. A full staff is 10 people. They've been short staffed since 2015, and they're feeling it.

Grove said she had more than 20 hours of overtime last week, which isn't unusual nowadays.

Lola Lathrop, a dispatch supervisor, said being a dispatcher requires sacrifice and intelligence.

“There’s so much they have to learn,” Lathrop said. “It’s amazing what you can do when you’re up against the wall.”

Grove said when she was training, the dispatcher put her in front of the computers and had her answer the calls. She said that’s how she prefers to learn — by being thrown into the deep end.

Hurd and Grove said they tag team emergency calls when there’s just one call going on. One will be talking to the caller while the other dispatcher talks to law enforcement and medical responders to get them to the scene.

When there are multiple emergency calls, the dispatchers speak to the caller and communicate with law enforcement themselves.

The busiest calls are when there is a structure fire or accident. They’re dispatching multiple agencies, while taking calls from those reporting the emergency.

Grove said she was on shift when the Quail Run Motel fire was happening. That emergency lasted for hours, and she said she was exhausted by the time it was over.

“You’re making dozens of phone calls,” she said.

Last week, the dispatchers received flowers, candy, coffee mugs and words of appreciation and encouragement for the great work they do.

La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey and Lt. Gary Bell wrote a letter of commendation to the staff to praise them for their hard work.

“It is your responsibility to identify the nature of calls as quickly as possible and assist the caller in solving a problem,” Bell wrote in the letter. “You are the critical link between the citizen and the first responders, as you are responsible for obtaining the information

from the caller and transferring that information to our police officers, firefighters and EMS personnel. Your objectives are straightforward and clear, but they are not easy to accomplish.”

Bell wrote that their service to La Grande and the county is “absolutely incredible.”

Grove and Hurd are a bit more humble about what they do.

At the end of the day, they’re proud that they can help somebody get through their emergency.

“Nine times out of 10, they’ll say ‘thank you,’” Hurd said, “even if they didn’t get the answer they were looking for.”

It’s a fast-paced job that requires a lot of the dispatchers, and they’re happy to be there to do it.

“You never know when the phone rings what you’re going to get,” Hurd said.

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