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### Lack of dispatchers creates dire situation



Despite the heavy workloads, Hurd said the camaraderie promoted within the local law enforcement departments is a highlight of the dispatcher job (Cherise Kaechele)



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For Union County 911 dispatcher Cassie Heine, it's all about the personal touch.

“I don't act like a robot,” she said. “I'm a person, just trying to help another person. And I think it's really important to just be yourself and be human.”

But being able to devote the time to comfort emergency callers, as well as time off to rest, has been in short supply for Heine and her coworkers.

Fellow dispatcher Tesmond Hurd gave an example of what he and his fellow dispatchers have been through, recalling Heine's recent stretch of working 12 days in a row.

During one of those long days, Heine recalls falling asleep during a lunch break, armed with just a coat to lay on. Hurd, who was on shift with her, said he couldn't believe she fell asleep.

“I couldn't believe I slept either,” Heine said. “I was so exhausted.”

It's a situation all of the dispatchers can relate to.

During January's La Grande City Council retreat, La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey characterized the staff situation for dispatch as nearing borderline "crisis mode."

He said dispatch is budgeted for 10 positions, not counting the communications manager, Lola Lathrop. Dispatch now has eight workers, but one is still in training. Harvey said in-house training usually takes about a year, and during that time, a trainee is typically never alone.

"Theoretically, seven dispatchers (are) doing the work of 10 right now," Harvey said.

The dispatch, which is a La Grande Police Department entity, provides services for 21 different agencies.

"We literally dispatch for everybody in Union County except for Oregon State Police and (Oregon Department of Transportation)," Heine said. "That means police, medical, fire — everything."

Harvey said the dilemma began when an officer position came open in September 2015 and a dispatcher filled that vacancy. But the dispatcher position hasn't been filled. The stressful nature of the job in dealing with emergency situations made completing training and testing extremely difficult, Harvey said. Drawing in people even to attempt training has been no picnic, either, despite offering competitive pay.

"Recruiting efforts have been challenging (since 2015)," he said.

The result is the round-the-clock, 365-days-a-year dispatch operation has felt a significant impact. During this rough winter, Lathrop, dispatch supervisors and the dispatchers have all had to band together to cover when coworkers were sick, on vacation, or could not make it due to heavy snow or roads being closed.

Harvey said the goal is to always have two dispatchers on shift at all times, but shortage has led to instances when dispatch is down to one worker. He said there hasn't been instances of emergency personnel responding significantly late, but it puts a strain on dispatchers during times of high call volume and has led to fatigue.

"It's a very challenging, stressful job to begin with," Harvey said. "Then when we start having overtime from trying to fill gaps — and that's ongoing for a year plus — there's not a lot of relief there."

Heine said typical shifts are 10 hours, but there have been a lot of 12-hour shifts. She said there are slow days, but those are few and far between.

"You just never know when that call's going to come in, so you have to be mentally prepared," Heine said.

Daily paperwork and taking calls that aren't emergencies add to the responsibilities. Inside the dispatch room, computers and phones connected to agencies dispatch services are everywhere.

"We're not just sitting in a tiny cubicle like you see in TV shows," Hurd said.

The workload keeps dispatchers answering phones, monitoring responders on computers, monitoring surveillance and jail cameras, inputting information while the other dispatcher is listening to the call and coordinating with the agencies, from the time they clock in until they go home.

Heine said a downside to the low workforce is they don't get to give the customer service the dispatchers would like to.

"We can't spend as much time with somebody and hear them out. A lot of the time, that's what people want — to be heard," she said. "Instead, it's get the information, 'I'll let an officer know, thank you.' It makes you feel like you haven't done your job in a way."

Harvey, who praised the selfless nature of the dispatchers, said traits he looks for include integrity, good communication skills in stressful situations, functioning alone or as a team, basic understanding of technology and being compassionate yet assertive.

Despite the heavy workloads, Heine and Hurd said the camaraderie promoted within the local law enforcement departments is a highlight of the job. Both said they relish the adrenaline and making an impact on someone's day.

"I come here everyday because I like to help people and make a difference in people's day," Hurd said. "This is the first point of contact for whatever type of thing is going wrong. As bad as it sounds, someone's worst day is the time we get to step in and try to make it a just a little better."