



HIGHLANDS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Sheriff Paul Blackman

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Dispatch center looking for heroes

SEBRING -- They can save a life with just their voice.

They are on the other end of the phone 24 hours a day, 365 days a year when you call for help. They can help you do everything from getting your neighbors to turn down their loud music to calmly talking you through the steps needed to save someone's life.

They are, without a doubt, the most important people you will likely never meet. And they are looking for people to join their ranks.

The role of dispatcher in the Consolidated Dispatch Center is not for everybody. It takes a certain kind of person to fill that seat. Those that have what it takes, however, would be hard pressed to find a more rewarding job.

"It's more of a calling than anything else," said Capt. J.P. Fane, who oversees the center and is trying to fill five vacant positions. "They are people looking for a place where they get the satisfaction of helping somebody else. They do that all day, every day, from small things up to literally saving someone's life."

The main skill a dispatcher must have is the ability to stay calm under pressure. Many of the calls they take are from people literally in the worst moments of their life.

"No matter what the call, they can't panic," Fane said.



They also have to be master multi-taskers. Each dispatcher's workstation has five computer monitors -- two hooked up to the 911 system, two that have the Computer Aided Dispatch screens and another that monitors the status of the radio network.

"It is a highly stressful job," Fane said. "A lot of people get scared away when they hear what the job is and what it pays, but the ones that truly care stick it out."

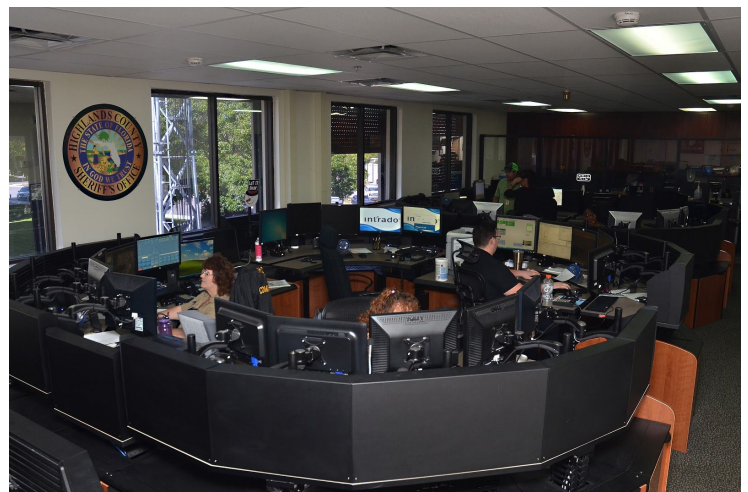
Many of the dispatchers have stuck it out for a long time. A typical shift has several people with more than 10 years on the job. Nobody has been there longer than Rhonda Brockwell, who has 32 years of service.

"You have your ups and downs, but it makes you feel good to be able to help people," Brockwell said. "You get a high because you helped them. You never know when you pick up that phone; it could be a call about a dying baby or a barking dog.

You have to stay calm, she said. When the crisis is over you can walk outside and lose it. But then you have to pull it together and come back to work.

Brockwell said the most memorable calls are the ones where a dispatcher helps save a life, particularly if it is the life of a child. She immediately tears up -- more than 15 years later -- when thinking about a call where she talked the parents of a baby who nearly drowned through doing CPR. The child fully recovered, and she got to meet him later.

That closure is one of the things the new administration under Sheriff Paul Blackman is trying to improve.



"You make a connection with some of the callers but sometimes never get a resolution," said Heather Carr, dispatch director. Carr said deputies and law enforcement supervisors are now encouraged to let the dispatchers know how a call turned out.

As the county grows, so does the amount of calls to the dispatch center. Fane he has five vacant positions to be filled, and is hoping to get some people to come in and see if they have what it takes.

There is a lot of training and some certification involved, and there is a plan in place for new hires to start out as call takers to ease the load on dispatchers who are working the radio. That position will be used as a training ground for new employees with the goal for them to move up to the role of regular dispatcher.

The job comes with full benefits, including the Florida Retirement System, health/dental/vision/life insurance and paid holidays, vacation and sick leave. If you would like to find out more about starting a career in a fast-paced, rewarding position, call Carr at 863-402-7286.