Season 2 Episode 8

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April 10 - 16th 2022 is National Public Safety Telecommunicators week and is held annually during the second week of April to honor telecommunications personnel for their commitment, service, and sacrifice. I can speak firsthand as to the importance of our 911 dispatchers. While being robbed and abducted, a customer quickly became in need of medical attention. While trying not to panic, the 911 Operator asked me questions to better understand the situation I was dealing with. She guided me through steps to assist the lady, all the while keeping me calm and in control.

Imagine being blind to a situation and still creating a positive outcome. The 911 operator is a behind the scenes hero, and I am forever grateful. Today I am honored to feature Lieutenant Heather Hall. Lieutenant Hall is with the Kaufman County Sheriff's Office in Kaufman, Texas. She has been employed as a 911 telecommunicator for 20 years, and has worked as a dispatcher, call taker, trainer, shift supervisor, and most recently has been promoted to the position of Lieutenant, overseeing the dispatch center. She was raised in a blue family with her dad and stepdad both being police officers for 40 years. Her mother worked as a 911 dispatcher. Serving the public and officer safety were always part of her childhood and she has spent most of her adult life ensuring that both occur to the best of her ability.

In your office who handles the 911 calls?

Lieutenant Hall

We have several people that work admin phones, 911 phones, and radios. In our center everyone is cross trained to do all the jobs. They rotate positions throughout the day. Radios is a lot to handle with all the radio traffic, and then 911 calls can be overwhelming so rotating stations gives them a bit of a break from each position.

Jen

How many calls does your center take a day?

Lieutenant Hall

350-400 calls. Our county has been growing fast which resulted in more needs of the citizens for services by the sheriff's office. Our call volume has skyrocketed, especially this this last year.

Jen

When did you realize you wanted to be a 911 dispatcher?

Lieutenant Hall

I needed a job. I was young. My mom was a dispatcher and I thought, “Well, Mom, how hard can it be?” This is now a running joke in our family because I came in having absolutely no idea what a 911 dispatcher did and assumed my mom talked on the phone all day. When I started, I quickly found out how awesome my mom truly was. It's been that way ever since.

Jen

When I watch movies, I envision a room with several dispatchers, lots of apprehension, a sense of urgency. If I were to walk into your office, would that be what I would see?

Lieutenant Hall

It would certainly depend on what time of day it was. The 911 center can absolutely be chaotic, fast paced, and stressful and then the next minute, it will be slow. Here, we have 6 operators on duty with a supervisor assigned to each shift. When you walk into the center you see large TV screens on the walls that monitor different camera systems. Every station has 5 computer monitors. The dispatcher answers several phones, and it looks, to someone who's never worked in dispatch before, it looks awesome. But it's not like CSI. There are no screens on the walls that we can swipe. I do enjoy watching the crime shows and thinking, “Oh, if only we did that.”

Jen

Can you share what your day-to-day duties are?

Lieutenant Hall

Every day you come to work some things will be the same and many things will be different. Every day, we take street calls, we take civil issues, we take domestic disturbances, but the situations based around those calls are going to be different. You pick up the phone not knowing what you're going to get.

For the thrill seekers and the adrenaline junkies, this is the perfect job. Your trained, but every time you pick up the phone, you're never sure what you're going to get on the other end. Then you have dispatch who are responsible for dispatching officers and sending them to high priority calls. You’re responsible for their safety, making sure you know their location, making sure you check on them and provide cover units when necessary. The other part of dispatch is fire dispatching. We dispatched for 13 different fire departments here in our agency.

Jen

Wow! That is a lot of responsibility. Are you fully staffed?

Lieutenant Hall

No, we are hiring. It's kind of a joke in the dispatch world; if you are fully staffed, it is only ever for a day. There are probably no agencies in the state of Texas that are fully staffed. It's just a hard job to keep staffed. Burnout is at about 7 years. So, at about 7 years, we start losing some people. This is assuming they make it through the rigorous training process.

Jen

Tell us about the training process.

Lieutenant Hall

There are many things to learn in this profession. In Texas, they must be licensed through the state, by going through basic training and taking a state test. They must be trained to work the state database which inputs things into the state and national computer database, such as wanted persons and stolen items. Then they must learn to call take. They must learn to radio. Like I said, when I walked in, even with a family of law enforcement, I had no idea what 911 was. So when we get people in here who have no idea what a 911 dispatcher does, they can be easily overwhelmed and have an unrealistic expectation.

Jen

What percentage of people conquer the training process?

Lieutenant Hall

We have done some different things to ensure our training rates are high. We probably have about a 90% pass rate in our training program. We do pre-employment testing which means to interview for the job, they have to pass a test which scores their basic skills with computers, multitasking, map reading, etc which are skills ultimately required for the job.

Jen

What is the essential skill needed?

Lieutenant Hall

There are several essential skills needed; the ability to remain calm under pressure is probably number 1. In that moment, you must be able to keep it together. Second it the ability to not take things home with you. It is a personal trait you must have, to be successful in this job. Unfortunately, the older we get, the harder it seems. You’re facing your own mortality, and life brings along a spouse and children. Because of life experiences, I feel like I relate to this emergency and think, oh, that could happen to me. A 21-year-old, I think, deals with things a little better than I do at 42.

Jen

We don't think about the 911 dispatchers, and what it's like for them to take this phone call. The dispatcher is being described what the victim sees, no matter how horrific it is. How does someone process what they hear?

Lieutenant Hall

We offer debriefing and counseling. Sometimes, after an incident and always after a major incident which is emotionally affecting the dispatcher, we'll bring someone in and have them talk to them. Many times, the counseling doesn’t occur the same day. It may not even be that week or month, but several months down the road. It's the culmination of everything that has occurred and then it triggers the dispatcher.

**I was excited to do this podcast because there is so many people don't understand about what 911 is, and how amazing the men and women are. They sit in a room and listen to everyone's worst day. They trying to provide some sort of comfort and help when they're really in a helpless situation. They're on a phone, there's nothing physically they can do to help the caller other than being present. If a situation or a call goes badly, the dispatchers left with those voices. I think it's important for people to realize just what incredible people work in this field.**

Jen

I think what you said is amazing. The 911 Dispatch is left with voices. We think about our law enforcement when they go to a scene, what they see, and how they process that. I never thought about what it's like to be left with a voice and perhaps never knowing the outcome of a situation. Does the law enforcement officer communicate back with the 911 dispatcher?

Lieutenant Hall

Sometimes we can follow up with the officer to inquire about the outcome, but most of the time, there is no result for the dispatcher. You must remember, there’s another call coming. When you hang up the phone, there's going to be another one coming. You must keep moving on with your day.

Jen

How do you address a panicking caller?

Lieutenant Hall

You try to remain calm, a calming voice. If you speak calmly, it tries to get them to mimic what you're doing. Then redirect by asking a question. Asking a question creates a distraction causing you to stop and think. “What’s your phone number?” “What’s your address?” Asking questions which are beneficial to us, are also beneficial to them because it allows them time to compose themselves.

Jen

What is the most common call you receive?

Lieutenant Hall

We take many domestic disturbances; stray dog calls, reckless driving and we take cows out. Probably my least favorite call is cows out.

Jen

When you say “cows out” you mean the animal is loose?

Lieutenant Hall

Cows on the highway are very dangerous. It is the county's responsible to pick up livestock that are loose. We probably get cows out calls, seven or eight times a day. The law enforcement officer goes out there and tries to determine if they can locate the cow and determine if they know where the owner is located. If not, we must have a hauler come out in, pick it up and get it off the roadway.

Jen

Can you share an example of a time when you had to complete multiple tasks under pressure?

Lieutenant Hall

Yes, I once was working a foot pursuit on one radio, and a vehicle pursuit on another radio. This was years ago when we were a 3-man operation. It was extremely stressful but trying to work 2 different pursuits, by 2 different officers, in 2 different locations was multitasking at my finest.

Jen

What strategy do you use when you are under intense pressure?

Lieutenant Hall

I don't know what strategy I have. I didn't realize I was a thrill seeker because I don't like roller coasters, but I love the adrenaline of a busy day. Working both of those channels quickly and efficiently makes you feel good when it's over because everybody's safe and you know you have accomplished your task. You can sit back and say, “Wow, I did that.”

Jen

What call do you remember the most?

Lieutenant Hall

There was a call for a structure fire. We stayed on the line with the caller, who was unable to get out of the residence. It has been one of the most traumatic calls that I have ever been a part of. And it will forever have changed me.

Jen

This is a part of what it’s like to be a 911 dispatcher.

Lieutenant Hall

It is, and when I talk about “you're left with the voices,” it's never the happy voices you're left with.

Jen

Did you seek therapy to work through that?

Lieutenant Hall

I did. I had to seek therapy for several months, and for me, I still struggle. I laugh because I came home with about 15 smoke detectors and had my husband put them up in every free space of our house. He was like, “um?” I was like, “I just need you to do it for me.”

Jen

That makes sense. I think you reevaluate what makes you feel safe.

Lieutenant Hall

Yes. The one negative to this job is it changes your mindset so much. It's not always for the best, you become very cynical. You believe you see danger everywhere. They say we only deal with 7% of the population in this field. When all you hear day to day is people in distress, it's feels like it's 100% of the population. No one calls you because they're having a good day. Everything we take is negative or bad, so we see danger and crime everywhere we look.

Jen

I heard you mentioned your husband. What is it like for a spouse?

Lieutenant Hall

He's very supportive because he's not from this world. I call it our world, the police world. I have found there are only certain things I can share with him because he can't deal, even when I'm upset. Most of the calls I've dealt with and processed before. If I've had a hard call and I come home and need someone to cry to, sometimes it emotionally affects him. There was a TV series we were watching about 911 dispatchers, and it was a true-life account. He became very emotional and said, “I just can't believe you do this all day.”

He is interested in the exciting things which happen. He's like, “Oh, I hear police cars, what's going on?” I was like, “I don't know, I'm off. I don't care.” He gets excited about that, but the traumatic emotional things, I try to keep him from. That way one of us can have a more normal life.

Jen

Has there been times where you felt, I can't do this anymore. Or maybe even your husband as a spouse is like, “Babe, I don't want you to do this anymore.”

Lieutenant Hall

There have been those times where I think I just can't do this anymore. In fact, many times I’ve said, I am too old for this. Sometimes you lose your happy, overwhelmed with all the negative going on in the world and you lose sight of things which make you happy. Then without fail, there's the next phone call which comes in and, because of you, that person has a better outcome. That’s what keeps us here. I want a roomful of people who want to come in every day and do nothing but make someone else's day better. Those are the kind of people you want to sit in a chair and answer a phone. It's amazing what one person can do with their voice.

Jen

I guess that's why I have a podcast; it’s the voice, right? Via audio you can hear the emotions and words people choose to share their story. When you witness one of your dispatchers having a hard time after a phone call, how do you help them in that moment?

Lieutenant Hall

We take them out of the moment. We provide them some space because sometimes they need to get out. We try to comfort them and let them talk. They need to be heard too as they’ve just spent the last 30 minutes listening to someone else talk and they need the opportunity to be heard. We offer counseling services if they want to talk to someone professionally.

I am excited to do this podcast because I want there to be a realization of our every day. These people walk in, sit down, and have a thankless job. They never get credit for the work they do. We're a team and it takes everyone to make everyone safe. Dispatchers are true first responders. They are the first person who picks up the phone when it rings. They're the ones that without them, no other services are coming. If it wasn't for the dispatcher on the other end of the phone, the ambulance, the fire department, the police officer, that help is not coming.

They truly are the first responders, and they do a job which is incredibly difficult. Imagine taking a call and listening to someone die. Those are things you don't forget. Those are things which most people don't ever experience. The officers in route to the call are getting there after the fact. It's the dispatcher who has listened and witnessed someone's final minutes and then the dispatcher must do home.

Or they have the lost child and the screaming mom who cannot be consoled. I personally am a mom and I must sit there reminding myself, this is not my kid, this is someone else's child, so I can keep my emotions under control. I'll go home and they'll know Mommy had a bad day because I will be crying, holding them, thanking God every day they're safe.

Jen

Are 911 dispatchers considered first responders?

Lieutenant Hall

We are considered first responders through the state of Texas, and there is a movement to have us reclassified on a federal level, which is what we are pushing for. Right now, 911 dispatchers are considered clerical work, we type on a computer and answer a phone. There's nothing clerical about our job.

Jen

Wow! I wouldn't have used clerical as a word to describe what you do, and the duties and responsibility involved. If somebody wants to be a part of the federal movement, where do you start?

Lieutenant Hall

You start locally with your state and your state representatives by getting them on board to reclassify the 911 dispatchers as first responders. This keeps the movement going. We have councils of government here that control 911 and they work hard to push that movement for us. It’s getting elected officials to jump on this bandwagon and realize how important this profession is, and the importance to reclassify them so these employees are being recognized for the work they do in public service and get the benefits they deserve.

Jen

Have you met anyone you have helped?

Lieutenant Hall

I have not. I've taken calls from people I personally know, but as far as strangers go, I have not met them. I have had people send me flowers which is always a surprise and very nice. I took a very difficult burglary call where someone was breaking into the home. I always wanted to be able to meet her because she did a phenomenal job protecting herself. You feel like there's sort of a bond.

Jen

As a 911 dispatcher, you remember voices. Is there a hole in you where you really want to give that person a hug and say thank you, celebrate their safety and the outcome?

Lieutenant Hall

Yes. Especially the calls with the elderly. You want to go over there, check on them, or make a random call to see if they are ok. You can't do it, but you naturally want to check on people and see how they're doing after something occurs. We had a bad ice storm last year which left people without power for a week or two. We had a lady who called who was cold and without electricity. The dispatchers coordinated officers to take blankets, and food to her. They emotionally invested into her safety.

Jen

With the call volume you have coming in, have you or another one of your dispatchers had to handle a call from a family member?

Lieutenant Hall

Yes. Thankfully, I have not had that experience, but we had a dispatcher who picked up a 911 call from her grandmother who had found her father deceased. At that time, she still had a job to do, and she did it. She persevered through the call. When the call was over and help was on their way, she was done.

Jen

Wow! That brings a tear to my eye because the lack of appreciation we have for our dispatchers, simply because we aren’t familiar with their jobs, but the strength and the perseverance they have is amazing. I'm sorry she had to encounter that, but it's just part of the job. A part we need to understand more.

Lieutenant Hall

It is and it’s why burnout is so high. Imagine doing that every single day. People break and they don't want to do it anymore. It’s a real thing for 911 dispatchers.

Jen

How have you avoided burnout?

Lieutenant Hall

I don't know that I did. I don't think I avoided burnout. I think I just overcame it and overcame it several times. Many times, I thought, this is not for me, it's time to go. Once I applied for a position outside of dispatch and didn't get it and that is what needed to happen. I didn't need to leave. I try to find something new to improve, change, and benefit the dispatchers to make things better for them. It gives me a new goal and a new purpose.

What is wonderful about my new position, is it is the first time in 20 years that a dispatcher has been promoted to the position of Lieutenant. I'm very excited about the opportunity to lead our department by someone who has worked every day in this department. I go in and truly understand what they feel and what they need. Now my goal is to try to provide them a space which provides them joy and some happy between the moments of stress.

Jen

Congratulations in your new role. Has this leadership role created a new perspective for you as a leader and trainer versus being the dispatcher?

Lieutenant Hall

I realized my previous Lieutenants did many things I didn't know they did; emails, meetings, stats and crunching numbers. It’s been eye opening and a learning curve which I don't like. I'm not comfortable in situations where I don't feel completely in control in. Trying to find my way in this new position has been out of my comfort zone; my comfort zones on the dispatch floor. I'm trying to utilize this learning to better dispatch by providing good stats and getting us more people. We need more dispatchers.

It's been a long time since I didn't know what I was doing. I am a control freak and I like to be in control of my situation. It’s funny, as a dispatcher, you pick up the phone and you never know what you're going to get. It would seem this activity would not be desirable for a control freak, but I feel like I have enough skills I can handle whatever comes in. When I walked into this office, I was not sure what I was supposed to do. It’s been unnerving, but I’m finally becoming a more comfortable and confident in what I'm doing.

Jen

What call through you for a loop the most?

Lieutenant Hall

We had this older, sweet lady call on the admin line, which should have been a 911 call. Someone was trying to break down her door with a 4-wheeler. She started the conversation off with, “I'm so sorry to bother you.” I was like, “No, ma'am. You're not bothering me. How can I help you today?” She says, “well, if you have time, could you send someone out?” I said, “Well, yes, ma'am. What's going on?” She's saying, “Well, I think someone's trying to break down my front door.”

At what point I'm looking at my admin phone going, what? And I said, “I'm sorry, did you say someone's trying to break down the door?” She's like, “Yes, ma'am. I think their ramming a 4-wheeler into my door.” And I was like, Oh, my good grief. She's remaining very calm, and apologetic for calling and bothering us. I told her, I was like, “ma'am, you're not bothering me.”

Then the 4-wheeler breaks down the door, she screams, and I scream. It startled me and I was very much out of control of the situation, so I yelled. The officers arrived on scene and the lady said, “okay, the officers are here.” I said, “Okay, next time, please call 911.” She replied, “Yes, ma'am.” I said, “Thank you have a good day.”

There's this misconception about when to call the admin line vs 911 line. Some people either call 911 for everything, or some people will call 911 for everything. If you call an admin line in need of an emergency service, should something happen and that line get disconnected, we can't trace it. By calling 911, it automatically gives us the opportunity to find you. So should you not be able to say anything, we can start pinging your location and we can get pretty close to you.

Jen

When should you call the 911 number?

Lieutenant Hall

Anything in progress is worthy of a 911 call. Anything occurring right now and will need an immediate response, should be a 911 call. Anything which has already occurred, for example, you came home, found your house has been broken into, there's no cars there, and no one looks to be there. Reporting stray dogs, and fraud, are good examples of admin calls. What it comes down to is, not that it really matters, because here in our facility, you're going to get the same call taker, regardless of which number you call, but you only have so many 911 lines. If we tie up our 911 lines with non-emergency calls, then people who have an emergency won't be able to get through.

Jen

Are calls recorded?

Lieutenant Hall

Yes, all calls are recorded. Both admin, 911 and radios.

Jen

Are the calls confidential information or can somebody go back and get the transcript of the call?

Lieutenant Hall

It's all subject to open records pending on where they are in investigations, depends on when certain audio can be released because it's all used in court. They will pull recordings for calls, and they will be submitted to court as part of the court record.

Jen

If someone wanted to do something nice for our 911 dispatchers. What is a good idea?

Lieutenant Hall

We have had people buy $5 Starbucks cards in bulk which they gave as a gift for dispatch. Someone will call and say, “Hey, I would like to provide lunch for your agency.” If it comes from a restaurant, that is great. We don't do homemade foods from strangers. Dispatch loves to eat. I'm not sure any dispatch staff that doesn't like food. They work 12 hours shifts here, so I yummy snack goes a long way.

Jen

12-hour shifts seem like a long time to deal with such an intense environment.

Lieutenant Hall

They like 12-hour days because it gives them three days off a week. I will say one of the things I miss most, now that I'm not in dispatch, is my three days off. Now I have two days and I'm not sure what you're supposed to do with only two days off. It's been 20 years since I've only had two days off.

I thoroughly enjoyed getting to talk to you today about 911 and the awesomeness that is the employees who in 911. My goal is to provide education to the public about what truly happens behind the scenes and how hard these men and women work to ensure that they're safe and ensure that their officers are safe. They take on a big role in responsibility when it comes to safety of citizens and officers.

Jen

I am honored you are here to share your experience and knowledge. This episode will launch on April 11th in time for National Public Safety Telecommunicators week.

Lieutenant Hall

At some point, someone recognized how great this profession is, and gave them a whole week to honor them. Our agency is supportive of our staff, and they truly believe dispatch is the backbone of this agency. It's always a fun week for us; they get to wear T shirts, we cook for them, and the command staff buys them gifts. It’s a great way to recognize how wonderful they are.

Thank you for reaching out. I appreciate the opportunity.

Jen

I want to give a big thank you to Lieutenant Hall. I really appreciate you being my guest today. Thank you for your 20 years of 911 dispatch service and again, congratulations on your promotion. You deserve it!