

‘Calm voice in the dark’

Lea County dispatchers are on the front line in emergencies

ANDY BROSIG NEWS-SUN



ANDY BROSIG/NEWS-SUN PHOTOS Shift supervisor Chris McCart monitors emergency calls on Monday in the dispatch center at the Lea County Communications Authority in Hobbs. Each dispatcher works with a single agency — sheriff, police and fire — to allow them to devote their full attention to making sure emergency responders get where they’re needed and have the information they require to do their jobs, LCCA Director Angela Martinez said. Below, Susan Yarbrough, a dispatcher for 20 years, watches her monitors on Tuesday.

When things go wrong, be it fires, accidents or just things going bump in the night, Lea County Communication Authority dispatchers are the first ones in line to get help where it’s needed.

The agency’s mission statement is clear: Their job is to serve the area’s public safety community — law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services — “enabling these agencies to perform their duties effectively and efficiently,” according to the LCCA website.

But for LCCA Director Angela Martinez, that’s just the start.

“A lot of it, if you think about it, we’re the calm voice in the dark,” Martinez said. “We’re behind the scenes of every incident that happens (in Lea County).”



“We’re the most important people you’ll never see,” she said. “We’re truly the first, first responder.”

This week, April 11-17, is National Public Safety Telecommunications Week — celebrating the work 911 dispatchers across the country do for their communities every day.

The LCCA was born a decade ago, when dispatch centers around the county were consolidated into one, centralized location on College Lane northwest of Hobbs. Before that, individual agencies — Lea County Sheriff’s Department and police and

fire departments in Hobbs and each of the other communities in Lea County — had their own dispatch centers, where calls for help would go and responders sent out.

Those different call centers were combined into one and went on the air June 26, 2011, and moved into its current home one year to the day later. Four Lea County communities — Lovington, Eunice, Tatum and Jal — still maintain dispatch centers locally, for non-emergency calls.

All the 911 calls in Lea County, though, go through the LCCA, Martinez said.

“We handle all the emergencies,” she said. “Our dispatchers come from all over Lea County.”

LCCA averages about 220,000 calls a year, Martinez said. Of those, about 48,000 calls annually are 911 emergency calls.

LCCA currently has 29 employees, 23 of whom are dispatchers, directly involved in answering emergency calls and getting the right people to the right place to help, she said. The remaining six are charged with everything from listening to calls to make sure the dispatchers are following protocol to training to information technology, ensuring system integration and keeping everything working smoothly.

LCCA BOASTS SEVERAL firsts in the state, Martinez said. It was the first agency to achieve accreditation as a dispatch center in New Mexico, she said, and is the only one in the state accredited by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And the agency’s training program is being copied by similar agencies around the state, Martinez said.

Martinez started as a dispatcher with the Hobbs Police Department in 1998, long before the consolidation into LCCA. Working her way up through the ranks to lead the agency gave Martinez a unique perspective on the job.

“I never forget where I came from,” she said. “I know how important the job is.”

Not every call coming into the LCCA technically qualifies as an emergency. Sometimes, people just call because they need someone to talk to, Martinez said. Regardless, LCCA dispatchers never dismiss a call out of hand, just because it doesn’t meet a specific set of criteria, she said.

“To them, it’s an emergency,” Martinez said. “We’ll know it’s not, but we’ll still treat it as an emergency.

“We’ll explain (the difference) to them and ask them to call back on the non-emergency number,” she said. “But if they think it’s an emergency, we want people to call, regardless.”

Training to be a 911 dispatcher takes between six months and one year, Martinez said. New dispatchers spend their first few days taking tests and watching an experienced trained officer handle calls.

In addition to in-house training at LCCA, dispatchers take classes through the New Mexico Police Academy to learn general rules on taking calls, radio procedures and to become certified in both Emergency Medical Dispatcher (EMD) and in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). All dispatchers are required to complete the EMD and CPR training before they answer their first call, Martinez said.

THE ACTUAL LENGTH of the training depends upon the individual — when they think they’re ready to start handling calls. In Martinez’s experience, that’s usually a minimum of six months.

People decide to become dispatchers for different reasons. For 20-year veteran Susan Yarbrough, it was her father’s service as a deputy sheriff for Lea County in the late-1960s that sparked her desire.

“It’s just in your blood,” Yarbrough said. “For lack of a better word, it’s a calling. I came in hoping I could make a difference in someone’s life.”

Sara Smith, who started her training at LCCA on Monday, also has a desire to help people. After working for three years with inmates at the Lea County Correctional Facility, she decided to make the move to the other end of the spectrum, she said.

“I’ve always wanted to help people,” she said. “What better way to do it than behind the scenes, to actually be the first person to be able to help somebody, rather than getting there later.”

Smith’s experience at the prison included working with inmates convicted of murder, injury to children or who’d “done worse things to a child. Why not be that person who can actually be someone who helps that child, helps someone who’s been murdered?”

BEING A 911 DISPATCHER definitely isn’t an easy job, Martinez said. She’s initially hired several individuals since she became agency director in 2012 who just didn’t work out — dispatcher just wasn’t the job for them.

“In training, I tell people to prepare for anything when the phone rings,” she said. “Every person here, I tell them this will be the hardest thing they ever do.”

And it’s tough not to get emotionally involved in the calls they receive, Martinez said. What makes it more difficult is dispatchers usually don’t know what happens after emergency responders arrive on the scene and their role in the process is over.

“We don’t usually know anything about what happens to the people,” she said. “We don’t know what happens to the callers, if they made it.”

There are several calls over the course of her 20-plus years that stick with Martinez.

One, a suicidal individual who called from Green Meadows Lake, saying they were going to end their life. Dispatchers weren’t sure, even as they were talking to the person, how it was going to end.

“On this call, we didn’t think we were going to — I was standing right next to (the dispatcher), listening to her, helping her through it,” Martinez said. “We found out a week later when (the person) called up and was thanking the dispatchers.

“But we don’t usually know anything about what happens to people,” she said. “That’s the hard part — we usually don’t get to know the outcome.”

That call is just one of many that touched dispatchers, making their jobs definitely high-stress endeavors, Martinez said. They are fortunate, she said, in routinely being invited to post-incident debriefings, where they can talk about what they witnessed — whether face-to-face or over the 911 line.

“Anybody that’s around (an incident), whether they’re on the phone and hearing it or on the scene, it affects everybody,” she said.

For the future, Martinez is working with state Sen. David Gallegos, R-Eunice, on a bill to reclassify emergency dispatchers, who are currently classified as either secretaries or clerks. The Hobbs City Commission and the Lea County Commission separately passed resolutions recently, updating LCCA dispatcher’s status to recognize them as first responders.

“We’re definitely not secretaries or clerks,” Martinez said. “We’re 911 dispatchers who are doing everything we can, before anybody else gets to the scene. We’re doing our part; we’re a piece of that puzzle.”

So what keeps Martinez and the rest of the 911 dispatchers at LCCA coming to work every day?

“We have one dispatcher — she’s delivered babies over the phone I don’t know how many times,” she said. “It’s things like that — we’re helping every day.

“That’s brought me back every day,” Martinez said. “Yes, there’s heartache, it’s stressful, there are long hours. But knowing we’re making a difference — we’re that calm voice in the dark.”

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New LCCA dispatcher