

Don't Forget Your Dispatchers

By Wendy Norris

Many dispatchers feel like they are the forgotten emergency worker. Because they are behind the phone lines and are seldom seen in the public eye or by their fire/ems co-workers, they are often left with the stress of not being able to debrief stressful calls.

Elizabeth Daley, a fire/ems/police dispatcher, recalls a particularly difficult 9-1-1 call. "I was working the swing shift and near the end of my shift I received a call from a distressed man. He was contemplating suicide and said that he had a gun pointed at his head. He talked about losing his job and his failing relationships with his family. He didn't have good coping skills or the support he needed to deal with his depression and loss. He felt that his only option was taking his life I sent the police and an ambulance to his home and remained on the line with him. As the seconds ticked by he became more agitated and I had a harder time getting him to talk. About four minutes after the call came in, the police pulled up in front of his house. He saw them and said that he could not deal with the police. Then I heard a gun shot. It was so loud and scared me so badly. I was devastated to be on the other end of the phone with someone who had just taken their life. Luckily, the police were able to enter the house and had learned that he had shot at a wall and not himself. I never had a chance to talk to the emergency workers who were there about the call. To this day, I am still jumpy at the sound of a loud bang. I also have more anxiety about my job."

Elizabeth is a perfect example of why dispatchers needed to be included in chaplaincy care. Her anxiety regarding this particular incident could have probably been greatly reduced had a chaplain or peer counselor been available to debrief the call and then provide her with resources and follow up support.

If you are a chaplain, here are some of the things you can do to support your dispatchers:

- Send them regular emails of encouragement
- Make sure they know you are available for debriefings or to just talk. You can do this by leaving your business cards, or by sending small tokens of appreciation attached to your contact information.
- Make routine visits to the dispatch center.
- If you hold services, devotions, or special events make sure they are invited.
- During memorial services, remember their fallen.
- During annual award ceremonies, remember to include them for recipient awards.
- Find resources that would pertain to their type of stress and make sure they have access to it.
- Remember them during their special events such as births, deaths, or hospitalizations.
- Send cards and make special visits during holiday seasons.
- Thank them.

Dispatchers are a vital part of the emergency services response equation. Dispatchers are human with human responses and the need to deal appropriately with the stressors of working in this career. You, as a chaplain, could be the one link that makes them feel appreciated.