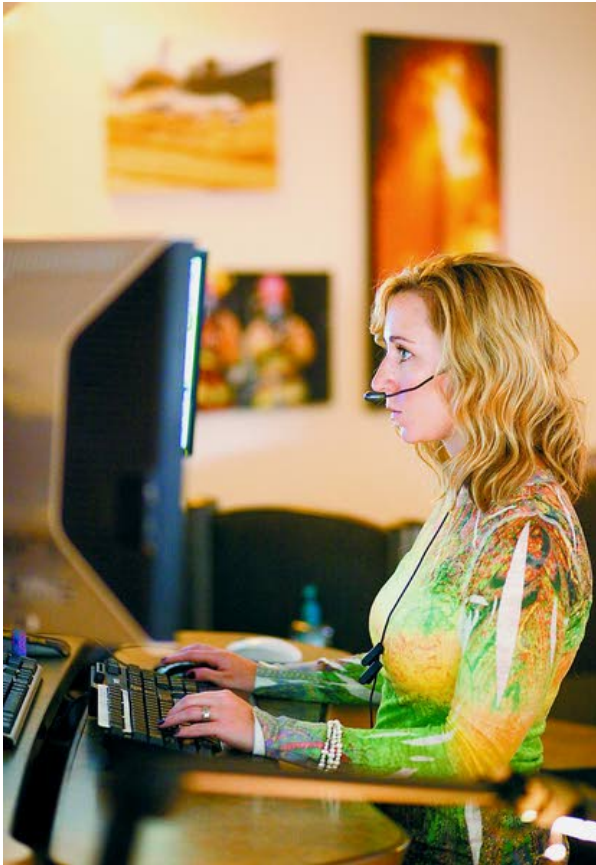


An everyday hero

By Meredith Metsker, Daily News staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 26, 2013 12:00 am



Haley Emery is nothing short of a hero.

She may not fly around in a colorful Spandex uniform or be able to save an airplane from crashing into a baseball field, but the 25-year-old Whitcom 911 dispatcher does help people every day at work. And in October, Emery's diligence and persistence with a medical 911 call saved a woman's life.

At 11:44 a.m. Oct. 22, Emery answered a cellphone 911 call from a woman who was struggling to breathe. All she heard was someone breathing heavily into the phone, something many pranksters might do in a fake 911 call, but almost immediately Emery's gut instincts kicked in.

"You kind of get this gut feeling with some of them, and I could just tell something was wrong," she said.

Since the woman couldn't speak, Emery asked her to push a button if she could hear her. Beep. Emery kept asking her yes or no questions to which the woman would answer with a beep or silence. Because the call came in on a cellphone there was no address, so Emery searched the woman's phone number in the dispatch records to try to find a name or address all while continuing to reassure the woman on the phone. Seconds later, Emery found a recent breathing difficulty call that came from the same number with an address on the 900 block of Travois Way in Moscow. She asked the woman to press a button if that was her address. Beep.

Less than a minute after the woman called, one of Emery's co-workers dispatched police and an ambulance using the address Emery had found. Police arrived at the woman's house three minutes later, and the ambulance showed up eight minutes after that to help her. The call lasted a total of three minutes, and without Emery's persistence with the call, her co-workers said it easily could have been disregarded as a pocket dial or a prank.

"After I hung up, I didn't even really realize what had happened and one of the girls in there said 'Man that was awesome. I never would have thought of that,' " Emery said.

Emery, a Butte, Mont., native and Washington State University graduate, has worked for Whitcom for three years and said she loves her job and finds it extremely rewarding.

"It's never the same, ever. I still am excited to come to work. Every single day is different," she said.

Emery works four 12-hour days each week, along with four or five other dispatchers, answering hundreds of calls from Moscow, Pullman, WSU, Whitman County and Asotin County and dispatching for more than 70 agencies. As a dispatcher, Emery is the ultimate multitasker. When she answers a call on her mobile ear piece, she not only talks to the person on the phone, but she also simultaneously searches her five computer screens for more information about the caller, typing on her two keyboards and clicking at a whirlwind pace to get information to first responders as quickly as possible. With some calls, she also corresponds with police officers or firefighters over the radio while talking on the phone and logging information on her computer.

Despite her hard work, Emery said the job of a dispatcher is often a thankless one. She said many people get frustrated with her when she asks so many questions about the emergency, something she is required to do. On the left side of her desk Emery has a large booklet of flip cards detailing various medical emergencies and lists of questions or instructions associated with each one.

"We actually have strict guidelines and questions we follow, which can sometimes offend people because we're asking all these questions and they think we're not sending anybody but we're always sending on what we have. It just keeps us all on the same consistency and on the same page," Emery said, adding first responders

are always dispatched as soon as dispatchers have an address and an idea of what's going on.

In addition to gathering information quickly, Emery said she often acts as a counselor, comforting and reassuring callers until help arrives. She said she'll strike up conversations with people, sometimes asking if they have children or any pets. Once she said she was speaking to an elderly man and heard a cuckoo clock go off in the background and asked him about that.

Though her job is often rewarding because she can help people, like the woman who had trouble breathing, Emery said she's also taken many difficult and traumatic calls. She said the 911 call she answered in reference to the 2011 murder-suicide in Moscow involving former University of Idaho professor Ernesto Bustamante and graduate student Katy Benoit was hard for her. And last year, Emery heard an elderly man in Whitman County fatally shoot himself over the phone after she'd tried to talk to him out of it.

"That's kind of a hard one, to know you were the last person to talk to him," Emery said.

But she said there are still plenty of happy endings, though dispatchers rarely get to find out what happened. With the phones ringing constantly, Emery and her fellow dispatchers always have to move on to the next call and the next emergency, sometimes with only a few seconds in between.

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