



THE CALM IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

911: E-Comm dispatchers need problem-solving skills, empathy and assertiveness to deal with emergencies

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Imagine a job where every time you answer the phone, you could help save a life or stop a crime.

A lot of people might find that stressful. But for Kim Cameron, answering 911 calls is the perfect career.

"Every day is new and every call presents new challenges — it's the best part of the job," said Cameron, a 911 call-taker at E-Comm in Vancouver. "It's great brain exercise."

Cameron, 35, has been answering emergency calls for nine years, co-ordinating police, fire and ambulance assistance for people across southwestern B.C. She is one of nearly 250 people in E-Comm's operations centre whose job touches thousands every day.

E-Comm, which provides 911 service for the Lower Mainland, Sunshine Coast and Whistler, handles more than 1.25 million calls a year — an average of 3,400 a day — and each one is answered in less than five seconds.

Call-takers have to quickly determine which emergency service is required, send the details to the dispatcher responsible and gather as much information as possible to help emergency personnel at the scene.

"You hear heart-wrenching stories, the B-and-Es where people have lost prized possessions that can never be replaced and circumstances involving adults and children you can't even imagine," Cameron said.

"It's a challenge — you have to expect the unexpected, but I like having an impact. It's meaningful work."

A routine day can quickly become intense when an emergency happens in the region. Last year's fire in Burns Bog and the daylight kidnapping of Graham McMynn are just a couple examples of high-profile incidents that resulted in a call to 911.

911 call dispatcher Kim Cameron at her workstation in the E-Comm operations room. JON MURRAY — THE PROVINCE

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'You're saving lives . . . on a slow day, you're helping people'

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"We have some very dynamic personalities all working together in the same room, but you can't be an individual here," Cameron said. "And you have to be prepared to juggle."

Erin Ramsay, director of human resources for E-Comm, said the company is always looking for people interested in working full time or as auxiliary staff in the operations centre. The company, which is owned by the municipalities that use the centre, is continually expanding as more emergency services opt to centralize their calls and dispatching functions.

Currently, the centre answers all

911 calls for three regions and performs the dispatching services for 10 police departments and 11 fire departments. The ambulance service dispatches its own personnel. The centre also provides a wide-range radio system used for communications between police, fire and ambulance personnel throughout the Lower Mainland.

Staff at the operations centre work 12-hour shifts, four days on and four days off, and are members of the same union local as B.C. paramedics. Wages begin at \$19.37 an hour and increase to \$29.07.

Ramsay said although the job only requires Grade 12 education, she looks for applicants who have some emergency-services experi-

ence in their background, even if it's volunteer work at a police detachment or answering calls for a crisis line.

Applicants who get past the first cut have to pass a screening test that assesses map reading and listening skills, recollection of details and typing accuracy. If they pass by at least 80 per cent, applicants move on to the interview stage. Before they are hired, they have to undergo an RCMP background check.

Then they begin a rigorous training program that includes classroom time and a mentoring program in the operations room.

At least two B.C. institutions, Kwantlen University College and Malaspina University-College, offer

emergency-communications programs for people interested in the growing industry.

"We're looking for people who demonstrate professionalism, maturity and problem-solving ability," Ramsay said. "They have to be empathetic, but assertive too. They have to get in and get the information quickly, while also being empathetic with the caller and non-judgmental."

She said callers are often in high-stress situations that might make them hysterical, emotional, abusive or unintelligible.

"The main thing is to be unflappable," said Ramsay, who was a 911 operator for several years before moving into management.

"You have to put aside all the information that's not important and focus on what's necessary and reassure the caller that help is on the way."

E-Comm offers employees opportunities to move from entry-level jobs to other positions in the operations centre such as dispatcher, team manager or trainer, she said.

"It's a very exciting job, and it's a chance to help people. It's their No. 1 connection to police, fire and ambulance."

"It's high stress and it's certainly not for everybody, but you're saving lives and protecting property. Even on a slow day, you're helping people."

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