



To: Town of Vail Manager – Scott Robson
CC: Town of Vail Council Members
From: Vail Public Safety Communications Center
RE: Recognizing Emergency Services Dispatch (911) as First Responders

Date: 03/11/2020

The Emergency Services Dispatchers with the Vail Public Safety Communications Center (VPSCC) serve the Town of Vail and Eagle County 24 hours a day, seven days a week: just as firefighters, law enforcement, and emergency medical services workers. Telecommunicators make the same personal sacrifices as their peers by leaving family, friends, and the safety of their homes to receive the initial emergency calls that save lives, protect property, and ensure the safety of the community during emergency events or hazardous weather.

Receiving 911 calls requires significant training and competencies such as situational assessment skills and sound judgment, strong public and internal relations, teamwork, and advanced multitasking skills. Telecommunicators have the sole responsibility for dispatching police, fire and medical first responders and act as their communication partners during every call for service. In 2020, VPSCC staff members served on Incident Dispatch Teams (IDT) and responded to several incidents within and out of our county to assist with in progress or large-scale events such as wildfires or barricaded suspects to assist with communications and operations management in the field. There are even staff who are qualified to serve with our county's hostage negotiation team and special operations unit on in progress events. This added level of responsibility and specialized training required of tactical dispatching and emergency management go far beyond the duties of Administrative Support.

As the 911 system has evolved to include more technology, so too has the dispatchers' job duties. Although this evolution makes receiving calls and providing emergency assistance over the phone more efficient, it also requires more of the call taker. For instance, a dispatcher may simultaneously be questioning the caller, dispatching first responders, and using other technologies, such as call location technology or searching criminal or medical histories. No shift is routine, and dispatchers often work with intense, life-and-death situations and save lives every day in ways that go far beyond speaking on the phone. In 2020 alone, approximately 12,246 calls were initiated for medical and fire emergency services wherein dispatchers provided instructions and guidance. Of those calls, 66 were cardiac arrests, 39 were structure fires, 37 mental health / overdose, and 8 childbirth calls. In addition, VPSCC Emergency Dispatchers handled 119,878 calls for service for Eagle County's four law enforcement agencies, varying from parking problems to stabbings and suicides. COVID-19 added complexity and additional medical questioning to nearly all these calls, with telecommunicators checking for the likelihood that our responders were heading into high risk situations.

Through the International Academy of Emergency Medical Dispatch, dispatchers are prepared to provide life-saving medical instruction. Their negotiating skills can be the difference between life and death in a hostage situation or when a suicidal person is on the line. The work is extremely stressful and has an emotional and physical impact, worsened by the around-the-clock nature of the job and the long hours. Telecommunicators must handle the stress of answering thousands of calls each year - one call after another, daily - often being the reassuring voice on the other end of the call as citizens experience the worst day of their lives. Dispatchers hear the cries of devastation, listen to the screams for help, and are the support as citizens cope with the loss of a loved one. Telecommunicators handle all of this and at the very same time they must strive to keep their fellow emergency responders safe in the field.

Several states and agencies have already recognized telecommunicators and dispatchers as first responders. In Colorado there are twelve (12) 911 centers, including Pitkin County, that have recognized their dispatchers as first responders and more are following suit. In June 2019, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed House Bill 1090 which changed that state's definition of a first responder and classified dispatchers in the same way as EMS personnel, firefighters, and police. Additionally, this bill allows dispatchers to have access to specialized training and other benefits like mental health care that apply to all first responders. At the Federal level is a bill known as the, "911 SAVES ACT," which would reclassify all dispatchers as first responders and is waiting for review. Knowing how long Congress can take to act we are requesting local action to recognize our services.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 defines "first responder" as "individuals who, in the early stages of an incident, are responsible for the protection and preservation of life, property, evidence, and the environment." Who better, by this very definition, can be considered a first responder than the dispatcher who serves as the initial contact for every public safety response? We are asking for your support in recognizing the invaluable service telecommunicators provide for our community and to support us as we do for Eagle County every day and night. Please consider the attached proclamation for adoption by the Town of Vail.

Regards,

The Vail Public Safety Communications Center Staff

Vail Police Department – Chief Henninger

Avon Police Department - Chief Daly

Eagle Police Department – Chief Stauffer

Eagle County Sherriff's Office – Sheriff Van Beek

Vail Mountain Rescue – Rob Foster

Eagle County Paramedic Service
Chief Bradford

Vail Fire Department – Chief Novak

Eagle River Fire Protection District
Chief Bauer

Rock Creek Volunteer Fire Department
Chief Horn

Greater Eagle Fire Protection District
Chief Cupp

Gypsum Fire Protection District
Chief Kirkland

Eagle County Airport Fire Department
Chief Kohrmann