

Days never dull for dispatchers

Winter Park workers handle calls for police, fire emergencies

By Yvonne C.T. Vassel

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — Coded messages of accidents and danger are a standard part of the job performed by police and fire dispatchers.

In Winter Park, unlike larger cities such as Orlando, the job of dispatching police officers and firefighters is carried out by the same people.

They sit in a windowless basement room facing an elaborate communications console that is rarely quiet. In any brief time period they can be heard answering emergency phone calls, alerting officers or firefighters and dispatching them to various locations while calling for ambulances and answering other phone calls or radio inquiries.

It is a hectic job which, in Winter Park, is usually done by two dispatchers on each eight-hour shift. On one recent day the dispatchers were Judy Corp and Brenda Hendricks.

Corp, 40, has been a dispatcher for five years — most of that time in Winter Park. Hendricks, 24, has been with Winter Park for two years.

As she answered the phone, talked over the radio to officers on the street, checked driver's licenses and criminal records on a computer, and tried to keep track of what each officer was doing, Corp sighed and admitted there is a lot of pressure and aggravation in her job.

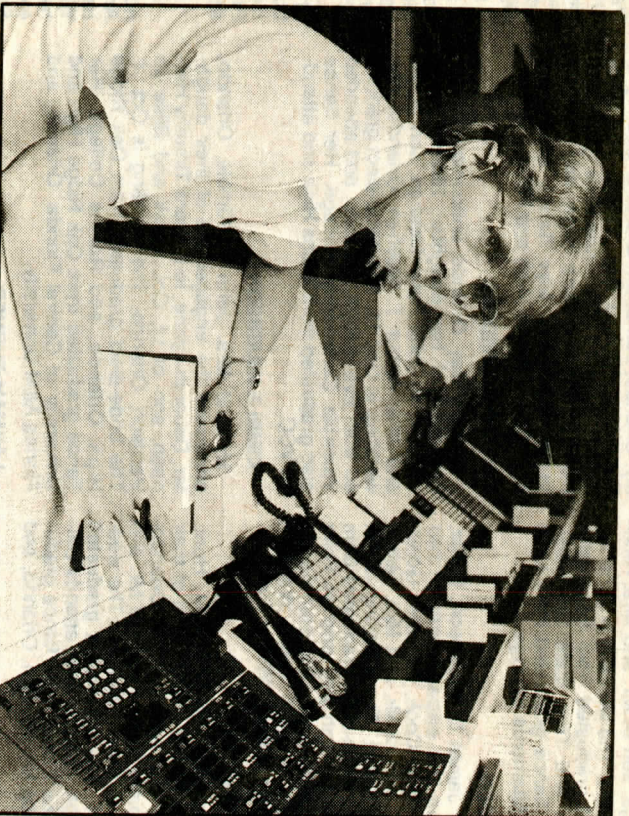
"A lot of people calling us get really aggravated when we ask them questions. 'Just send the police. I'll tell them when they get here,' they shout. They don't realize we have to give an officer enough information so they have a good idea of what to find when they get someplace," Corp said.

She recounted the time an officer screamed at her over the radio when an officer who responded to an emergency call jumped a fence and found himself face to face with a huge dog.

"That's when I started asking callers about dogs," Corp said.

Yet the job has its rewarding and heartwarming moments, they said.

Hendricks remembered when a woman called to get help for her husband, who was drowning in their pool. Hendricks kept



ANGELA PETERSON/SENTINEL

Judy Corp is an assistant supervisor of Winter Park dispatchers ... job has frustration, aggravation as well as rewarding moments.

the woman on the phone and dispatched help. While the fire rescue crew was on its way, Hendricks spoke to them and relayed advice to the woman.

"I told her to turn him over, pull him into the shallow part and keep his face out of the water. To me this is, in general, what every dispatcher goes through," said Hendricks.

The man survived.

There also was the time they helped with a birth over the phone. A panicked woman called to say her relative was in labor then hung up. The dispatchers sent out a rescue unit but while the crew was on the way, the woman called back to say the baby was ready to come out.

"The only thing we could think to tell her was to have the woman lay on her back and raise her feet up. Then the baby came out and the paramedic on the rescue truck radioed us to have the woman place it on the woman's stomach and clear the baby's air passages. Rescue got there right after, and just before they took the mother and baby to the hospital they opened their microphone and we heard the baby crying. That was neat," Corp said.

A frustrating part of the job comes when someone who needs help calls on a non-emergency number and hangs up before the dispatcher can get any information. The 911 line automatically displays the address, phone num-

ber and name of the person who is listed at that phone number.

Other frustrations come from officers who get upset when they have not been given as much information as they want or have not received information as quickly as they would like.

"Very rarely are we told 'Good job.' But you mess up and you hear about it," Hendricks said.

Both said they have no intention of doing any other kind of work. Hendricks, who also is a reserve police officer for the Winter Park department, said she does not want a full-time police job.

"To me this is an exciting job. It's something different. I'm going to stay. I don't want to go full-time as a police officer. I feel this is more important. This is the lifeline," she said.

Corp briefly left Winter Park in late 1984 for a job with the Orlando Police Department. She was lured back six months later when Police Chief Raymond Beary offered her more money and a promotion to assistant supervisor.

Now she is pushing to establish a training program for the department, which will include sending dispatchers to more seminars and to Spanish classes.

"We don't have quite the need yet that the big cities do, but

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more Spanish-speaking people are coming into the city," Corp said. "People call us and, even if they can speak some English, when they are in a panic they revert to their native language."

The dispatch center has nine full-time operators,

two part-timers and a supervisor. When they go to work in the basement of the police department they often do not leave until their eight-hour shift ends. Trips to the restroom are taken during lulls in radio traffic and lunch outside is rare, they said.

They monitor eight frequencies and dispatch firefighters, ambulances and sometimes other city employees. Their busiest times, they said, are on Fridays and Saturdays and during storms. The number of emergency calls vary widely from day to day, but during one recent 16-hour period they received

about 120 calls on the 911 number alone.

Hendricks said the job often makes her so tense that she believes it can be heard in her voice.

"Sometimes I think I sound incoherent but then they tell me my voice hasn't changed," she said.

"When I walk out of this place I try my best to leave the feelings behind and usually I can. The only time I've ever taken it home is when one of my officers have been hurt. You wonder if there's something you could have done."