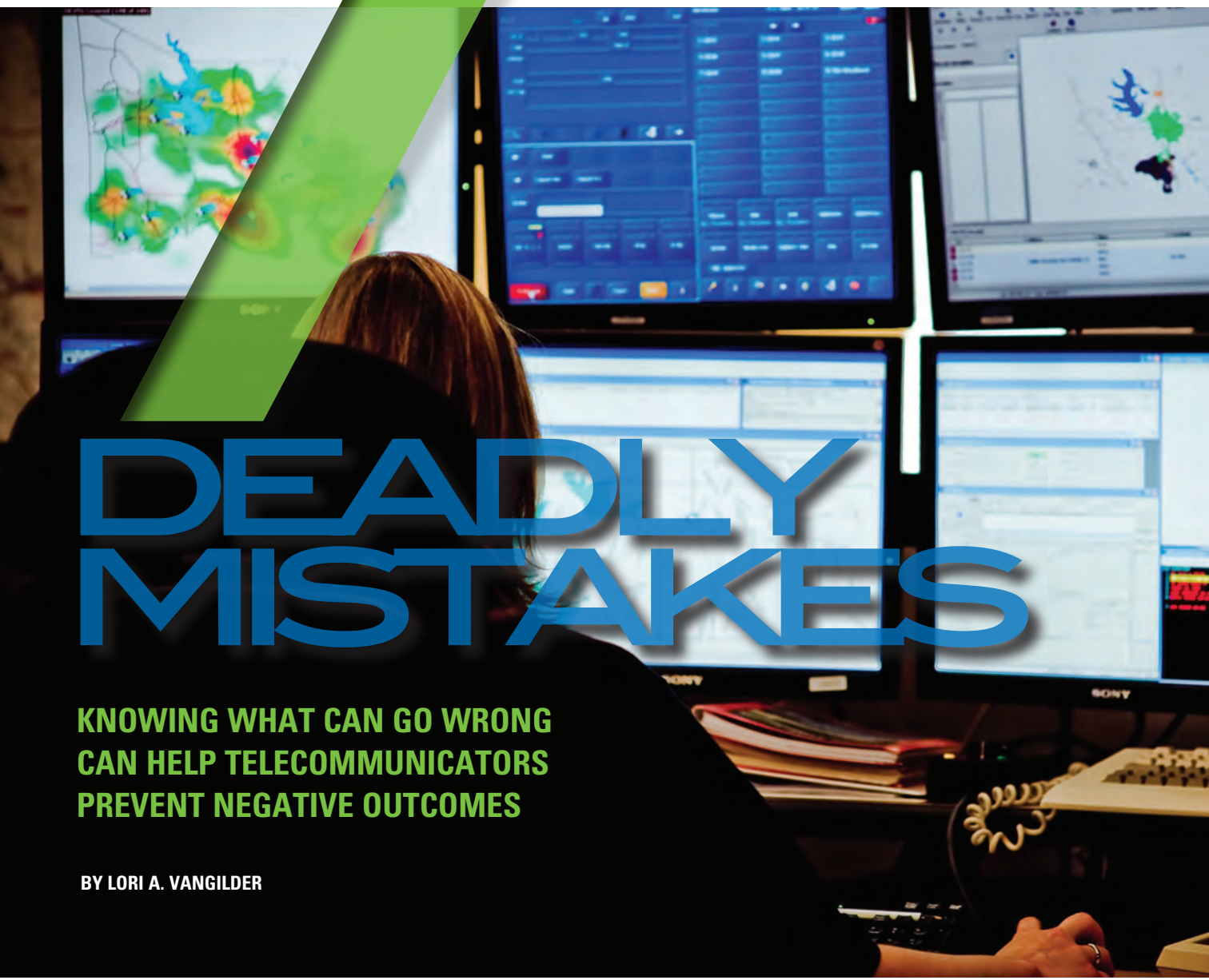


“9-1-1 saves lives.” We’ve heard this statement since we were children. We learned how to dial it, and we taught it to our children. But it’s not until you become a telecommunicator that you appreciate the human factor involved in saving lives.

Every day, a phenomenal amount of work is accomplished by public safety telecommunicators who work at the highest level of our cognitive process. Without conscious effort, we take in new information, reframe it and compare it with previous experiences. Then, our brains access that information and, bam!, we’ve done something so complex that we sometimes amaze ourselves.



DEADLY MISTAKES

KNOWING WHAT CAN GO WRONG CAN HELP TELECOMMUNICATORS PREVENT NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

BY LORI A. VANGILDER

In 2006, more than 240 million 9-1-1 calls were made in the U.S.¹ Millions of times each year, responders are dispatched, everything goes right and lives are saved. But occasionally, something goes wrong. At times, our problem-solving and decision-making skills aren’t used as effectively and as efficiently as they should

be. The result is errors, and because our profession is public safety communications, those errors are magnified, scrutinized and publicized as deadly mistakes.

It’s up to us—as comm center directors, supervisors and telecommunicators—to identify the many different situations that can create deadly errors and take steps

to prevent negative outcomes—a life-saving proposition. Below, seven mistakes to avoid.

1 MISKEYING & MISUNDERSTANDING LOCATIONS

Location, location, location. We are taught from Day 1 that acquiring the

accurate location of an incident is the most important part of the job. With an accurate location, we have somewhere to send responders. But the simplest task creates the largest room for error.

In most comm centers, when a call is received the information is immediately typed (keyed) into a CAD system. In larger centers, a telecommunicator may handle hundreds of calls per shift. No matter how big or small the center, there's the potential for human error



every time an incident is entered into the CAD. Keying in the wrong house number or street name will cause responders to be dispatched to the wrong location.

Most comm centers require a minimum typing speed (e.g., 40 words per minute) as a prerequisite for employment. But most typing tests are given in

a vacuum, with no distractions for the one taking the test, so accuracy isn't measured under realistic conditions. Factor in the physical toll of an eight-, 10- or 12-hour shift, the need to simultaneously listen to a distraught caller who may or may not speak English fluently, pass the call along to a dispatcher or dispatch the call themselves, listen for and answer other lines, and it's easy to see how a telecommunicator could miskey an address or misunderstand a street name.

Dispatching field units to a wrong location for a traffic crash could escalate a traffic crash with injuries to a traffic homicide investigation if someone dies because EMS was delayed. Consider the consequences of dispatching a fire department to the wrong street address of a fully involved structure fire in which people are trapped. Any way you look at it, it spells liability.

Tip: Telecommunicators can decrease the risk of a potentially deadly error by developing the positive habit of ending each call by repeating the location to the caller to ensure accuracy. If a street name is similar to another street name, duplicated in a nearby city or just plain confusing, spell it out. *Example:* "Mrs. Smith, units will be dispatched to 120 C-H-O-C-K-T-A-W Street in the Briar Community to meet with you regarding the burglary of your residence." This gives the caller one last chance to correct you and ensures that units are dispatched to the correct location.

Because typing speeds and keyboarding skills are vital in today's comm centers, another way to reduce errors is to ensure your keyboarding skills are kept up to par. Numerous typing tutorials and tests are available commercially and free online. Start a challenge in your center that gauges everyone's speed and accuracy. Everyone wants to be the "best," and most telecommunicators are perfectionists, so many will be willing to participate for fun, resulting in more accurate keying and faster typing speeds.

Mistakes are also more prevalent if a telecommunicator doesn't know their jurisdiction's geography. Many street names are similar from area to area, some differing by the addition of a compass direction. Although addressing personnel attempt to review every street name to decrease confusion,

many agencies still have a Main Road and a Main Street—or a Pine Street and a Pine Tree Street. Complicating the issue further are common primary name starters, such as "Wood" in Woodfield, Woodfair and Woodmere, or complicated spellings, such as Econolatchee Trail, Tamiami Drive or Tehoupitoulas Street. Knowing your jurisdiction with its street names and locations will help minimize problems.

Tip: Make a list of similar street names and share it with your co-workers. Does your center provide map training, map book tests or map challenges? These are all in-house training methods that ensure personnel are aware of their response areas. Ride-alongs with field units can create a bond between response personnel and telecommunicators. *Suggestion:* Create local treasure hunts in which the telecommunicator must obtain the house number of the blue house on "X" Street or the name of the store at the corner of "Y" Drive and "Z" Road.

As telecommunicators, one of our biggest fears is dispatching units to the wrong location. We rely on the information we receive, and we must verify that information to ensure we heard it right.

2 LACK OF FOLLOW-UP & DUE DILIGENCE

Lack of follow-up can create the potential for deadly error. Follow-up is essential for 9-1-1 hang-up calls. Many agencies require a field unit response and a call back to the phone number. If the line is busy, many agencies require second and third attempts within specific time parameters. It's important to know your agency's policies and procedures, especially those pertaining to hang-up calls, 9-1-1 open lines and 9-1-1 call backs.

Due diligence is ensuring that the job is done right—and thoroughly. For those of us familiar with National Crime Information Center (NCIC) teletype operations, we know it's common for the teletype channel to be overwhelmed with requests and backlogged with returns. It can become easy to simply glance at the NCIC information returns, but you might advise field units that a person is "Not Wanted" when in fact a more careful review of the information return would indicate the suspect is

7 DEADLY MISTAKES

“Wanted.” Don’t become so overwhelmed with the volume of requests that the quality of your review is less than acceptable. This can result in a fatal error.

3 NOT ASKING FOR OR RELAYING INFO

Most agencies are adequately staffed for daily operations; however, when a large-scale incident occurs, it seems as though there are never enough personnel on hand. The siege of phones ringing off the hook and the radio garbled with transmissions of field units talking over one another can be intimidating, and it’s easy to become overwhelmed. At times like this, telecommunicators must be extra careful. You could easily neglect asking each caller complete questions.

Take a deep breath, depend on your training and skills, and remember that you need to handle each call as a unique situation. Ensure that every fact received on the call is logged into the CAD system. What may not seem pertinent to you at the time could be what breaks a big case in the long run.

Don’t forget to ask for the exact location to determine if more than one incident is occurring. Don’t miss that single fact a caller tells you that could be life altering. Remember, the only question not answered is the one not asked. Although we can’t allow playback features and logging recorders to become a crutch, they are useful in retrieving information that could have been missed during busy moments.

When it comes to traffic crashes, we must wipe away the “routine call” phenomenon. When an accident occurs on a specific road, it can become routine to pass off all accident calls on that road as being the same just to clear the phone lines. All a caller needs to indicate is a traffic crash on “that stretch of interstate,” and telecommunicators immediately want to say that units are already responding and pick up the next line. Unfortunately, it’s common for multiple crashes to occur as a chain reaction after the first. Not asking complete questions can stop the telecommunicator from dispatching field units to a location where there may be serious injuries.

Just because you’re currently working a train derailment or car crash doesn’t

mean that a similar second incident isn’t occurring at the same time. Because location is everything, we must ask every caller for the incident’s exact location, even if they say it’s on the same street. Never skip a question just to respond with, “We already have that report.” Don’t assume—ask.

It should be standard to ask a caller about weapons or hazards that may be on scene. If there are weapons, ask how many and what type. If there are hazardous materials, determine what type of material or chemical, how much and whether or not it’s contained—and *relay that information to responding units*. If information is obtained and *not* relayed to first responders due to limited radio time or other unforeseen circumstances, the result could be officers being shot and killed or fire-rescue personnel being exposed to potentially poisonous materials.

Agencies should have a QA/QC (quality assurance/quality control) program. In fact, it’s beneficial if telecommunicators are included in the organization of the monthly call review. It would also be appropriate to have a dispatching review to ensure dispatchers are providing responding units with all of the initial and supplemental dispatch information via the radio or a mobile data computer.

4 LOSS OF COMPOSURE

Answering the phone and hearing desperate screams for help may evoke a strong personal reaction. It’s easy to adopt the caller’s emotions as your own and react with them. If these emotions are relayed to the caller, they may feel that not only are they out of control, but you are too and there’s no help to be found. Relaying emotions via your volume and tone is called *voice inflection*. On the radio, the sounds of an excited dispatcher can pump up the emotions of responding field units who are already experiencing an adrenaline rush and may be driving at increased speed with lights and siren. Your calm voice may be what prevents their deadly mistake.

Emotions are also involved when a telecommunicator “hypes” a call, or embellishes the facts of a low-priority call to make it a high-priority call. Every time

responding units travel hot (with lights and siren), they put themselves and the public at risk for traffic crashes. We must ensure that the true and honest facts of each call are relayed accurately, timely and thoroughly.

5 MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

“He did what to a what?” Sometimes we receive calls that are almost too odd or shocking to believe. As calltakers, we cannot make assumptions. Doing so is potentially deadly. Not believing that what’s being reported is actually occurring or wasting time trying to convince the caller they’re mistaken could cost valuable time for such incidents as stranger abductions. It isn’t hyping the call if the facts presented by the caller truly indicate an abduction. Assuming a potential suspect was just playing around when he pushed a woman into a vehicle and took off could be the end to that woman’s life.

When there’s a long-term, ongoing situation, such as repeat harassment, threats or stalking, never assume. Dispatch the call as received. If the victim wants or needs a law enforcement unit, the comm center is not in a position to see what’s occurring on scene and should relay the facts—as received—to responders.

Calls from drunk people have their own special set of challenges, but just because a caller is intoxicated does not mean they aren’t aware of what’s happening. If the intoxicated caller reports an emergency, field units should be dispatched. And sounding intoxicated doesn’t mean a person has been drinking alcohol. They could have an altered mental status or speech impediment or be having a stroke or diabetic emergency.

6 SUCCUMING TO DISTRACTIONS

A telecommunicator must be mentally focused to provide emergency medical dispatch pre-arrival instructions or get the facts in a major felony that’s being reported. We must be on our toes, alert and prepared for the duration of our entire shift. Sometimes callers may have only one chance to say their location or report what’s occurring. A law enforcement officer who is being ambushed and is shot may only have one chance to report it. If you aren’t

focused, their one chance may be missed.

As adults with busy lives, we tend to burn the candles at both ends. This is common with individuals who work early mornings and overnight shifts. Public safety communications is a profession in which it's essential to arrive at work awake and alert. Realizing that what you do makes the difference between life and death should be enough to encourage anyone to ensure rest prior to shift.

Some comm centers allow telecommunicators to use televisions, DVD players, have full Internet access and personal laptops on duty; others don't. Regardless, we must keep our main focus on the job that we do. Movies and games can be paused. Laptops can be closed.

Most agencies have call-answering time standards that must be met. Radio channels must be answered immediately, and relaying information to field units must take priority.

7 LACK OF COMMUNICATION

The last deadly error we discuss here is lack of communication, both intra-agency (within one's own agency) and interagency (with other agencies). In agencies with separate calltaking and dispatching assignments, there must be reliable, accurate and timely communications between the calltaker, dispatcher and field units. If the calltaker is aware of hazards, weapons or changes to an incident while field units are responding, the dispatcher must be notified and relay that information to the units. When the incident and its tapes are reviewed is not the time for relevant information to be revealed.

It's standard for EMS responders to stop and stage away from a situation that may be hazardous. Numerous call types, such as a fight in progress, shootings and stabbings, require staging. Yet the most pertinent bit of information for these units to know is when the scene is clear and when they can advance on scene.

Interagency communications must be timely, accurate and documented. If the center is chaotic, it's better to make multiple notifications rather than none. Then, document, document, document. Documentation is the key to ensuring all tasks and duties are completed responsibly and thoroughly.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

We are public safety telecommunicators. It's our nature to want to help others, to be protective of our agency family and to have perfectionist tendencies. No one wants to be the person who makes a deadly mistake. So learn from the errors of others. Complete case study reviews within the comm center and share newspaper or Internet articles about incidents that have occurred elsewhere and the mistakes that might have been made. If we don't learn from mistakes, we're bound to repeat them. **||PSC||**

LORI VANGILDER is an adjunct instructor with APCO Institute. She retired after 22 years with the Lake Mary (Fla.) Police Department and is a past president of Florida Chapter APCO.

REFERENCE

1. National Emergency Number Association:
www.nena.org/cellular-wireless-911. Accessed Feb.1, 2010.
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CDE EXAM #28292: 7 DEADLY MISTAKES

- One way to give a caller a chance to correct an incident's keyed location is to:**
 - Repeat back the location of the call.
 - Spell confusing street names.
 - Confirm the town or city the street is in.
 - All of the above.
- Map training, map book tests and map challenges are training methods that ensure personnel are:**
 - Aware of their response area.
 - Kept busy on shift.
 - Not watching television or movies.
 - Communicating effectively.
- It's important to ask each caller all call-handling questions because:**
 - Active shooters could be moving.
 - There could be multiple traffic crashes at the same location.
 - There could be more than one major incident at the same time.
 - All of the above.
- "Hyping" a call is when the telecommunicator:**
 - Does not complete follow through.
 - Downplays the situation on scene to create a lower priority response.
 - Embellishes on facts to create a higher priority response.
 - Is not certain what's occurring on scene.
- When working a large-scale incident and feeling overwhelmed, it's important to:**
 - Input every fact relayed on phones into the call screen.
 - Clear the phone lines as quickly as possible.
 - Handle each call as a unique situation.
 - Both a and c.
- Documentation will help the telecommunicator prove:**
 - All tasks were completed.
 - All facts provided were relayed.
 - All interagency contacts were made.
 - All of the above.
- To ensure interagency communications are completed accurately:**
 - Document contact in the call screen.
 - Ask a co-worker to complete the call for you.
 - Wait for field units to confirm on the radio.
 - Do it yourself.
- Calls cannot be discounted from callers who sound intoxicated because they could:**
 - Be having a medical emergency.
 - Have a speech impediment.
 - Be true.
 - All of the above.
- When the telecommunicator's vocal inflection is excited:**
 - Field units become excited.
 - The caller feels more out of control.
 - Both a & b.
 - None of the above.
- Supplemental dispatch information that should be relayed to responding units may include:**
 - Situation changes on scene.
 - Weapons involved.
 - Hazardous materials present.
 - All of the above.

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