

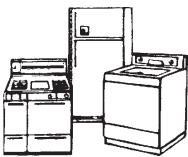
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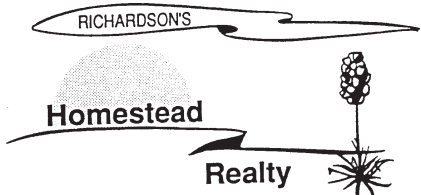
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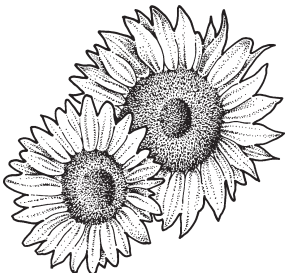
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Thanks for all you do!

Week honors dispatchers across county and country

By Doug Stephens

The Goodland Daily News

They call themselves the “invisible link.” They connect you to the emergency services you need. They are dispatchers, and this is their week.

Both the city and Sherman County have declared this as National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week.

“It’s a national recognition, kind of like Secretary’s Day,” said Mary Messamore, Sherman County director of emergency services. “People always thank the EMS and the police, but they forget to thank the people who send the cops out to them.

“It’s a week of saying thanks.”

“We are invisible,” said Bonnie King, a midnight-shift dispatcher and a former Goodland police officer and Sherman County deputy sheriff. “No one ever sees what we do. They see the results, though.”

The Sherman County dispatchers answer every 911 call in the county. They send out city and county firefighters, ambulance crews, sheriff’s deputies and police officers. They sometimes send over calls to the state highway patrol, and there are times when they even answer emergency calls from Cheyenne and Wallace counties.

“A lot of people don’t realize everything we do,” King said. “They think it’s just the police. It’s all of Sherman County.”

Stacy Dinkel, a four-year veteran of the radio, said the job isn’t as easy as some people may think. The dispatchers here go through a lot of turnover, she said.

“Folks think they’ll just be answering the phone,” Dinkel said. “It’s a lot more.”

Dinkel says she has trained eight people in the last two years. To become a dispatcher, a person has to go through six to 10 weeks of on-the-job training, she said. They have to take emergency medical training, and have to learn to work the in-house computers and the state system.

Dispatchers have to go through 20 hours of medical re-certification each year, King said.

There is usually just one dispatcher on duty at a time, Dinkel said. On Friday and Saturday nights, though, there usually is an extra person, just in case.

“It’s a lot of work,” Dinkel said, “You can’t just walk off the street and take over the radio. You have to train for it.”

The job can be frantic if you let it.

“It can be stressful,” Dinkel said. “It takes time to get past that point of tension in your stomach.

“Training teaches you to use a particular tone of voice, which helps. We also have a script for most situations.”

The stress of dealing with life-and-death situations is worth it, though, she said.

“In times of crises, we’re the last resort,” Dinkel said. “It make you feel good at the end of the day.

“There have been times when a person’s spouse was dying, and I’ve been able to talk them through CPR and they made it. There have been times when I was able to talk suicidal callers down.”

It can be exciting, too. Dispatchers occa-



Dispatcher Stacy Dinkel is on the phone Monday at her station in the basement of the city administration building. The dispatchers receive every 911 call in the county, and often have to try to calm callers down. Photos by Doug Stephens/The Goodland Daily News



Dispatchers use computers to retrieve records for police, and to keep track of the calls they get. They are being honored for their help keeping the public safe this week.

sionally work police chases, jail breaks and tornadoes. During the last snow storm, Dinkel said, they received 57 emergency calls from I-70.

“You name it, it’s happened on my shift,” she said.

Not every case can come out well, though. Dispatchers have gone through heartbreaks. People sometimes die on the way to the hospital, and the fire department can’t always make it to the scene fast enough.

“Every once in a while, we get someone who we can’t help,” said King, “like when those people died in a trailer-fire last year.

“I don’t like to see anyone hurt. I like to get help there when they need it.”

Dinkel agrees.

“The most frustrating thing is not being able to help, or folks calling in and not giving me enough information to help them.”

Sometimes a call comes in too late, Dinkel said, and sometimes the caller doesn’t give

enough information.

“A lot of times, people don’t realize that the questions we ask are important,” Dinkel said. “They want us to send someone over there right away, which is understandable, but we ask these questions so we know who to send and the right place to send them.”

King says dispatchers have to have basic information.

“We need to know who, where, a call-back number, and what the problem might be,” she said. “People think their address just shows up on our screen.

Lots of times it does, but we need to make sure you didn’t go over to your neighbors’ or something.

“Sometimes people get agitated when we double-check this information. They are already agitated, and don’t understand why we need to do it.”

Most times, though, King said people are cooperative.

King has been involved in law enforcement for years. She worked as a dispatcher in another county and is a former officer.

Dinkel said she just kind of fell into the job.

“I have six kids, and I’m sort of the neighborhood mom,” she said. “When moms have a problem, they come over to me for help. I figured if I can handle that, I can handle 911.”

The special week was begun by the Contra Costa County, Calif., sheriff’s department in 1981 to give recognition to the often ignored “voice on the radio.” Other departments across the country picked up on the week over the next few years and the U.S. Congress introduced the honor nationally in 1992.

Goodland police usually send the dispatchers flowers or balloons during the week, Messamore said.

Last year, they brought in cookies. She said she doesn’t know what they will do this year.

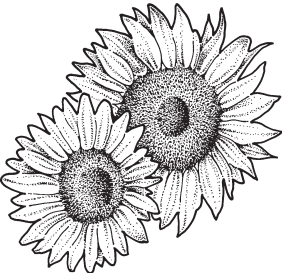
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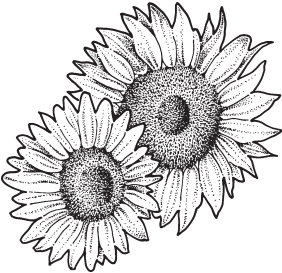
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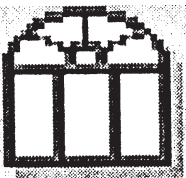
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