Chapter 4

Unique Job Roles and Mental Health Risk Factors Among Emergency Dispatchers

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ABSTRACT

Emergency medical, fire, and police dispatchers are often called the first, first responders. Working in emergency communication centers, they are the first point of contact with medical, fire, and law enforcement resources and the first point of access to public health and public safety systems for millions of callers each year. Emergency dispatchers face unique risks to their mental health, and the roles and responsibilities specific to their work produce stressors not synonymous with those encountered by other first responders and emergency workers. Yet relatively little research has been done to understand the specific mental health concerns of this vital and often overlooked segment of the emergency services profession. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the job-specific tasks and work characteristics that make the emergency dispatcher’s job qualitatively different from the jobs of other emergency workers and first responders, then discuss the unique mental health risks associated with their work.

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INTRODUCTION

Emergency medical, fire, and police dispatchers are often called the first, first responders (Clawson, Dernocoeur, & Murray 2015). They are the first point of contact with medical, fire, and law enforcement resources and the first point of access to the public health and public safety systems for tens of millions of callers each year. However, the work of emergency dispatchers differs significantly from that of other first responders and emergency workers. Emergency dispatchers handle situations of equal emotional weight to those encountered by first responders—including medical emergencies, structure fires, motor vehicle crashes, domestic violence, and the whole long list of human tragedies—but must do so remotely. Being removed from the scene might seem to make their job easier or less stressful, but the opposite is often the case.

Significant research has demonstrated that field responders experience very high levels of stress (McQuerry, Giano, & Merten, 2018), burnout (Boland et al., 2018; Khatiban, Hosseini, Bikmoradi, Roshanaei, Karampourian, 2015; Mitani, Fujita, Nakata, & Shirakawa, 2006), suicide (Carleton et al., 2018b), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Berger et al., 2012; Carlier, Lamberts, & Gersons, 1997; Fullerton, Ursano, & Wang, 2004; Haugen, Evces, & Weiss, 2012), and other mental health effects (Carleton et al., 2018a) from repeatedly responding to and managing others’ trauma. This applies across all three of the main disciplines of field response: firefighters (Henderson & Van Hasselt, 2016; Jahnke, Poston, Haddock, & Murphy, 2016; Kim et al., 2018), police officers (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2015; Hem, Berg, & Ekberg, 2001; Price, 2017), and emergency medical services (EMS) responders (Berger et al., 2007; Donnelly, 2012). Many of the causes of the stress, PTSD, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidality, and other mental health issues experienced by field personnel are common to emergency dispatching as well, including shift work (Ma et al., 2013; Markus, Hartman, Brand, Holsboer-Trachsler, & Puhse, 2010), repeated exposure to trauma (Milligan-Saville et al., 2018; Rallings, 2000), and a professional culture that often downplays the mental health effects of the work or expressions of those effects (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Tuckey, Winwood, & Dollard, 2012), among many others.

However, while the events emergency dispatchers manage are identical to those handled by field responders, the working conditions of emergency dispatchers are very different—so much so that they experience unique risks as a result. Several studies have shown that the level of stress, burnout, and other mental health issues is as high among emergency dispatchers as among field responders (Lilly & Pierce, 2013; Meischke et al., 2015; Pierce & Lilly, 2012; Trachik et al., 2015), but few have identified the different causes of those outcomes among dispatchers. This chapter will review the work of emergency dispatchers in comparison to field responders and outline the unique risk factors faced by dispatchers, who by the nature of their work handle emergencies over the phone, rather than in person.

THE EMERGENCY DISPATCHER’S ROLE

The emergency dispatcher (sometimes referred to as an emergency calltaker) plays an unusual but critical role in public safety and emergency services. The first point of contact for anyone calling for emergency medical, fire, or police services, the emergency dispatcher is part information gatherer, part system manager, and part care provider (Clawson, Dernocoeur, & Murray, 2015).