



# Invisible 911 Dispatchers in New Jersey Face Uncertainty During Pandemic

By DANIEL DEVINE

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SPARTA, NJ - On a fall day in 2019, a young boy riding his bicycle rolled onto the main road near his Sussex County home. The reverberations from an oncoming dump truck would signal danger to any adult. For this boy they foretold death. Someone placed a 911 call.

Scot Sorensen, 49, is the 911 Coordinator for the Sparta Police Department SPD. The dispatcher has answered over 100,000 calls during his 25 years on the job. The call about the 2-year-old boy stands as the worst in his career.

The over [1,000 dispatchers](#) in New Jersey are instantly immersed into the most traumatic life experiences of people in their communities. They can become the first person a caller talks to after the death of a loved one. Other times they become the last person a caller talks to before dying. In most cases, dispatchers help save lives.

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Over [9,000,000](#) calls were made to 911 in New Jersey last year. The constant involvement in life and death situations, under pressure, exposes dispatchers to [elevated levels of mental and emotional stress](#), all while remaining invisible to the millions they serve.

The onset of Covid-19 presents a new challenge to New Jersey's 911 professionals, but not because of increased calls. Instead, in many locations the [pandemic has ravaged the tax revenues of the counties and towns](#) that fund 911 centers. Many emergency call centers nationwide [reported](#) a reduction in spending as early as May because of the virus. If and how that will impact the quality of 911 services going forward depends on how long the pandemic lasts and whether additional funding sources can be secured.



**A police car in the parking lot of the SPD, carrying the 911 call number. October 3, 2020. Daniel Devine**

Sorensen's wide shoulders, gray hair and calm demeanor suggest a man with experience who can handle the job, even during a pandemic.

Recalling the death of the 2-year-old boy, without any detectable emotion in his voice, Sorensen said it was difficult to interact with the caller. Continuing, he made a general observation about his role: "The hardest part of that day, or any day we handle a stressful call, is that we can't take a day off. Life goes on."

Sorensen then expressly downplayed the emotional impact of his job. "Nothing compared to the people on the scene," he said, differentiating himself from the responding police officers and medical technicians.

The veteran dispatcher's focus on how he manages callers, rather than his feelings, is one of several [coping mechanisms used by 911 professionals](#). Coping mechanisms aside, dispatchers still face similar emotional and mental issues as police officers.

A 2018 [study](#) found that between 13% and 16% of dispatchers have post-traumatic stress disorder, compared to 7% to 19% for police officers. A 2012 [study](#) reported that their burnout rate is equal to or above their police officer colleagues.

A crack in his voice revealed a possible crack in Sorensen's armor as he discussed youth suicides. In these cases, he explained, not only has a young life been lost, but the caller is often a parent who has just arrived at the scene.

"We want to say everything will be ok, but we can't," Sorensen said.

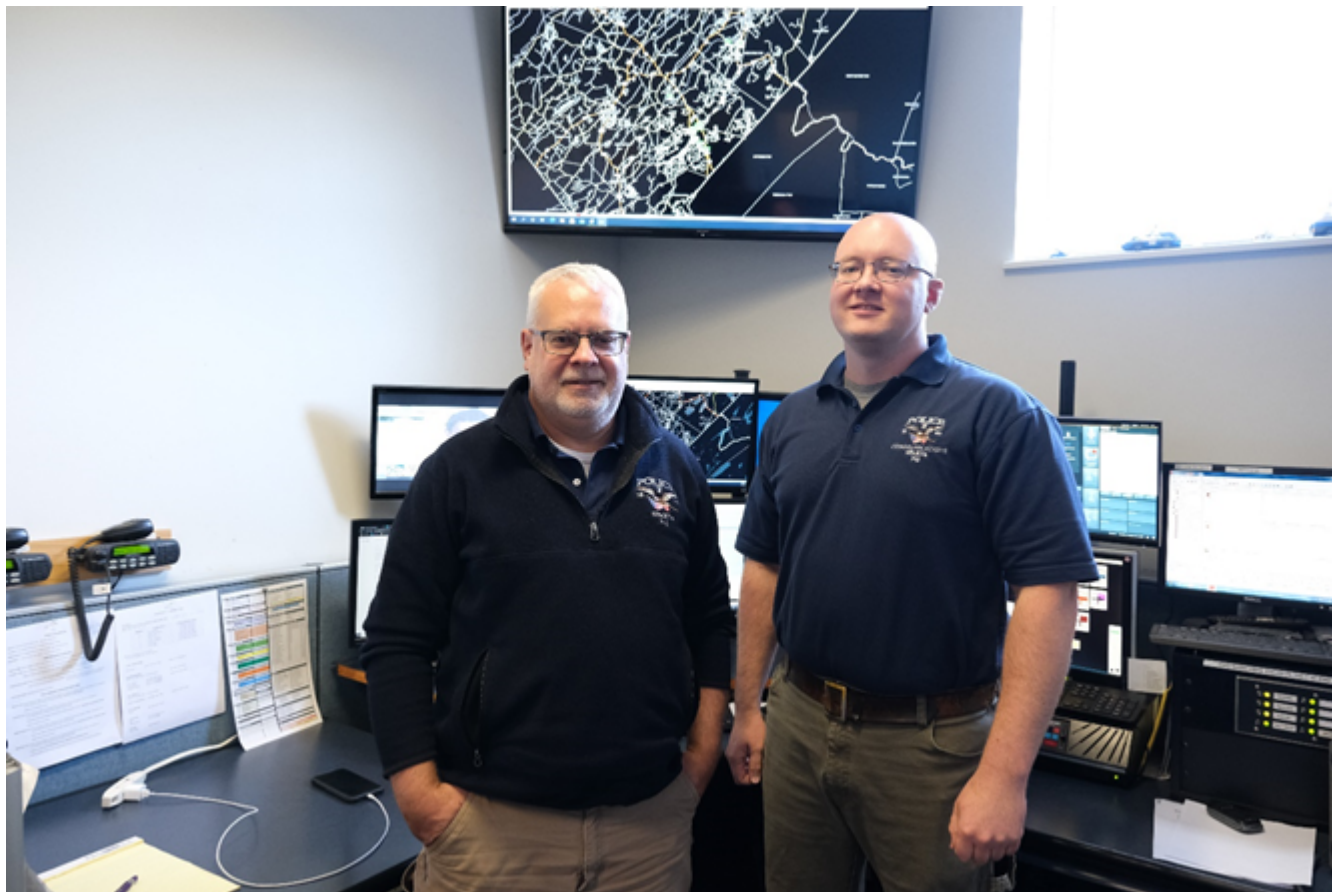
In addition to the emotional component of the job, there is significant pressure on 911 professionals to be effective on each call despite the volume they manage. Federal regulators [estimate](#) that for every minute lost in the nationwide average 911 response time, 10,000 lives are lost.

Detective Lt. Terrence Mulligan, a veteran of the SPD, said of Sorensen's role: "There is no room for error. Lives depend on this." Mulligan, 47, believes that Sorensen is the best dispatcher he has worked with during his 23-year career as a police officer.

Another source of stress that is unique to dispatchers is derived from a [lack of closure](#). His or her role is to act as a bridge between 911 callers and the emergency personnel arriving at the scene, at which time the job ends. They rarely know the outcome.

When resources permit, dispatchers are assigned regular partners with whom they share shifts. These partnerships represent a valuable support mechanism, said Sorensen.

Tom McIntyre, 32, who is even broader and taller than Sorensen, has been his dispatch partner for nearly five years.



**Scot Sorensen, SPD lead dispatcher, left, with partner Tom McIntyre. October 4, 2020. Daniel Devine.**

The two remain measured while handling calls, with low voices that betray their physical presence. In between calls, they offer support or advice to each other. Most often the dialogue is accompanied by light laughter and accompanying smiles.

Laughter is another important [coping mechanism](#).

After several visits to the SPD, it becomes clear how the two depend on each other. Partners take care of each other and watch each other's back, Sorensen said of his relationship with McIntyre.

Outside their police department confines, 911 professionals receive little to no recognition for the value they deliver.



**The Sparta Police Department building. October 5, 2020. Daniel Devine.**

"No," Sorensen said, almost surprised by being asked whether any of the people he has helped circled back to offer gratitude. Not one time in a quarter century. "People think we answer phones and answer the radio, basically a glorified secretary."

Even during a pandemic, when other first responders are receiving increased recognition, many community residents remain oblivious to the importance of 911 dispatchers. A May [study](#) by the National Emergency Number Association or NENA found that almost 54% of over 500 dispatchers, surveyed nationwide, reported difficulty in acquiring masks. They were not seen as first responders or even essential workers.

The challenges of his job do not seem to deter Sorensen. He expressed no complaints.

“Cooking school, when I was 18,” Sorensen said when asked whether he had considered any alternative careers.

After answering, SPD’s 911 Coordinator paused, looked away then back again and flashed a satisfied smile. “At the end of a busy day, I know I have helped people,” Sorensen said.

It seemed as if he imagined his life as a chef, then quickly concluded he made the right choice. Neil Spidaletto, the Chief of Police in Sparta, agreed, “Scot does a great job.”

But what, if anything, presents an added challenge for Sorensen and his team?

“A full moon,” Sorensen said without any hesitation or hint of humor. “It’s been shown over again,” he continued, not offering any evidence to support that claim.

The unexpected rise of Covid-19 may prove to be akin to a full moon. The NENA [study](#) showed that by May, 40% of the surveyed dispatch centers had already reduced operations due to the pandemic. However, unlike a full moon, there is no way to determine how long the pandemic will continue.

Who can New Jersey’s localities, which currently fund 911 centers, call upon for additional funding if needed? The state of New Jersey is one option.

[Trenton raises over \\$100 million in 911 earmarked revenues per year, not a single dollar of which goes to local dispatch centers.](#) From a financial perspective, 911 dispatchers are currently invisible to the state’s legislators.

Regardless of what happens or does not happen in Trenton, people in need will continue to rely on their local 911 operators. Sorensen and McIntyre will be waiting on the other end of the line. As Sorensen pointed out, even when dealing with deadly emergencies, life goes on.

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