

Currently, Chaffee serves as a dispatcher for the Glastonbury Police Department in Glastonbury, Connecticut, where she has been employed for the past eight years. She also serves as a volunteer firefighter for the Glastonbury Fire Department and engages in drills every other week. Chaffee also runs the cadet program, which requires her to engage in two extra drills per month.

Included in her initial training for her job as a dispatcher was a 40-hour telecommunications class, a three-day National Crime Information Center (NCIC) course and a three-day Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) class offered by the state of Connecticut.

Though Chaffee is skilled in handling all types of calls, she is particularly concerned about any calls involving children or shootings. A couple years ago, there was a shooting in the nearby town of Manchester where eight people died as a result. She also finds domestic calls are rough because, oftentimes, the dispatcher doesn't know what is really happening on the other side of the phone. "I am more concerned about officer safety. They are hard because you have to work the officer safety aspect," Chaffee said.

A number of skills are vital for her to do her job effectively. Listening is essential and is most important not only to what is being said but what is occurring in the background. Multi-tasking is necessary because in a small agency such as hers, Chaffee is doing everything all at once. Patience is critical because callers on the other end are frequently upset, emotional and in crisis. Chaffee has to focus on the fact that those on the other end of the phone are the ones experiencing the emergency. All these skills are developed and honed over a period of time. "You start at what you are good at and build from there," Chaffee said.

For Chaffee and other dispatchers, stress is a predominant factor present on the job. Though it is wise to leave work and put the day's events behind, Chaffee acknowledged that it is difficult to do. However, she pointed out that focusing on safety as a priority, along with taking a deep breath, makes it easier to do this. Her other outlets to alleviate stress include playing trivia, participating on a softball team, engaging in sports, riding a motorcycle, volunteering at the fire department, and spending time with fire department colleagues and friends.

Chaffee relishes the diversity involved in her role as a dispatcher. She likes variety, which makes it easier for her to do the work. One of her lighter moments on the job happened when she received a call about a lost wallet at the Glastonbury music festival. What she soon discovered was the call came in from Glastonbury, England—not Glastonbury, Connecticut.

Another call that she recollects with a lasting impact was a woman who came to the lobby of the police department stating her husband, who had Alzheimer's, was lost, and she could not locate him. Chaffee discovered that he was four towns away at a McDonald's. In speaking with the man on the phone, Chaffee asked him to name the nearby memorials and that is how she connected the town related to his whereabouts. With an undergraduate degree in geography, it is not surprising that she was able to help. Her knowledge has enabled her to find other people including lost hikers in the woods. She has also trained the fire department in the use of GPS units related to latitude/longitude coordinates from the 9-1-1 screen.

Though her town is small, there is a mixture of crimes. Cars have been broken into, and there was a fight that included 450 people with weapons and robberies at gas stations. Glastonbury is one town over

from Hartford, making it a combination of a suburban town as well as a rural area. There are seven businesses open 24 hours in the area.

Chaffee pointed out that police officers are on higher alert safety-wise, and this remains in the back of everyone's mind. No place is safe anymore — including small towns, she said. Everyone must maintain a sense of heightened awareness. "I must always be at the top of my game," Chaffee said.

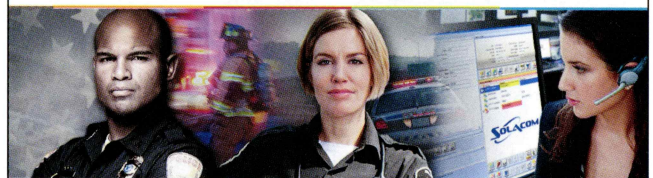
Chaffee has received a number of awards for her work including several departmental life safety awards, a Red Cross lifesaving award, and a Firefighter of the Year Award. For those who may be considering entering the field, Chaffee has words of wisdom. "The hardest thing is knowing you can't do the job," she said. "It's not a game. It's about life and death. You have people's lives in hand. You have to be on your toes. You have to be prepared from zero to 60. You have to have the ethic to do what we do. It's a hard job — nights, weekends and holidays. It takes a special breed to do what we do."

Chaffee, a fully engaged public servant, admitted her fire background has helped her tremendously and has made her job "9,000 times easier." She added, "I love my job. I wouldn't trade my job for anything else." That says it all. ●

*Karen L. Bune serves as an adjunct professor at George Mason University and Marymount University in Virginia, and she is a consultant for the Training and Technical Assistance Center for the Office for Victims of Crime and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.*



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