



## The Blame Game

Author: Barry Furey

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Browsing the web recently, I've come across several articles that reaffirm my belief that if being a scapegoat were a game of tag, telecommunicators would perpetually be "it." Now, this should come as no surprise. After all, in a profession that has historically been viewed as a gathering of redheaded stepchildren, taking potshots at the PSAP is nothing new. What is new, however, is the scope of these collective allegations and insinuations. While I'll paraphrase for the sake of brevity, the intent is clear: whatever it is, it's the dispatcher's fault. This thinking dovetails nicely with my favorite analogy: 9-1-1 is like a submarine. Nobody sees us or hears us until something blows up. Then they blame us for the explosion.



In the first case, a fire department spokesperson advised that they would have gotten to a fire much faster had they been advised that there were victims still in the house. Now, don't get me wrong. Leaving out that someone is still inside is a pretty big deal, but, honestly, what measurable difference does this information make in the time it takes to get there? "Gee, we wouldn't have had that second cup of coffee if we knew we had a victim." People; please! Yep, it's a problem. Yep, it's a BIG problem. But when agencies all over the country are re-examining their response protocols, and in many instances requiring units to stop at all red lights regardless of the severity of the call, the point may be moot.

Which leads me to another pet peeve; dispatch processing times. We all want to get help on the way to people who need it as quickly as possible. More importantly, we want to get the right help to the right location as quickly as possible. This does not happen without questions being asked; and in some cases lots of them. Most calls being wireless in origin automatically adds to the time it takes to get a valid dispatchable location. Throw in some non-English speakers and a couple of 9-1-1 misroutes and those time sensitive benchmarks you've established have taken a pretty good hit. Pile on top of this the fact that some agencies see CAD not as Computer Aided Dispatch, but rather as Capture All Data, thereby generating a string of marginally effective questions. Now, please don't confuse this with any of the formal protocols out there. These work, but they too take time. And therein lies the rub. When did time inside the PSAP become different than time on the street? Are seconds not seconds no matter who spends them? I'm sure we've all seen cases where a telecommunicator was criticized for taking too much time to handle a call, but where besides the academy have you ever seen a firefighter donning gear being measured by a stop watch? If you're going to criticize, then at least have the decency to look at every aspect of response – not just one. An ambulance riding buddy of mine signs all of his web posts, "Fire – The Bravest. Police – The Proudest. EMS – The Forgotten." I have to remind him that sometimes being forgotten is an upgrade from being singled out.

On another front, I came across a piece asserting that the handling of a call was compromised by a telecommunicator's lack of familiarity with gang terminology. Some might consider that a good thing. At least you know where your employees are not spending their off-duty time. Now, in all seriousness, where gang activity is high I would suspect that some gang awareness training is in order. But I also would not rely upon this training to make anyone 100% proficient in

street talk. So, what is the public expectation? Unfortunately, many times it is more than we can deliver. Do we therefore need to add gang lingo to our list of available interpretation services? “Hello, translation center? This is operator 40 at 9-1-1. I need someone who speaks MS-13.” Are gang members now considered a protected class and covered by the equal access provisions of the ADA, or is this just a portent of things to come? “Oh, jeez. I’ve got a plumber on the phone. Anybody here speak heating and cooling?”

For me, the first shots in this battle were fired with the rash of occupied vehicle drownings that made the news a few years back. These made such an impact on our industry that there are now officially recognized protocols for how to handle such calls. Although it’s our job to provide help and I have the utmost sympathy for victims who don’t get it, we’ve now essentially codified our liability to provide such instruction for these and dozens of other situations that some might argue ought need not be explained to a reasonable person. And once that decision is made, there’s no turning back.

Where does all this lead? Who knows? Perhaps we’ll wind up issuing such politically correct advice that our precious time-to-dispatch will suffer even further. “Are you with the patient now? No? OK, I need you to take your phone and go over to the victim. Oh, and since it’s a cell phone I am required to remind you that some studies indicate there may be some cancer risks associated with these devices. Now, please do not run with any sharp objects on the way, keep lollipops out of your mouth, and watch out for tripping hazards. If you must cross a street, please do so only at an approved crosswalk after looking both ways. If it is a controlled intersection, wait for the pedestrian signal and/or green light, and be aware of vehicles making right turns on red. When contacting the patient use universal precautions. Oops, wait. I don’t think I’m supposed to say that last one. What’s that? Someone took him to the hospital in their car ten minutes ago? Do you happen to know this person’s cell phone number so I can give them directions and safe driving instructions?”

Better yet, maybe in our “free time” we should be dialing at random to give folks emergency information and advice. You never know when they’re gonna need it. And shame on us for not telling them that someday they might need assistance...

***Our PSAP Management columnist Barry Furey has been involved in public safety for more than 40 years, having managed 9-1-1 centers in four states. A life member of APCO International, he is the current director of the Raleigh-Wake County (NC) Emergency Communications Center.***

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