



Above, Calgary Police Service call evaluator Heather McEachern.

In the city of Calgary, Alberta, a band of IBEW Local 254 members face nonstop problems—matters of life and death—that roll in around the clock. These members are dispatchers and emergency operators with the Police Service and Fire Department, who perform highly critical and demanding jobs requiring mastery of state-of-the-art computerized communications equipment.

Operating in a city of nearly 800,000, the Calgary dispatchers demonstrate highly developed and varied skills as they handle calls to the police and fire departments throughout the day and night. These members exemplify the breadth of occupations within the ranks of the IBEW.

Calgary Dispatchers: A Vital Co

Police Service Communications Officers

As communications officers (COs) of the Calgary Police Service, dispatchers and call evaluators are uniformed members (though not sworn officers) of the Police Service. CO trainees undergo a rigorous hiring and training process, receiving instruction in federal, provincial and municipal law; computers; academics; customer service; and physical and mental health. When civilians were first hired as COs, they did not dispatch; that was reserved to police officers. That changed as the workers showed that they were more than capable of handling all duties. As reported by Calgary Police Service COs Susanne Tarrant and Sharon Keelaghan, "We have proven ourselves not only as call evaluators, but have gone on to become dispatchers [which requires] six weeks of officer coaching, an additional week of classroom study, and hands-on training."

The call evaluators answer and evaluate all incoming calls, 23 percent of which are dispatched to the field. Call evaluators also provide information to the public on such matters as criminal, provincial and municipal statutes, crime



At right, Angie Baier trains Ron Janert on one of the Police Service Communications Centre computer systems.

prevention and other citizen needs and questions.

Dispatchers review the calls entered by the call evaluators, dispatch situations and keep a constant record of the progress of calls—simultaneously managing the police radio, the computer, the telephone, and information from co-workers. The COs also have limited access to the Canadian Police Intelligence Computer so they can check for warrants, criminal records, stolen cars and such information. They stay in touch with officers dispatched to a scene and coordinate officer efforts with outside agencies. The COs must do all this while remaining calm and organized in a high-stress environment.

A Dispatcher Describes Her Work

One police dispatcher said the COs sometimes feel like characters on a M*A*S*H television episode, explaining that, "There are times when we feel the stress of trying to keep a gunman calm enough not to shoot anyone until the police apprehend him; times of talking someone out of suicide, or dealing with the death of a police officer who may be a good friend. Through all of this, we have to remain calm and on top of any critical situation." She noted that, "A team working together under these conditions really becomes a family, and we are always there for each other."

On duty at Rotary Park 911/Fire Dispatch Headquarters, from left, back row: Andy Schulthess, Judy Bussey, Robert Ditchfield, Greg Binnion and Dennis Spurway; front row, Trina Noseworthy, Linda Gorko, Lorna Harlow, Daryl Elson and John Wills.



Communications Link

How Police Service COs Gained IBEW Representation

After a hard-fought struggle, in 1989 the Police Service Communications Officer Unit gained the right, as a result of Labour Relations Board (LRB) hearings, to representation by IBEW Local 254. In 1986 the Calgary Police Service Management had decided to hire civilians as COs (a relatively new concept in Canadian

law enforcement), and the first group of civilians began a five-week training course at the police training academy.

Initially, the CO Unit came under the jurisdiction of the Calgary Police Association. Subsequently the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) challenged this representation and filed a motion with the Labour Relations Board asserting that CUPE should be the bargaining agent for the COs. The LRB ruled in December 1986 that the COs were not covered under the CUPE certificate and further that they were also excluded from the Calgary Police Association bargaining unit. So, the CO Unit found itself without union representation.

Following that ruling, the group approached the IBEW. After much research and hard work by Local 254 Business Manager John Briegel and the employee representatives, the LRB ruled in favor of Local 254. The resulting representation election took place in 1989. Of the 58 employees who voted, 57 voted for IBEW Local 254. When the IBEW began representation, the CO Unit consisted of 66 members. Today, it is 110 members strong.

(Continued on page 29)



Charlene Habkirk coordinates services to assist police units she is dispatching.

A DAY AT THE COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

Communications Center activity on a given day might look like this:

Rene is advising the mother of an out-of-control teenager of available resources. Susanne, sitting beside Rene, desperately tries to calm a 14-year-old boy who has accidentally shot his best friend. While talking with the boy, Susanne simultaneously updates the attending unit of the situation through computer entries. Her soothing tone reassures the boy somewhat, but every second seems like an hour until ambulance and police personnel arrive. Across the room, Angie adroitly deals with the daily rambling of a confused mental patient. Surrounding these three women, 20 additional COs are taking calls and handling crises. Meanwhile, 13 calls are waiting and an emergency line is flashing.

In the dispatch room, Sharon checks on a police unit she has sent to a violent domestic situation; officer safety is her number one priority. She recalls from a few years ago the scream of a police officer who watched a partner struck and killed by a speeding stolen car, and the six grueling hours that followed during which she talked nonstop with personnel on the street, assisting the officers in remaining calm and focused on searching for the offenders, while showing no signs of emotion herself. Terri is busy coordinating police units with the Ambulance Service at a serious injury accident, while also completing requests for the Public Works Department to bring barricades and the Electrical Department to repair a damaged light standard.

(Continued from page 13)

Trailblazers at the Calgary Fire Department

Calgary Fire Department dispatchers and 911-emergency operators are a smaller unit that has been represented by Local 254 for about 35 years. The Rotary Park 911/Fire Dispatch Headquarters Unit is composed of 24 permanent and six on-call emergency operators and dispatchers. These workers handle the dispatch and monitoring of Calgary fire units, and the emergency operators receive and direct all 911 calls.

The Fire Department dispatchers and emergency operators work demanding 12-hour shifts—two days/two nights on, and four days off. Shifting is designed to accommodate the peak call-load periods and enables the employees to spend four days of every eight with their families. In the past year, the Rotary Park Unit employees have noted an ever-changing and escalating work load as the city grows.

In 1989 the first two Rotary Park 911 on-call relief operators were hired to fill in as necessary for employees away on vacation or sick leave. All employees hired after 1989 begin as relief operators with no set schedule, until a permanent position opens.

Prior to 1981, only men staffed the Rotary Park operation (known as the Fire Department Alarm Room). The first two females were assigned in 1981, and there were adjustments to be made and obstacles to overcome. Today, one-half of the Alarm Room employees are women. Local 254 member Vicki Parent, one of the first women employed there, remains a member of the Rotary Park Unit today, in the capacity of acting supervisor.

Many of the IBEW members employed at the Rotary Park Unit have previous work experience in law enforcement agencies and other dispatch centers, which serves them well in performing their vital communications function with the city of Calgary. ■

WHAT WE DO

At right, Rotary Park emergency operator Lorna Harlow.



Rotary Park supervisors Andy Schulthess (left) and Dennis Spurway.



At the Rotary Park 911/Fire Dispatch Headquarters: emergency operator Trina Noseworthy (foreground), and emergency dispatchers Robert Ditchfield (left) and John Wills (background).