

Abuse of 911: Alarming number of callers use emergency service as customer service line

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Published September 25, 2018

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ALAMEDA COUNTY, Calif. (KTVU) - In her 19 years as an East Bay dispatcher, Rachael Herron said she received way too many 911 calls that were clearly not emergencies. She fielded calls about blaring music. An abandoned car on the street. Frogs croaking too loudly. A family of raccoons running along someone's back fence.

Last month, an elderly man called [Alameda County dispatch asking for a rabbi.](#)

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“These are not emergencies, and they’re not important,” Herron said. “That’s the thing that drove me the most crazy. Most of these calls were things that if people just went and had a two-sentence conversation with the person who was bothering them, would have been resolved.”

LISTEN: Permit Patty calls 911 on girl selling water without permit

Dispatchers like Herron note an alarming increase in the number of callers who use the 911 system as their own personal customer service line. There are no national statistics to show just how many callers abuse the 911 system, according to the National Emergency Number Association. But in some jurisdictions, such as San Francisco, about 40 percent of the calls that come in to the emergency hotline are quickly deemed non emergencies, according to reporting by 2 Investigates.

“This means more than 257,000 calls to 911 were not emergencies in 2016,” said San Francisco Department of Emergency Francis Zamora, referring to the latest statistics available. San Francisco dispatchers receive about 3,500 calls a day, about a 1.2 million a year.

Zamora added that since 2011, the number of dispatch calls has risen by 37 percent, meaning that 911 dispatchers are answering 1,000 more calls a day than they did seven years ago.

Non-emergency calls are a burden for dispatchers

Non-emergency calls are a burden for dispatchers who are trying to triage real emergencies and save people’s lives.

"Yeah, and you have to go from hearing a child die in your ear to taking the phone call of the woman who thinking the rap music next door is the worst thing that ever happened to her," Herron said. "What if you just said, ‘Sir, please turn down

your music?' instead of hiding inside and calling police? Neighbors should get to know each other and people should have empathy and understand what is a big deal and what is not."

LISTEN: Frustrating 911 calls that are not emergencies

Some of the 911 calls deemed non-emergencies that 2 Investigates reviewed include:

"San Francisco 911...What's the exact location of your emergency?"

"I think we just had an earthquake."

"Is anyone injured?"

"No."

"Okay, I'm going to let you go."

"San Francisco emergency. What is the address of the emergency?"

"Uh, this is a non-emergency. I'm making a call to the police...my car got towed and I'm trying to check out where is my car?"

"(Alameda) County emergency."

"Hello."

"Hi, how can I help you?"

"I have no internet."

"You what?"

"I have no internet."

"Okay, you not having internet is not a matter for 911. Is there somebody else you can call?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, you can try to...what cable company do you have?"

"Uh, Xfinity?"

"Okay, is that who your internet is with too?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, you can pull up one of your bills and you can call the number on there, okay.

Not 911."

"Okay."

"Okay, good luck."

911 calls on the rise because of technology

Dispatchers say that the number of calls are on the rise mostly because of technology. It's easy to call 911 on a cell phone, and pocket dials also abound. Before cell phones, people had to call 911 on a rotary landline, and the number "9" was specifically chosen because it took the most effort on a to select and dial.

Plus, as 25-year San Francisco dispatcher veteran Dawn Mahoney said, it seems like people these days just want their needs to be taken care of immediately.

"People call 911 thinking if they do, they'll just get police faster," she said. "Even though they don't have an emergency, dialing 911 to them is easier than looking up a number to call the correct line."

LISTEN: BBQ Becky calls 911 over charcoal grill

Mahoney implored people to keep a non-emergency number of their city's police department in their phone instead of dialing an emergency line for mundane questions. Mahoney said some of the most prevalent types of 911 calls that she gets, which are clearly not emergencies, are people complaining about homelessness, panhandling and house parties that are too loud.

Some 911 calls have inflamed race relations

A small subset of non-emergency 911 calls have inflamed race relations in the Bay Area this spring and summer.

Those calls range from Alison Ettel, nicknamed “Permit Patty,” in San Francisco, who called 911 on an 8-year-old African-American girl selling water without a permit to the case of [Erika Martin in Mountain View](#), who was mistakenly linked to an African-American family wrongly accused of shoplifting at a Safeway. It turned out Martin, who is also black, was at the store to feed a homeless man and a dog. The original shoplifting allegation also turned out to be false.

And of course, there is the now infamous 911 call to Oakland police on two African-American men who were using a charcoal BBQ at Lake Merritt.

On April 29, Jennifer Schulte, who earned the nickname “BBQ Becky,” spent about 15 minutes on the phone with two dispatchers, asking for police help after seeing Kenzie Smith and Onsayo Abram using a charcoal grill in a non-designated spot. She ended up arguing with a second dispatcher, because she didn’t want to give her race so police could identify her at the lake.

“Who’s yelling in the background? Why is the person yelling? To panic over a barbecue? I don’t understand,” the dispatcher asks Schulte in a lengthy and tense call that took 12 minutes.

Herron, the veteran East Bay dispatcher, described some of the 911 callers that she spoke to as “racially motivated.” To her, that means the callers reported on a person of color out of fear, not based on an actionable emergency.

And she got these calls a lot.

“Oh, every hour,” she said. “Every single day I got the calls. ‘You need to come check this person out...he or she is suspicious. I can tell that they don’t live here.’”

”

PHOTOS: Alarming number of non-emergency calls to 911 centers on the rise

Dispatchers must take action on calls, but they can prioritize

Across the country, the types of calls that come in to 911 and tie up the lines are just as mind boggling. Last December, a man in Florida called 911 complaining about the size of his clams at a restaurant. In Minnesota, a man called 911 to say he was out of cheddar cheese and couldn't make his lasagna recipe. Callers in Indianapolis called dispatch to report spiders in their apartment, flowers in the garden were vandalized and cats stuck under the hood of their car. A Burger King customer in Ohio called 911 on an employee who he said refused to honor his coupons.

These calls are frustrating, Mahoney said, because the next call in the queue might be “someone who can't breathe.”

By law, dispatchers can't refuse service.

“No matter how ridiculous I think the call is, we have to send someone if they want someone to respond,” Herron said.

But they can and do prioritize calls.

Herron pointed out that in the case of BBQ Becky, the Oakland dispatcher wrote “NFD” on the transcript of the April 29 911 call. NFD means “no further description.” Herron interpreted that to mean that the dispatcher didn't ask any follow-up questions and didn't feel the call was important.

Laws ban 911 abuse, but authorities don't want chilling effect

There are laws across the country that ban the practice of 911 abuse.

It is a misdemeanor in California for any person to willfully use the 911 system for any purpose other than reporting an emergency. It is a felony if someone is

injured or dies as a result of emergency service response to a false call. In 2008, for example, a Hayward man was arrested for calling 911 roughly 27,000 times, just to press the beep tone and talk in a fake voice.

But prosecutions of 911 abuse are rare. And that's on purpose.

As San Francisco District Attorney spokesman Alex Bastian said, authorities are hesitant to crack down on these type of callers because that would have a "chilling effect" on people who might really have an emergency.

Dispatchers are the first ones to say they want people to continue calling 911. But they are also imploring callers not to tie up the lines unnecessarily.

"You could be taking up somebody else's time that really needs help," Mahoney said.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED: Here are some of the non-emergency numbers for police some police agencies around the Bay Area: Alameda County Sheriff 510-667-7721; Oakland police 510-777-3333; San Francisco police 415-553-0123; and San Jose police 408- 277-8900.