

Transition to the new Public Safety Building & National Telecommunicator Week

By, B. Michael Thurlow, Fire Chief

Each year, the second full week of April is dedicated to the men and women who serve as public safety telecommunicators. This year we honor the often unsung heroes of public safety, our dispatchers, during the week of April 12-18. Every emergency that a police officer or firefighter responds to either starts with, or is handled by, one of our public safety dispatchers. They are truly on the front line, and are generally the first person a citizen deals with during a crisis.

Scarborough is very fortunate to be one of only 24 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) in the State of Maine. This means that when a 911 call comes in for the town of Scarborough, it generally is routed directly to us, without the additional step of being transferred from another agency. There are a minimum of two dispatchers working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and more during peak times or significant events.

During the current pandemic crisis our dispatchers are asking a series of extra health screening questions when you call 911. The purpose of those questions is to try to identify patients who potentially have the Corona Virus so they can alert first responders of the need to don the appropriate personal protective equipment to assist the patient while also protecting themselves.

The dispatcher's duties don't stop at just answering 911 calls, they also include dispatching police, fire, & rescue services, coordinating efforts with the Public Works Department, Community Services, and the Sanitary District; answering the business phone lines with general questions and complaints, greeting citizens in the lobby of the public safety building, and several other tasks as assigned by the officers and firefighters.

On top of the stress of the current pandemic, all public safety personnel, including our dispatchers, are preparing for a big change as we transition our operations to the new Public Safety Building. After several years of planning and over 15 months of construction that move will finally be taking place by the end of this month. Our local construction manager, Landry/French, has done a remarkable job completing this project within our original timeline. The dozens of subcontractors from the various trades have been challenged by the recent events, but they have all stepped up to make sure this critical facility can go live before we need to vacate our current public safety building which is being sold to help fund the new station.

On April 10 we actually started transitioning the fire and police administration and detective bureau to their offices on the 2nd floor of the new building. IT staff installed their repurposed computers and phones over the weekend and they were the first to start working out of the new facility on Monday, April 13. The following week fire and police operations/patrol will make their transition.

Over the next two weeks the dispatch center infrastructure will also transition. Radio, phone, 911, and IT infrastructure is being built out and tested. Our plan assures that there will be no interruption in service, even though much of the infrastructure and radio equipment is being repurposed and transferred from our old facility to the new one. Final testing is scheduled for 4/21 and the new dispatch center is scheduled to go live on Wednesday 4/22.

Chief Moulton and I want to commend our entire public safety team for their patience, professionalism, and for their unwavering commitment to serving and protecting the citizens of Scarborough. They are all naturally concerned about their own, and their family's personal safety, yet still come to work every day ready to serve.

Although our dispatchers never know what might be happening on the other end of the line each time they answer the phone you can be assured whether it is as straightforward as a lost dog or as complex as a structure fire, the professionals in the Scarborough's Public Safety Dispatch Center are prepared to answer your call. During National Telecommunicators week we make an extra effort to salute and thank them for the critical service they provide to our community.

If you have any question about this article or any fire department issue you may contact me at mthurlow@scarboroughmaine.org or 730-4201.