



Answering the Call

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- Matt:** Hello, and welcome to this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I'm Matt Garcia with the SAFLEO Program. I'm excited to welcome Teresa Lockwood, Senior Dispatcher with the Connecticut State Police with over 30 years' experience. Today, Teresa and I will be talking about mental wellness for telecommunicators. First off, Teresa, I'd like to welcome you to the show. Thanks for coming on board today.
- Teresa:** Thanks, Matt. Thanks for having me. It's such an honor and a privilege to be here with you to talk about some issues that are near and dear to my heart. And I started my career early on at a local department. And as of recently, I have been an advocate for training and peer support for telecommunicators. And I'm looking forward to talking to you today.
- Matt:** Fantastic. We're looking forward to having you on. I'm excited to get that out there today. In today's discussion, we're going to dive into the unique challenges telecommunicators face and explore ways to foster mental and physical resilience and share insights on building a culture of wellness within this essential workforce. Teresa, we were talking yesterday. You have an interesting backstory as to how you got into this line of profession anyways.
- Teresa:** Absolutely. I started my career like many people on both sides of the fence in law enforcement because of my dad. He had been one of the first civilian dispatchers as they started to transition from the traditional sworn people sitting at the desk. He was one of the first civilians. And I spent many of my years bringing him dinners at Christmastime. I used to sit and kind of watch, so it was definitely a natural progression when it was something that I wanted to go into. I have a vested interest in you and every other officer that I've ever sat the desk for going home at the end of the night. I always say we're on the same team. We don't play the same positions, but our goal is the same, that all of you out there on the road go home every night to your families.

Matt: What's been the hardest part for you as a dispatcher in terms of handling the calls, dispatching the calls out, seeing them through to the end as much as you can before moving on to the next? What are the biggest struggles you would say face dispatchers?

Teresa: I always say that one of the biggest struggles that dispatchers face is that you don't get any closure on a call. We have our senses, and dispatchers only get to satisfy what I call the hearing sense. We only get to hear what's going on, whereas the officers, when they arrive on scene, get to see it, touch it, smell it, and experience all of those other things. That allows the officers' brains to make sense of a senseless situation, while a dispatcher has only those sounds and that trauma—the person who might be screaming because a baby's not breathing—and we never get to see it through to its conclusion. I feel that there are avenues through peer support and other things that can help with that. I was definitely a huge advocate for our department to include the dispatchers because I knew that mental health and the ability to have an outlet to put all the pieces together were so important.

Matt: You talk about when you get that call and you've got somebody on the other line screaming and their world is in complete chaos, and that's coming through to you. How do you handle that while still activating and getting the things in place and dispatching officers to the scene? How do you handle both?

Teresa: That's something that is, first of all, done through training—the ability to multitask—but everything comes into play. You have to be able to remain calm. I can tell you that, on the inside, when I have a hot call, I definitely am physically affected by it, but you have to be able to compartmentalize it. That's why you work with great people. You have a team. We do this every single day, so you just snap into action.

Matt: And when you say snap into action, is it all autopilot for you at this point?

Teresa: Definitely. I kind of compare it to what in the sworn world they consider like muscle memory. It's like drawing your gun. You train over and over to draw your gun through the training that you've had, and call after call, you tend to be able to manage your calmness, and you do. You just go into autopilot. Some days, like I said, I would go home at the end of the day and your brain is just constantly working. And you're always having to think of the next step. What could I get for that officer? What resources do they need? Who do I need to call? I always try to make sure that they are as prepared as possible out on the road, while still managing the calls that are coming in.

Matt: What do you do for yourself after an extremely stressful or tense shift?

Teresa: I tend to be someone who listens to music. That's my outlet. I am a big advocate, even when I get an opportunity to train with people on the sworn side, of having an outlet. Mine happens to be music. That's my way of decompressing. I put on soothing music, and sometimes I'll just drive home in total silence. I'm able to decompress that way. I love to travel. Again, I'm a huge advocate for having a life outside of the law enforcement world itself. Too many people whom you and I both know have

dedicated their lives to this, and they don't have that outlet. So it can be something very simple, but I always say, find something that matters to you outside of this because you have to have that life for your own mental wellness.

Matt: I want to go into the shooting. Are you good with that?

Teresa: Absolutely.

Matt: So, for those listening, on August 3, 2010, in Manchester, Connecticut, a disgruntled employee went into work expecting to be fired, and the situation turned into an active shooting. In the end, the gunman did shoot and kill himself, but eight coworkers were also killed in that shooting. Could you take us through where you were that day and what it was like for you as the calls started coming in?

Teresa: I remember the day very vividly. I remember the phones just started ringing. And I picked up a phone from a female who, throughout the duration of the event, ended up calling 11 times. She was in a closet in an office part of the building calling in. It should be noted that this was in a town, not necessarily an initial jurisdiction of the state police. In our world, we would transfer that call, and it would be the responsibility of the town to go.

Obviously, this situation warranted a larger response. I was talking to this woman, who was in the closet, and she was literally whispering. It took me years to listen to the tape again, but when I did, I noticed that I was also whispering to this woman. I didn't know it at the time because, in my head, I had two things going on. I needed to get the information right for officer safety. I needed to be able to describe that suspect and get all that information out there on the radio.

But I also couldn't stop thinking that every word I made this woman speak could make me the reason she was killed. That was something I really struggled with throughout the event: I needed to get that information, but I didn't want her to talk. I had to transfer that call to the agency where this was going on, and I essentially became her voice. Again, I didn't know this at the time. I wouldn't even let her talk. All I could think was that I didn't need her to talk. I wanted to speak for her because I was putting her in danger.

And my fears were for officers on the road and even every person in that building, I was trying to do the best I could. In an active shooter event, I can't stop what is happening. In a role as a telecommunicator, you can just lessen that impact and try to reduce the amount of people that are harmed.

Matt: What was in place for you and for other telecommunicators at that time after going through a critical incident at that scale? If I assume correctly, there would be debriefings and peer support, as well as a targeted response for the officers. Was there anything in place at that time for telecommunicators?

Teresa: It was at the time that we were new to the program. And in being honest, the program was new to the agency at the time. When they did put something together

initially, they left out the dispatchers, and it was something that I advocated for that day that we, again, go through a different version of the story, but our input is just as important as the officers. And that was one of the first times I actually got to sit down at a debriefing and watch how the process unfolds. As you know, most people go into it with a negative attitude, but that was one of the first times I was like, "This process really, truly can work."

Matt: What's the message you feel is sent when telecommunicators are left out? And I'm not saying intentionally. Many times it's unintentionally, but nonetheless, what's the message that's conveyed to telecommunicators when they're left out of after-action follow-up care that's provided to the officers, but not to them?

Teresa: I take it, I guess, probably more personally. I don't want to say that, again, it's purposeful. It's just definitely become my mission to make sure that the dispatchers are more included in these situations.

Matt: The reason why I ask that is because, and it's natural and I get it, when you start looking at who was involved with a critical incident, who was involved at the scene, your mind starts to play back like a video or a movie. And you start to take account for everybody that was there at the scene. But what's often forgotten, and in many cases innocently, is that that call didn't start at the scene. That call started with a phone call is what kicked the whole thing off in most cases. And that's where you need to start building. When you're reaching out to do debriefings, when you're reaching out for peer support, or you're doing follow-up, supervisors doing follow-up just to check in as to how people are doing. It starts all the way back in that dispatch with that first call that came in is where it starts, not out at the scene.

And that's why I think it's so important. And you've emphasized that, that the trauma that's associated with that call, because you're really hearing the noises on the other side. And as you said, it's all audible. You're not physically there to see, to smell. Everything is coming through audible. It's interesting because in your case with the shooting, you, without even realizing it, your voice mimicked that of the woman on the other end, and now you both are whispering to one another.

Teresa: Correct. And when I listened back to the tape at one point when I spoke about having to transfer that call, I said to her, "Stay on the line. I have to transfer." And I even said, "Be quiet. Don't talk."

And when I was transferring the call, again, it took years for me to even hear it. And she was whispering in the background, "No, no, no." And you put yourself in that person's position and you're like . . . I always say 911 is probably one of the few places left for the most part in this world where you can actually call a number, and a live person picks up that phone and put yourself again in her shoes. She feels she's finally reaching that help and she's trying to give the information.

And I say, "Stay on the line while I transfer your call." And that's kind of something that always ate me up. And that's why, again, I talked about becoming her voice because I was like, "I don't want her explaining this whole situation all over again.

I need to get that information out as quickly as possible or to verify that they indeed had the same information."

Matt: When did you transition to the academy?

Teresa: Our agency decided to consolidate several of our troops into regional dispatch centers, and the then colonel approached myself and several colleagues about putting together a training program. And we were able to put together what's now known as a dispatch training academy. It's an eight-week program where we give all of the foundations. We operate on the crawl, walk, run theory. We give the dispatchers all the foundation and the tools that they will need to be successful, hopefully. But we start building, like I said, that foundation for eight weeks where flashback 35 years ago, somebody showed me a phone sitting on a desk.

Matt: Have you been able to implement the skills and the knowledge you've gained from working on the peer support side? Have you been able to implement that into the training?

Teresa: Absolutely. That mental health component truly to me is one of my core values. I have been at this for too long and I've seen people on both sides of the fence be affected by this. So regardless of what I'm teaching, that is always one of my core values. And I work it into pretty much everything that I talk about because at the end of the day, we dedicate our lives to public service, some of us 25, 30, 40 years. And we talk about that someday. And that someday will never come if we don't take care of ourselves mentally.

Matt: Do you think had you tried this peer support component of the academy 30 years ago, it would've been well received?

Teresa: If I tried to bring it about myself, I don't think it would've been as well received. I think in our agency, the timing was right. It was something that we whispered about and nobody wanted to talk about, but everybody knew that somebody might be struggling or whatever. And the dispatch component of it, I thought I was always fortunate to have those personal conversations with officers. That was where I did foster a lot of my relationships. I learned about their families and I can't say how many times got officers to buy their wives flowers on Valentine's Day because they forgot what day it was, stuff like that. At the end of the day, even our job is about forming a relationship. And I think every relationship in law enforcement is important because, like I said, the stakes are so high. People's lives are at stake on both sides.

Matt: Where do you see the future of training for telecommunicators going?

Teresa: I am coming up on the end of my career. It is definitely something that I will continue to foster, pass it along to that new generation of dispatchers. I would definitely never want to lose, again, that communication, that human component of that training. But with the advent of technology, the training has become so diversified. Again, peer support is included in that subject de-escalation. I bring in many outside resources. It's not just a one-man or a two-man show anymore, right? There's so many tools in

our toolbox. And when you sit the desk, when that call comes in, you have to be ready to pick the correct tool out of the toolbox and know how to use it. So I definitely would love to see dispatch training continue, and where it goes, I guess you and I don't know from here what the newest, latest, greatest technology will be.

Matt: I want to ask you this, and I think it's a good way to wrap up everything you've talked about. Your son has followed in your footsteps, correct?

Teresa: Yes, he has.

Matt: What did you tell your son when he was going into this? What was so important that you needed to share with him when he chose to go into this line of work?

Teresa: I just wanted him to know that I go to work every day and I'm proud of myself and for what the work I do. I give it my absolute all every day. And he was able to see that his father is also in law enforcement, so he grew up in it. He would know when I had a bad day, but he also loved the aspect. Again, he had both sides of the fence of what he could be able to do. Law enforcement might not be his realm. He may not be a police officer, but he was able to serve and do just as important work on the other side of the microphone. That I think was something I always instilled in him.

Matt: I want to thank you, Teresa, for joining me to discuss wellness for telecommunicators today. I know that we've covered a lot of issues and a lot of solutions along the way, as well as the unique challenges that telecommunicators face. We've talked about how critical it is for agencies to provide resources to support their well-being. Recognizing and understanding these needs is crucial for maintaining mental and physical wellness. Together, we can foster a healthier, more supportive environment for these dedicated professionals who serve our communities in times of crisis. For more information on this topic and other wellness-related topics, please visit the SAFLEO website. Teresa, thank you so much for joining me. It's always a pleasure talking with you. Until next time, stay safe and be well.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families, to raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please find us on social media and visit [SAFLEO.org](https://www.safleo.org), that's S-A-F-L-E-O.org.

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