



Mendocino County dispatcher credited with calming Laytonville stabbing suspect



A Mendocino County sheriff's dispatcher is being credited as a crucial cog in distracting murder suspect Talen Clark Barton following Sunday's stabbings in Laytonville.

One of the teenage girls being held by Barton at the residence was also instrumental in talking the suspect out of leaving the scene.

Greg Blake, MCSO public safety dispatch supervisor, said the rookie dispatcher had only been on duty for a mere eight or nine months before Sunday's incident.

The dispatcher declined to be interviewed about her experience for this article.

"It makes me feel good about our training program and the people we hire," Blake said.

He said the dispatcher was able to keep Barton calm and stall him by asking for step-by-step directions to the residence while sheriff's deputies made their way to the 46000 block of South Meadow Lane where Barton is alleged to have committed the brutal killings of two members of a local family.

The Sheriff's Office reported the dispatcher was also able to talk Barton into dropping the knife he allegedly used in the attacks, and convinced him to go outside and surrender to deputies.

The MCSO described the dispatcher's conversation with Barton as "lengthy" after he took the phone from one of the teenage girls who initially called authorities.

Blake said the dispatcher has been back on the job since the incident.

Blake, now a supervisor, was previously a full-time dispatcher. He said the demand remains high in trying to fill positions, as naturally, it is a job where a lot of people wash-out.

"It's a hard thing to juggle when we have these incidents," Blake said. "The dispatchers are the ones gaining information to give to the deputies and keep them and the public safe."

California's Employment Development Department predicts the need for dispatchers is only going to keep growing within the state.

The EDD expects a 10 percent increase, or at least 700 open jobs, between the years 2012 and 2022.

Also, as the equipment used becomes even more complex to do the job, the EDD said people with computer and technical skills will be highly sought.

Public safety dispatchers, or 911 operators, may not only work with county sheriff's departments, but also can be employed by hospitals, ambulance services, fire departments and state or city agencies.

Currently, the MCSO has 11 dispatchers with two supervisors, according to Blake, and even then there is still a shortage. New hires are expected to work with an experienced dispatcher for at least six months before they can be on their own. Some however, may spend as much as a year trying to get acclimated to the job.

Blake expects three new hires to begin at the MCSO's dispatch center in the coming months.

During a past application period, Blake said the MCSO received around 100 applications from people who were interested in taking the test needed to become a dispatcher.

After the testing, only 30 to 35 applicants moved on to the next step, according to Blake.

Then, those people are informed of the personal background requirements needed to get the job, which includes having no felonies on record. The state requires such checks as well as having a valid driver's license, and at the very least, a high school diploma.

After that, the number dropped to about 20 people, and only 12 moved on to the next step of having an oral interview.

"We almost follow the same training as when new deputies are hired," Blake said. "We have a high rate of people who have the ability to do the job."

Blake said with all the chaos at times, there are windows when dispatchers may sit for an hour and not do anything. The substance of a particular shift can't be predicted, he said.

"Hopefully she (the dispatcher) will be OK," Blake said, of the Laytonville incident. "You have to hope there won't be a next time."

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