



Dialing 911

by Alan Aronow

It's 2:15 a.m. You can't sleep.

Shivering in bed, drenched in sweat, you grow ever more fearful—something horrible is happening. Sharp pains stab you in the chest, arm, and jaw. Gasping for breath you wake your wife and tell her you think you're having a heart attack. Shaking, she reaches for the phone and dials 911...

Hopefully you'll never have to confront a situation like this. While you may be lucky, plenty of your neighbors have had to rely on 911 to protect their home and loved ones. Last year alone, in Haddam over 2,000 calls were placed to 911.

Have you ever wondered what happens when you dial 911?

This article takes you behind the scenes and explores how hundreds of trained professionals, on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, race the clock to get the right kind of assistance to the scene of emergency. For many, it is a race between life and death.

A Brief History of 911

In 1967, the Federal Communications Commission approached AT&T to establish a universal emergency phone number. The number 911 was chosen

since it was short, easy to remember and no other phone number had, at that time, been issued using the 900 prefix. The U.S. Congress agreed to fund a nationwide 911 program and AT&T set up a special division to develop the infrastructure of the system. On February 16, 1968 the first 911 call was made in Haleyville, Alabama.

It has come a long way since then. From the rudimentary equipment of that era, a sophisticated computer based data communications system has evolved. Telephone companies have developed databases that cross-reference any wire-line phone number in the United States to a specific 911 response center, technically known as Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP). There are now over 6,000 PSAP centers nationwide.

In Connecticut, the state's Department of Public Safety is responsible for the

operation of the 911 system. According to Carey Thompson of the Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications, there are 107 PSAP centers located throughout Connecticut that process 911 calls. Cities and towns run most of these centers. In addition, the state police operate eight centers and another seven are independently owned and serve as regional facilities. Haddam is served by two of these regional centers—Valley Shore Emergency Communications and Colchester Emergency Communications.

Dialing 911 sets into motion a remarkable process which routes both the call and key data over high priority circuits to the center serving the region from where the call originated.

Connecticut's Enhanced 911 system (E911) automatically generates a computer display showing the incoming phone subscriber's number, address, name of billing party where the phone is located

Dialing 911—cont'd

and a GPS generated map shows the exact location of the wire-line telephone and other contact information. The exact location of a 911 call made on a GPS enabled cell phone is also displayed on the computer generated map, while the location of non-GPS enabled cell phones are estimated by what direction the cell's radio transmission is received from the radio tower.

How 911 Emergency Calls Are Handled in Haddam

Because of our town's unique geography (the only town divided by a river in Connecticut) Haddam has been divided into two separate PSAP regions. Valley Shore Emergency Communication processes calls made from the west side of the river while Colchester Emergency Communications handles those from the east side.

Each center is staffed by at least two highly trained professionals at all times. The individual answering a call is known as the 'emergency telecommunicator' or 'call-taker'. The other professional is the 'radio dispatcher' or 'dispatcher'.

Once a 911 call is received, the call-taker is responsible for obtaining sufficient information to determine the exact location of the emergency and what type of assistance is required. This information gathering process is done in a highly scripted fashion to insure that the right questions are asked and answered in the shortest period of time.

According to John Rehberg of Valley Shore Communications, the call-taker sits in front of the bank of computer screens and begins each 911 dialogue by asking the caller to identify exact location where the emergency is occurring, the nature of the problem and the number of people involved in the emergency.

As information is being gathered, the call-taker is also entering this data into the PSAP's computer system using a

special computer aided dispatch (CAD) program. A legitimate 911 call is assigned an 'incident code', which activates the CAD system to generate a recommendation of what 'assets' (fire departments, ambulance services, paramedic teams, etc.) should be sent to the scene of the emergency. The call-taker can accept that recommendation or make modifications as the situation warrants.

In addition to obtaining information and activating the CAD system, the call-taker also instructs the 911 caller what to do until help arrives. For example, someone dials 911 and says: 'my house is on fire'. After confirming the exact address, the call-taker asks how many people are in the house. The call-taker will then inform the caller that a fire truck is on the way, to get all people out of the house immediately, and to have everyone wait together across the street until help arrives.

Many call-takers have additional training that enable them, with the aid of specialized reference books, to provide expert instructions enabling the caller to provide first aid and other life saving techniques until help arrives.

Once a 911 call is assigned an incident code the radio dispatcher takes over. The dispatcher's role is to interface with the providers of emergency services (such as fire departments, ambulances, paramedics, etc.) for each region. Once the CAD system has outlined what resources are required, the dispatcher begins contacting the necessary emergency response assets by radio and stays in contact with them until the situation has been resolved.

Types of Emergencies

Most 911 calls fall into one or more of three major categories: police, medical and fire. In this section we'll examine how the emergency response assets serving Haddam are utilized in different types of situations.

Police Emergencies

Because Haddam has no local police force, almost all 911 calls requiring police assistance are ultimately handled by the state police from Troop F Barracks in Westbrook. Most police emergencies can be broken into two major categories: those involving crimes and those dealing with accidents.

911 calls that deal with crimes in progress, suspicious behavior, missing persons or domestic disputes are immediately transferred by the call-taker to Westbrook. For 911 calls involving accidents, the Valley Shore or Colchester PSAP will notify the state police and also, based on the specifics of the emergency, radio out for other assets such as paramedics, ambulances, and fire equipment.

The state police maintain a very sophisticated emergency response system (which includes GPS maps showing the location of patrol cars and troopers). Once a 911 call is transferred, the state police dispatcher begins a dialogue with the caller to obtain key data and then radios out for police support based on the specifics of the situation. Troopers remain in constant radio contact with their dispatcher and should medical assistance or fire equipment be needed at the scene of the emergency, the dispatcher will radio that request to either the Valley Shore or Colchester 911 center.

According to Officer Lt. J. Paul Vance, state troopers responded to 4,173 incidents in Haddam during 2010. These include both 911 calls for help and other, mostly automobile related events.

Medical Emergencies

A good percentage of 911 calls are for medical assistance yet many people, especially the elderly, hesitate before dialing 911. Medical emergencies range from general sickness, suspected heart attacks, falls, bleeding, poisoning, burns,

fainting, and broken bones to snake bites. Medical emergencies may require several types of response assets:

- **Emergency Medical Technicians:** EMT volunteers from Haddam's two fire departments are usually the first responders providing Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Basic Life Support (BLS) services.

- **Paramedics:** When more sophisticated medical assistance is required at the scene then highly skilled Paramedics providing Advanced Life Support (ALS) are dispatched from one of two Middlesex Hospital locations in the region. Paramedics now provide services and medications at the scene of the emergency that formerly were available only once the patient was admitted to the hospital.

- **Ambulance Services:** Ambulances are dispatched if the injured party requires transportation to hospital and/or to provide EMT or paramedical services.

Again, because Haddam is split by the Connecticut River, assets responding to a medical emergency will depend on which side of the river the call is placed.

When a 911 call for medical help is picked up by Valley Shore center from Haddam/Higganum/Tylerville the dispatcher will typically radio the Haddam Volunteer Fire Department for EMTs, the Middlesex Hospital for

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Paramedics and the Haddam Volunteer Ambulance Service for transportation to hospitals.

Medical emergency 911 calls from Haddam Neck go to the Colchester center, which radios the Haddam Neck Volunteer Fire Department to dispatch EMTs to the scene. If Paramedics are required, the Middlesex Hospital is notified to send its crew and if ambulances are required, the East Hampton Ambulance Service will be dispatched.

Scott Stoppa, President of the Haddam Volunteer Ambulance Service indicated that there are mutual aid arrangements between neighboring towns as well as private firms (such as Hunter Ambulance) providing backup services if primary assets are unable to respond or the scope of the emergency is too large for one service provider to handle.

Fire Emergencies

Few things in life can be more frightening than finding yourself surrounded by flames. I speak from personal experience. When I was a child, I came home from school one afternoon and asked my mom if she was baking cookies (it smelled like something was burning in the oven).

Instead of burnt cookies it turned out that my infant sister's room was on fire, with her still sleeping in her cradle. Fortunately my mother had the presence of mind to get my sister out of the blazing room and to instruct me to run down to the police 'call box' mounted on a telephone pole near our house and call for help (this was in 1957 before 911).

It seemed like an eternity before the firemen finally arrived. While everyone got out safely, the fire destroyed much of the house. Fortunately, 911 emergency responses happen a bit quicker these days.

Our town has two independent fire departments, Haddam Volunteer Fire Department and Haddam Neck Volunteer Fire Department, protecting the community (Note: while each fire department is a separate entity, both are managed under the auspices of 'parent' organization which receives town funding). Volunteers from these two companies perform a variety of services for the public and, surprising, in 2010, responding to medical emergencies actually outranked fire fighting.

Depending on the nature of the problem both HVFD and HNVFD mobilize their volunteer crews and send appropriate trucks and apparatus from fire stations to the scene of the emergency with remarkable speed and efficiency.

In the accompanying article, Bob Norton of the Haddam Volunteer Fire Department, vividly describes what hap-

Table 1

	Haddam Volunteer Fire Dept.	Haddam Neck Volunteer Fire Dept.
Year Organized	1930	1968
Fire Chief	Gary Klare	Robert McGarry
# of Volunteers	50	30
# of Fire Stations	3	1
#of Residents Protected	7,300	600
Square Miles of Land Protected	46	24
# of 2010 Emergency Incidents		
Fire	118	23
Medical	277	29
Motor Vehicle	88	3
Other	53	5

Dialing 911—cont'd

pens when the 911 dispatcher radios out a request for emergency assistance.

Is 911 Free?

While dialing 911 is free, the cost of providing the support infrastructure such as fire departments, ambulances, police, and paramedics adds up to a pretty sizeable percentage of town spending.

Next year's proposed town budget has \$1,169,670 set aside for the town's fire marshal, two volunteer fire departments, the ambulance service, Valley Shore Emergency Communications, Colchester Emergency Communication, and the state police.

Overall, taxpayer supported expenses relating to 911 and emergency services will cost each household in Haddam approximated \$375 next year.

In addition to the publicly funded cost of providing emergency services, 911 patients that require ambulance and/or paramedic services are often billed for those services, the cost of which, is usually covered by Medicare or health insurance plans.

How You Can Help Save a Life

Most of us know a little something about first aid, but do we know enough to competently assist someone that needs immediate help? Even under the best of circumstances, 911 still takes minutes to arrive at the scene of an emergency. Being able to act before help arrives can sometimes help save someone's life. Several organizations provide life saving training courses, such as:

The American Red Cross provides a number of courses throughout the state (the closest branch office is in Middletown) and online offerings with varying levels of training in adult, child and infant first aid, Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), an Automated external defibrillator (AED), water safety, baby sitting (designed for kids 11-15

years old) and even a course in dog and cat first aid (to be held in Middletown on June 25). For more information and course schedules go online to: CTRedCross.org.

The Haddam Killingworth Recreation Department offers teenagers fifteen years and older a lifeguard program this summer providing basic first aid training along with CPR, AED, and other skills. For more information call: **860-345-8334** or go online: www.hkrec.com.

The Haddam Volunteer Ambulance Service provides courses in CPR. For more information call HVAS at **860-345-2500**.

Finally, the Connecticut Department of Public Health, under its Emergency Medical Services Division, has compiled an extensive list of approved EMT training programs available throughout the state.

(Special thanks to the following individuals who provided information that made this article possible: Rich Darin & John Rehberg of Valley Shore Emergency Communications, Rich Grocki of Colchester Emergency Communications, Scott Stoppa of Haddam Volunteer Ambulance Service, Bob Norton of Haddam Volunteer Fire Dept., Chief Robert McGarry of Haddam Neck Volunteer Fire Dept. and Jim Santacroce of Middlesex Paramedics.)

Haddam Fire/Police/Medical Emergency Protection

Table 2

	Proposed Fiscal 2012 Budget
Fire Marshal	\$17,919
Fire Protection	304,358
Fire Dept. Incentive (pension)	108,110
Fire Protection Capital Budget	257,500
State Police/Emergency Special Duty	284,403
Emergency Dispatch	107,380
Ambulance Service	90,000
TOTAL	\$1,169,670