

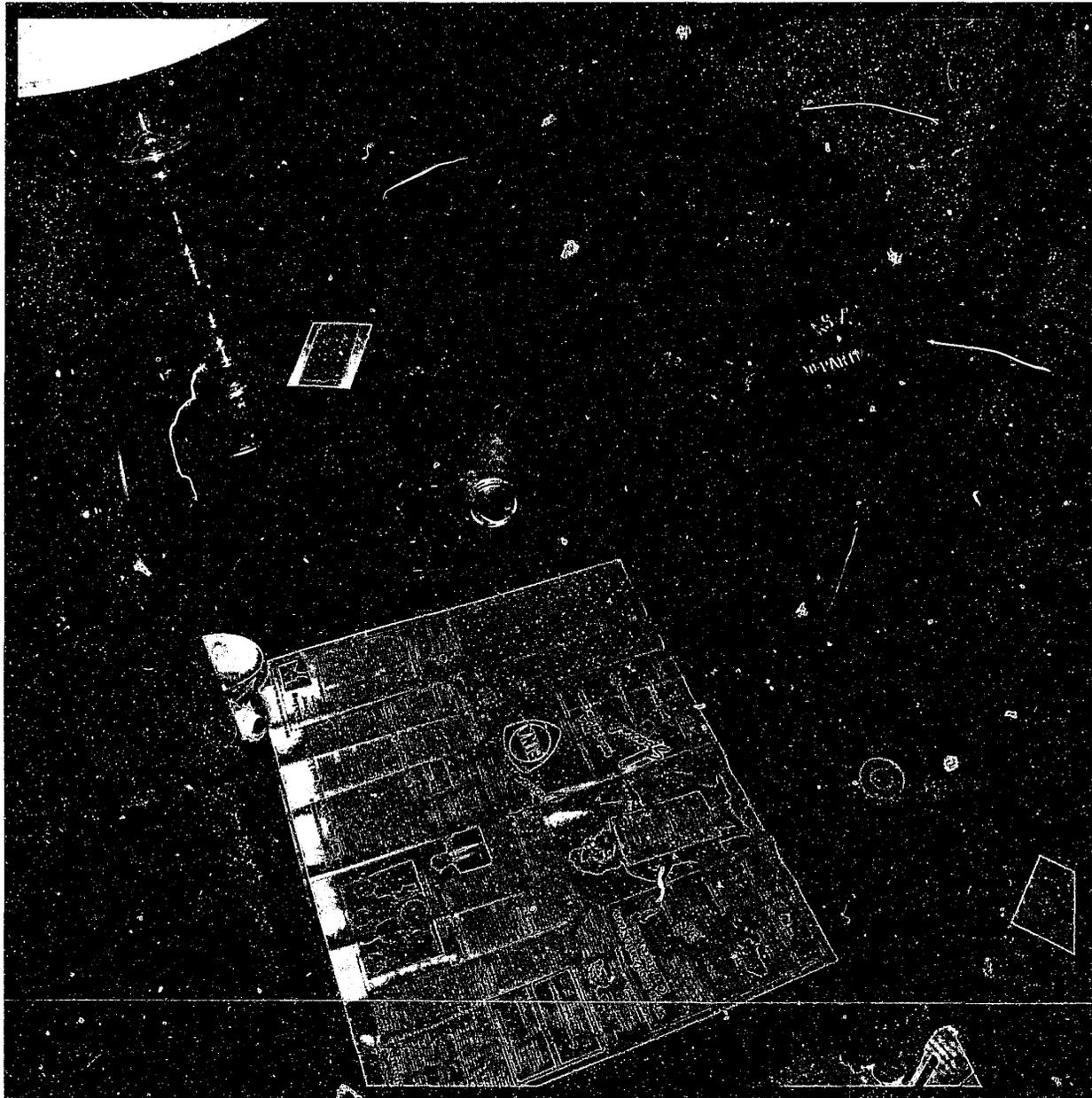
U.S. Department of Justice  
Federal Bureau of Investigation



JUNE 1995

# FBI Law Enforcement

B ♦ U ♦ L ♦ L ♦ E ♦ T ♦ I ♦ N



## Home Invasions

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June 1995  
 Volume 64  
 Number 6

United States  
 Department of Justice  
 Federal Bureau of  
 Investigation  
 Washington, DC 20535

Louis J. Freeh  
 Director

Contributors' opinions and statements should not be considered as an endorsement for any policy, program, or service by the FBI.

The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law. Use of funds for printing this periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (ISSN-0014-5688) is published monthly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 10th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20535. Second-Class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA 22135.

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**Features**

- 155701 **Violence on Campus**  
 By W. David Nichols **1** *Crime prevention programs and collaborative efforts with local law enforcement are strategies that help to create a safe campus environment.*
- 125703 **Home Invasion Robbery**  
 By James T. Hurley **9** *A new breed of violent criminals targets homeowners and poses a serious challenge to law enforcement.*
- 155704 **Dispatcher Training**  
 By Kathy M. Sheehan **17** *Civilianization, civil liability concerns, and increasingly complex technology have prompted advances in dispatcher training.*
- 155705 **Police Ethics Training**  
 By Tim R. Jones, Compton Owens, and Melissa A. Smith **22** *The Huntsville, Alabama, Police Department demonstrates that police ethics can and should be taught to all police officers, regardless of rank or experience level.*
- 155706 **Freedom of Religion and Law Enforcement Employment**  
 By Daniel L. Schofield **28** *Recent court decisions have examined conflicts between legitimate law enforcement interests and employee religious conduct in the workplace.*

**Departments**

- 155702 **6 Focus on Cooperation**  
 Fugitive Apprehension Task Force
- 8 Bulletin Alert**  
 Shifty Suspect
- 14 Research Forum**  
 IADLEST Sourcebook
- 20 Bulletin Report**  
 Gang Prosecution  
 Gang Suppression  
 Criminal Justice Videotapes
- 27 Book Review**  
 Policing Transportation Facilities

155701-  
155702

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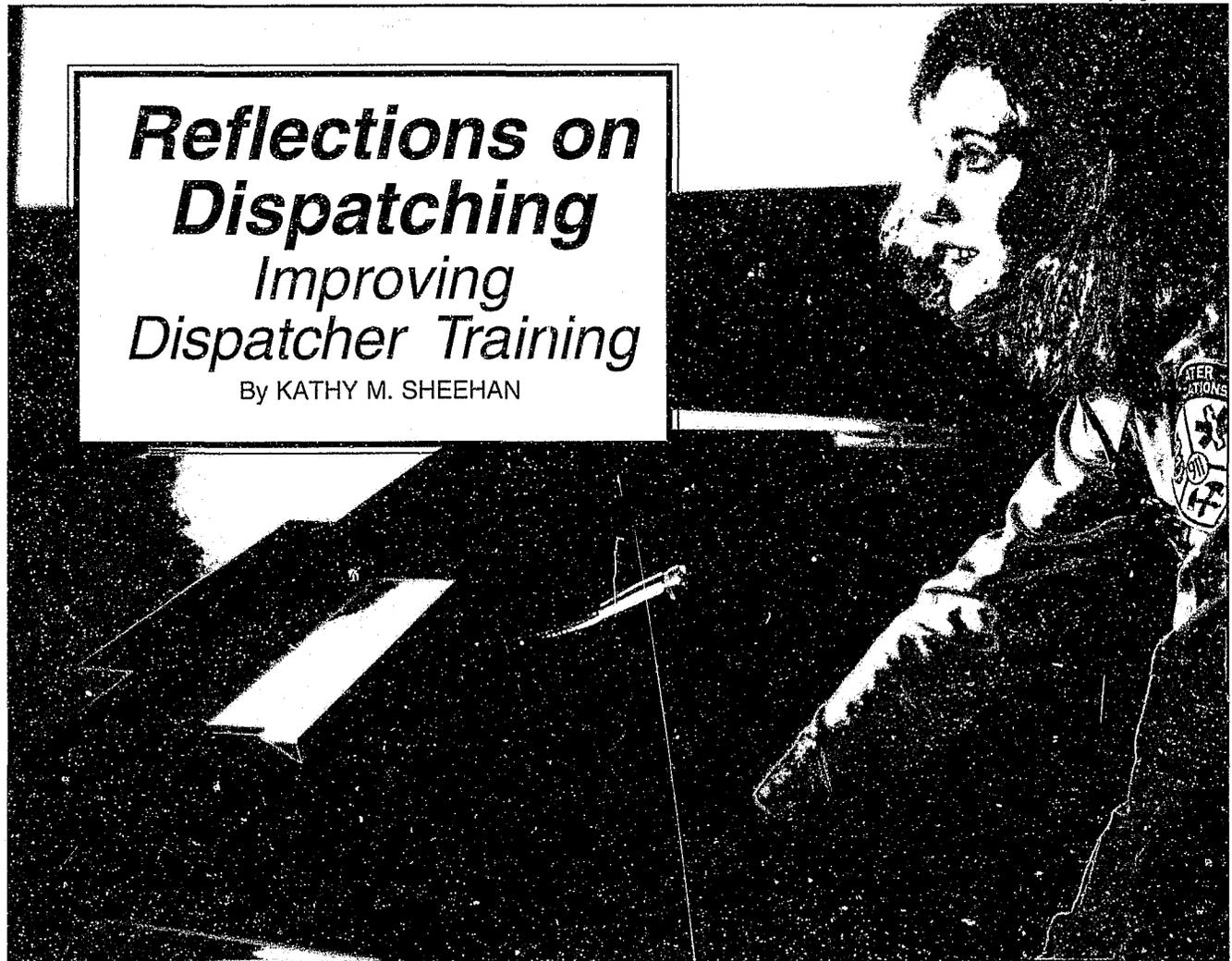
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155704

Photo by Roger G. Millard

# Reflections on Dispatching Improving Dispatcher Training

By KATHY M. SHEEHAN



“Just watch the other officers, kid. Watch what they do and listen to what they say.... You’ll catch on quick.”

Not too many years ago, statements like these were the only introduction to policing that recruits received before beginning their field careers. Fortunately, advances in police training have made such inadequate recruit instruction seem like a distant memory. Today’s police recruits receive training in a myriad of areas, from firearms to search-and-seizure laws, before they set out on their first patrol.

However, the above instructions are still heard regularly in public safety agencies around the Nation. Rather than being directed to police recruits, they are directed to dispatchers. In fact, this advice served as the totality of my formal training in the field of dispatching. For years, such practices were the rule rather than the exception in many departments.

Recently, three factors began to force a change in dispatcher training: The influx of civilian dispatchers, the specter of civil liability lawsuits, and the advent of complex computerized dispatching systems.

These considerations compelled many States to establish and maintain a level of certification for their police dispatchers based on standardized training. Connecticut, at the urging of its Bureau of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications (BSET),<sup>1</sup> is one of several States making a concerted effort to address this need.

### Addressing a Need

In the mid-1980s, the BSET recognized the need to regulate telecommunicator training. After a lengthy campaign, the State passed legislation mandating certification

for all emergency service dispatchers and telecommunicators hired after January 1, 1990. The legislation designated BSET as the administrative authority for this training and charged it with developing a State-wide certification program.

### Developing a Training Model

The field of dispatcher training did not abound with suitable programs; however, BSET conducted a competitive bid process and subsequently awarded a contract to a national training group. Under the contract, the training group modified its existing 80-hour telecommunicator course to suit the public safety needs of the State of Connecticut.

The program used standardized lesson plans and materials so that any certified instructor could deliver the same caliber training throughout the State. The original course curriculum covered 15 individual units of basic instruction on topics such as telephone techniques,

broadcast procedures, and interpersonal communication.

Armed with a structured program, the bureau then established criteria for instructors that include a "method of instruction" course and at least 2 years of related experience. Quality instructors are still a high priority consideration, even with preset lessons, because each unit of instruction leaves latitude for individual interpretation. The BSET staff regularly evaluates each instructor's classroom presentation, using both written student evaluations and unscheduled onsite visits.

Since the introduction of the program in April 1990, the BSET continually has refined the curriculum. Additional units of study have been added to cover such areas as stress, hazardous materials, and liability issues. Other areas have been scaled down or eliminated. Further changes, especially in the area of emergency medical dispatch, currently are being implemented. These

refinements have resulted in a more streamlined curriculum.

The program presently fills approximately 69 hours instead of the original 80 hours. This ongoing streamlining process also ensures that BSET can maintain flexibility in the training program in order to accommodate necessary changes as the field of telecommunications evolves.

### Student Note Forms

In conjunction with the standardized lesson plans, students receive note forms to reinforce key points and to help them prepare for the State exam for telecommunicators. The original note forms contained text interspersed with blank spaces that allowed the students to fill in with class notes. The theory behind this procedure was sound. In practice, however, instructors found it limiting to be bound so tightly to the lesson plan.

Students also complained that they had difficulty keeping up with the necessary notes. This was especially true of students who had not been in a classroom setting for some years.

With the recent influx of mature, second-career dispatchers, this became a critical problem. BSET resolved this dilemma by printing completed note forms that the students can take home at night to compare with their own notes. This not only ensures that everyone has equal access to the same information but it also encourages students to review the material after classroom hours.

### Call Guides

"Call guides" outline suggested questions and actions for many of the different types of calls for service



**“  
It is unthinkable—and  
ultimately dangerous—  
to treat the people  
responsible for critical  
communications as  
anything less than  
professionals.  
”**

*Ms. Sheehan has served with the Bridgeport, Connecticut, Police Department and is now a private consultant for emergency services and communication issues in Davis, California.*

received by dispatchers. Used as training tools, these guides are set up in a flip chart format for quick access by telecommunicators. They can be rearranged according to each agency's system and have additional space to add procedures specific to that agency. Civilian telecommunicators new to police dispatch find these call guides especially useful because they cover a broad range of possible situations.

Each guide assists the call-taker in gathering the necessary information, as well as dispatching the correct response. After the initial training, the call guides continue to be useful as a quick reference and inservice training tool for experienced dispatchers. Each student completing the State course receives a set of both the note forms and call guides to take back to their departments for further on-the-job study.

### **On-the-Job Training**

The training program addresses only the basics. It does not teach dispatchers how to operate specific equipment and/or software with which they will be working, nor does it include any of the policies, procedures or established practices within their individual departments.

Personnel and budget constraints have caused agency administrators to express some concern over the necessity for training beyond what dispatchers need for

certification. Considering the potential for wide disparity among agencies in both hardware and procedures, however, on-the-job training cannot be avoided. The BSET designed the program to blend easily into an on-the-job program for any of the service agencies.

Historically treated as the stepchildren of the emergency service field, dispatchers usually are happy to receive any kind of formal training. Individually, however, many resist the program's "tri-service" approach and resent instruction that addresses emergency services other than their own. In particular, some

firefighters and emergency medical technicians believe that the program is weighted disproportionately toward police service.

Their claim appears valid in this particular respect, and with good reason. The very nature of police work keeps the everyday dispatch of police response more continuous and complex than dispatching fire apparatus or medical units, because fire and medical situations routinely are handled by field supervisors on the scene after the initial callout. By contrast, police dispatchers generally stay involved actively throughout any call for

police service. Therefore, dispatchers must be able to cope with a wide and varied range of situations in police services that require more class time, more practice, and eventually more on-the-job training.

### **Advantages of Cross-Training**

Trainers and managers in the field of communications tend to agree that cross-training is a positive step. It accomplishes a number of things. First, it is common for police,



Photo © Peter Hendrie, Tribute

### **Cross-Training**

With the trend toward combining police, fire, and medical dispatch into one central location, BSET chose to cross-train telecommunicators in all three services. This also simplifies tracking individual student certification. Keeping accurate records especially is important because any dispatcher who obtains State certification may take that accreditation to any emergency service agency in Connecticut.

fire, and medical personnel to respond to the same incidents. A dispatcher who understands the procedures involved in each service's response will be better equipped to make informed dispatch decisions and assist field operations more effectively. In this manner, a police dispatcher who is notified of an apartment house fire near a busy highway can make an educated guess as to what type of response to expect from the fire department and emergency medical services (EMS) units. This helps the police dispatcher to assign an adequate number of officers to handle traffic and to be prepared for the number of hours that assistance might be necessary. Information of this type enables the dispatcher to make the most efficient use of available personnel.

Similarly, an overlapping response is accomplished more efficiently when a cordial working relationship exists between the different dispatch personnel. Dispatching any of the emergency services is a difficult and stressful responsibility. It is not uncommon for personnel to become territorial about their own department to the exclusion of others. Training all of the services together gives dispatchers a unique opportunity to establish better interpersonal communications with one another and to understand better the needs and responsibilities of other disciplines. This often leads to more cooperation among emergency services dispatchers, which benefits the entire community.

A third advantage of cross-training is the certification mandating a minimum level of basic training for

all dispatchers. The logistics and paperwork necessary to maintain three separate certificate programs make combined certification programs an attractive option.

Combining police, fire, and EMS dispatch certainly is not a new idea. In fact, many municipal administrators view dispatching all services from one central communications center as the most logical solution to personnel shortages and financial deficits. Training personnel together and allowing for lateral transfer of their certification takes the field of dispatching one step closer to that possibility.

### Conclusion

Effective dispatching is crucial to the safety and efficiency of field personnel and the citizens they serve. It is unthinkable—and ultimately dangerous—to treat the people responsible for critical communications as anything less than professionals.

A professional position is one that "requires advanced education and training...involving intellectual skills." One only has to listen to a busy emergency services radio for a few minutes to realize the level of intellectual skill needed by telecommunicators. I, for one, want the people holding the lives of my loved ones in their hands to be as thoroughly and professionally trained as possible. ♦

### Endnote

The Bureau of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications has been renamed the Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications.

## Gang Prosecution

*A Research in Brief* released by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) addresses the issues and findings of an NIJ-sponsored survey of local prosecutors' approaches to gang prosecution. The survey examined prosecutors' perceptions of gang-related crime, local definitions of gangs, criminal statutes used against street gangs, Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Acts, and problems dealing with gang cases.

The publication, "Prosecuting Gangs: A National Assessment," reviews State legislation targeted at street gang activity and discusses case studies of prosecution efforts at four sites. It also provides an overview of the types of gangs in large and small jurisdictions, their involvement in violent crimes and drug trafficking, and their use of drugs.

This NIJ publication (NCJ 151785) can be obtained from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service by using the Internet e-mail address [askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com](mailto:askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com), by calling 1-800-851-3420, or by writing the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000.