

Video Transcript: Mics & Sirens Episode 01

[Silvana Pulitano, Podcast Host] You're listening to Mics and Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. DFES acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which this podcast is created, the Whadjuk people.

[Sirens sound while news footage of fires play]

[Mark Spatocco, Communications System Officer at DFES] Because you can't prepare for every single scenario that can be faced with, there are times where you think, wow, how am I going to deal with this? How am I going to get through this? Because ultimately you want to be there for the caller. If I take a call and there's a smoke alarm active, there's some yelling and screaming in the background that's normally an indication that something's going on. It's quite daunting. The prospect of dealing with a 000 call, where you've got someone who's, you know, could be in the worst situation of their life, and you have to help them. You think of fire and emergency services, you think of fire straight away. But there's a lot more to it than the emergency side of things.

[Silvana] Over 1,800 staff and 26,000 volunteers make up Western Australia's Department of Fire and Emergency Services, or DFES. It operates 24/7, protecting people on land, at sea, by road, boat and air, over more than 2.5 million square kilometres. With so many layers to DFES, it's hard to know where to begin to tell its stories and the stories of the people behind the uniforms. The start of an emergency seems like a pretty good place. That very first 000 phone call, telling us the community needs help. The voice you just heard was Mark Spatocco. He's a Communications Systems Officer, a 000 call taker for fire. One of the calm voices on the other end of the line, on what could possibly be the worst day of someone's life. So let's step into the epicentre of emergencies and find out about those tough calls from start to finish. Mark, thanks for joining me.

[Mark] Thanks for having me.

[Silvana] Each time you go to work, you're speaking to someone who has an emergency unfolding right before them. Do you have a secret method for how you approach each call?

[Mark] It may sound quite simple, but it's to stay calm. A lot of callers will feed off our energy, so if we're calm, they're calm, and when they are calm, we can get all the information we need from them and get help there as soon as we can.

[Silvana] Talk me through a 000 call. So, for example, my neighbour's house is burning down. I call 000. What happens next?

[Mark] So you call 000. You'll be asked which state you're in and which service you require. If you ask for WA and fire, you get the DFES Communications Centre and from there we'll ask you what's the location or address of the emergency. The reason why we ask that is because that's what we need. Without an address, we can't really help. So providing we get the address from you, we can get the fire crews there. Once we're happy with the address, we ask what's going on. So we would ask you what's happening there. You would say your neighbour's house is on fire. We may ask some other questions after that, just to make sure we've got all the information we need and get the crews there as soon as we can.

[Silvana] So me as the caller, do you know where I'm calling from? Does my address ping onto a system?

[Mark] Yeah, we do have that capacity to look. Basically, when you ring 000, your location is given to us via a system, an external system. But we do like to get that information from you first. We don't like to assume that's where you are, even though the system says you're there. But you may be calling on behalf of someone else. You could be a few suburbs away. You could be, you know, south of the river and the incidents occurring north of the river. So we want to make sure that you give us the information first to, again, make sure that we get the help to where it's needed.

[Silvana] And so are you, the person who also dispatches a fire truck to that incident?

[Mark] Yeah. So in the Communication Centre, we're all call takers and dispatchers. So we take the call, we can dispatch to it. If someone needs the call to be dispatched on behalf of them, we can do that as well. But we do everything there, which is great. It's good fun.

[Silvana] So talk me through a dispatch. What does that look like? Do you pick up the phone and call a fire station.

[Mark] It depends. So we deal with obviously the career firefighters and our volunteers. So depending on where the incident's occurring will determine whether or not there's a career firefighter or a volunteer firefighter. So with a career firefighter we'll get the address. We'll dispatch it via our CAD system. It'll alert them via the devices in their vehicles. And if we also do a what we call a turnout PA, so we do a broadcast to the station to say, hey, you've got an incident. This is the address. This is where it is. And then they'll get ready, go to the trucks and then off they go.

In terms of volunteers, there's a few systems that we use. We rely a lot on SMS. So when we've got an address we've got what's going on. We dispatch them via the CAD system and that sends an SMS to our volunteers. Some of our volunteers also have what we call a group call or a conference call. So we basically call them to say, hey, you've got an incident. This is the location, this is what's happening. Then they can, amongst themselves, sort out who's going to attend. They get to station, then they respond from there.

[Silvana] So that's obviously because volunteers aren't based at the station.

[Mark] That's right. Yeah. So they're all at work or at home or doing whatever they need to do. And then the moment that call comes through, they switch to firefighter mode and off they go.

[Silvana] You've taken a lot of calls over the years. Is there one that stands out to you?

[Mark] Yeah, there was one call I took a number of years ago now. It was a couple that left lunch at a restaurant, and they were driving around the local area, and they turned down a street, and at the end of the street there was a ditch, and they'd gone over the edge of the road, and they were hanging off into this ditch, over the edge of the road, so they couldn't get out of the car. So they, of course, rang for help. When they asked them where they were, they didn't know what street they were on, which was a bit difficult initially.

[Silvana] So was this before this ... technology where you can ping people's addresses.

[Mark] Yeah. Before all that. So what I had to do was think of another approach. So then I asked them, okay, what route did you take from the restaurant to get to the street that you're on? So they were able to tell me, you know, they turned left down this road, right down that road. And eventually I was able to find the street that I thought they were on. I sent the fire crews, they arrived and they found them and they rescued them. So that was a really good feeling to know that I had to adapt to a different approach. And it worked.

[Silvana] You had to think on your feet.

[Mark] That's right.

[Silvana] Have you had instances where that's happened where you've had to think on your feet quickly?

[Mark] Yeah, there's a lot of times where we get calls that are out of the ordinary. So it requires us to think outside the box, think, okay, how would I approach this situation? A lot of the difficulty can be finding an address from callers. So rather than trying to ask for an exact address where the emergency is occurring, we can ask, can you give me any businesses nearby? Can you give me how long you've been traveling on this road and where you're going from and where you're going to? So there's a lot of techniques that we can adapt, which we need to because there's no one blanket rule for all situations. It really depends on what's going on and where it's going on.

[Silvana] Have you had instances where you can't see somebody, they're not visible to fire trucks, and you've had to sort of be innovative.

[Mark] Yeah, there was one incident I wasn't involved in, but it's a great story. There was one incident where a caller had been involved in an accident and there were - had fallen down the side of the road, but it wasn't visible from the road. So what the caller did was they stayed on the line with our call taker, and they knew roughly where the caller was so they could guide them to an approximate location, but obviously not exactly at the location. So what the call taker told the caller was to beep their horn. So when the fire crews - when their sirens were heard, the caller beeped the horn. And then, of course, the fire crews listened out for this horn and was able to find where they were. As a result of the horn sounding. So that was a really great result and a prime example of, you know, thinking on our feet and trying to think of the best approach for the situation because there's no, same response for the same incidents or for all incidents.

[Silvana] What's the critical type of information that you want from people? Because I imagine and I've called 000 myself as well over the years. But I know when you call, you sort of tend to waffle and you give a lot of information. Some of it isn't really relevant. So what do you want people to give you?

[Mark] So we really want the location. So that's what we need to get help to you. So that could be a street address of a house. It could be an intersection. It could be a business name. It could be some coordinates latitude and longitude. If we've got that, we can help.

[Silvana] Do you find that people are quite stressed in the situations when they ring? Is that usually what you get from people?

[Mark] It depends on what they're reporting. Sometimes if they're reporting are what we would probably consider a small fire, like a rubbish fire, that'd be quite calm. Whereas if they're reporting a house fire, then they can be quite concerned and panicky, which is understandable. But the opposite also applies. So sometimes the caller can be really panicky reporting a bin fire. And they can also be quite calm reporting a house fire. It really is hard to know how the caller is going to react, and they probably don't know themselves until it happens. So we have to be prepared for all those situations.

[Silvana] Do you find you often get conflicting information? I imagine if there is a car on fire on the freeway, you'd be getting multiple calls. Do you find that they're conflicting sometimes?

[Mark] They can be. Some people aren't as reliable as others, and there's many factors for that. Sometimes using an example of a car fire on the freeway, we like to ask, you know, what direction are you travelling? Some people don't always know they're north from the south, especially in an emergency situation. People forget. People forget where they're going to, where they're traveling to what direction. They're, you know, travelling in, and they can forget their names. They can forget their own addresses. So we have to be ready to, try and calm them down and then try and sometimes a different approach to asking the questions.

[Silvana] Have you had a call that has left you really stressed?

[Mark] Not stressed as such, but there are calls that you that can elevate your stress levels initially because of what you hear in the background. So if I take a call and there's a smoke alarm active, there's some yelling and screaming in the background that's normal indication that something's going on. Could be a house fire, could be a fire in the kitchen. So that kind of in my mind says to me, right, I could be dealing with a caller that would be quite stressed, quite panicky. I need to make sure that I maintain a calm disposition throughout the call, so they can feed off that energy and say, okay, well, if the call takers calm, then I'm going to be calm as well.

[Silvana] This is a job where every second counts. Do you find yourself in situations where you think, how am I going to get through this call?

[Mark] Sometimes, yes, because you can't prepare for every single scenario that you can be faced with. There are times where you think, well, how am I going to deal with this? How am I going to get through this? Because ultimately you want to be there for the caller. They're the ones that you want to help. So it really depends on the scenario. Sometimes you've just got to take a moment and think, right, what would I want in this situation from someone trying to help me? And that kind of helps me to help the caller knowing what would I expect, what would I want and apply that to the caller as well. So that's a good technique that I use.

[Silvana] During large scale incidents. I imagine you'd get so many phone calls, you know, those real large-scale incidents. Do you treat each phone call as if it's the first?

[Mark] We have to. Yeah. So we can have a large-scale incident occurring and we might be getting a lot of calls for one incident. But amongst those calls, we could be getting an incident that's completely different. Could be a, you know, suburbs away could be completely north of the of the State or south of the State. So we have to be prepared that

every single call that comes through can potentially be something different. When you start assuming that every call coming through is for the same incident, you might get caught out. So we must treat every call as if it's a potential new incident for us to dispatch to.

[Silvana] What are the most difficult types of phone calls a call taker could take?

[Mark] The ones where the callers ... We just can't extract the information from the caller. They're in such a state, they're in such a panic that they can't talk properly. We can't get the information from them. So they're the difficult ones. Sometimes it takes a bit longer for us to determine the information that we need. So we have to stay on the line a little bit longer, but it's worth it. We have to stay on the line, otherwise we don't get the information from them.

[Silvana] So what do you do in those situations? How do you extract that information from somebody who's highly stressed and probably not thinking rationally in the moment?

[Mark] Sometimes it just takes a bit of advice to say, look, can you just take a breath for me for a few moments, just kind of get them back to a almost a level headed approach? It doesn't always work, but sometimes it can. But that's one of the tools that I use. Take a breath for me. Take a few seconds just to restart and then ask the questions again. Sometimes we'll have to ask the question differently. And there's a whole bunch of other tools that we can use as well, but that's probably the main one that I use.

[Silvana] Is there a script that you follow?

[Mark] Not necessarily. So we have a, I guess, a list of questions that we ask for particular incident types. But you can't possibly be prepared for every scenario, so we can't script everything. Sometimes it does require the freedom of the call taker to ask some other questions that perhaps we haven't asked before. So, not every scenario is covered, and we need that flexibility to be able to ask other questions that we think might be relevant.

[Male Narrator] Working as a firefighter at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in WA is a career where you get to help keep the community safe every day. So are you a team player? Resilient, compassionate, and courageous? If that sounds like you, come and join us. Visit the DFES website: www.dfes.wa.gov.au, to find out how you can join the frontline.

[Silvana] This is Mics and Sirens. I'm here with Communications Systems Officer Mark Spatocco, talking about the epicentre of emergency phone calls. Have you had situations where people don't speak English well or don't speak English at all? And maybe you've had to sort of improvise in those situations.

[Mark] Yes, that can happen every now and then. When that happens, we can just keep it simple. We don't ask complicated questions. We ask simple, easy questions to answer. And that does normally work. When we kind of all speak a very simple language, a lot of people understand that. So that really helps.

[Silvana] You'd like to hope that people's intentions when they call 000 are genuine. Do you receive hoax calls?

[Mark] We do. We might get a few a day. A lot of the time we can eliminate those calls relatively quickly in terms of we can tell, relatively early on that it's a prank call. I find that the

more questions you ask, the more the information the caller has to make up. So that way, you know, we can get them to hang up or terminate the call, or at least admit it's a prank call relatively quickly. That being said, we can't treat calls as a prank call all the time. Sometimes the caller might be giving us all the information we need, and it may not sound genuine, but if they're giving the information that we need, we need to dispatch the crews just in case. And sometimes there can actually be a fire there, or there can actually be help required. So, we can't be too quick to dismiss those types of calls.

[Silvana] What are the best types of calls that you receive?

[Mark] I think the good result calls. The good outcome calls, the ones where, you know, the caller rings up, they're quite panicky, they're stressed, and then we get help to them. The fire crews arrive and everything's great. They're safe. You know, their house was saved or whatever it may be. There's a really good outcome. That's a really good feeling. That's, yeah, really good part of the job.

[Silvana] Talk me through your journey to becoming a 000 call taker. How did you get there?

[Mark] So it all started about 15 years ago when there was a bushfire near to the house I was living in at the time, and the helitaks were refilling water from the lake over the road. So as you do, you go out and have a look and see what's going on. And I got close enough to read on the side of the helicopter FESA, which is what DFES used to be called a number of years ago. So I went home, googled FESA, typed in or signed up for the jobs emailing list. Got a notification of this job, and here I am 13 years later.

[Silvana] So what was it about that day that had you intrigued about, you know, the fire trucks and the helicopters and the fire?

[Mark] I think it was really good to see all of the resources in action, the helicopters, the fire trucks, the firefighters, all of the behind the scenes stuff that goes into making sure a fire is extinguished. And I thought to myself, it'd be great to be a part of that. It'd be great to, to help. Not from a firefighter perspective, but from, you know, in the Communications Centre, helping from behind the scenes, getting the resources to the fire crews, getting them what they need to put the fire out. It's a really good feeling to be part of that.

[Silvana] You've also been involved in training other Communications Systems Officers. What does that look like?

[Mark] So it's, quite a selection process at the beginning. So you apply through the Jobs WA website, once you've applied and you go through a pre-selection process, we do a number of testing. Once you're through all that, you do a four-week course in the classroom, and then after that you do three weeks in the live environment while being mentored. So we're all up about seven weeks, to try and prepare you to eventually become solo. And then, of course, you always have help there. There's always going to be someone to help you. So even though you are solo, you're always going to have someone to lean on and ask questions in case, you know, you need some help because not everything is covered in training. There's going to be scenarios where you just need to think about how am I going to approach this and ask for help?

[Silvana] And I guess it's that thinking on your feet thing that we discussed earlier as well.

[Mark] Yeah.

[Silvana] Was there a point in your training when you thought, I'm not sure if I can go through with this. It seemed sort of like it might be quite a daunting experience.

[Mark] Yeah. There are a few points throughout the course where you think, gee, is this really for me? Can I really do this? It's quite daunting, the prospect of dealing with a 000 call, where you've got someone who's, you know, could be in the worst situation of their life and you have to help them. But because it's, you know, there's a repetition of you're taking call after call after call. It just becomes almost natural where you, you know, you've got the capacity to help someone. You need to get the information from them. Once you've done that, you can get help to them. So that's probably calmed me down in the sense that we do more of it, we do more of it. You become familiar, we become comfortable. And once you've done that, you can pretty much help anyone whenever they need it.

[Silvana] On average, how many calls a day do you take?

[Mark] It depends. On a busy summer's day, it could be, you know, a couple of hundred personally. You know, the Communications Centre could take a couple of thousand. It really depends on what's going on in a winter's night. That number can drop, but certainly on a busy summer's day it can be quite a few. And it especially when we've got large incidents, high visibility incidents a lot of people want to ring in, which is great. We want people to ring in. We want people to ring 000. But it really does vary in what's going on. And even if it's not a busy summer's day, it could be a, you know, a day in winter. But it just could be lots of fires, lots of traffic crashes. You just don't know.

[Silvana] Is it just so it's not just fire, then that you take calls for?

[Mark] That's right. So we do traffic crashes. We do hazardous materials incidents. There's a lot more to it than firefighters - than firefighting. We of course take calls from WA Police, from St John Ambulance. And we also take calls on the State Emergency Service line. So we do wear quite a few hats in there. And we can receive quite a few calls from varying agencies and varying people.

[Silvana] Is every day very different for you?

[Mark] It can be, yes. So you just don't know what's going to happen. You don't know what's going to be at the other end of that call. It could be a job that you've taken many times before. It could be something where you go, oh, I'm not really sure what to do with this or what are we going to do with this? So, it's quite exciting, I guess, to take those types of calls and think this is a new one, how are we going to do this? And then, of course, we get help out there. The firefighters arrive and do what they do best. So, yeah, it's, it really depends, but it's - it could be, could be anything, which is great.

[Silvana] You obviously have your training and there's general techniques that everybody has. But do you find that people have their own style of answering phone calls and the advice that they give?

[Mark] Yeah. As you become more experienced as a call taker dispatcher, you do develop your own style, your own rhythm. And it's good that way because, you know, you get comfortable with the way you do things, makes you more confident in your role. And then, of

course, if you're more confident, then, you know, you're going to be able to help people a lot quicker. So everyone has their own little idiosyncrasies and ways of doing things and their approach, which is good. You want that mix because you can learn off each other. You know someone, someone does something that you think, oh, that's really good. I'm going to do it as well. So it's really good that we have, I guess, that freedom to be a bit more, customised in our approach.

[Silvana] What's something that people are surprised to learn about your job?

[Mark] Probably the scope of the work that we do. Fire is obviously our main role, but as we talked about before, you know, we do traffic accidents. You know, we deal with fuel spills, we deal with rescues and HAZMAT. So I guess the scope of what we do, you know, you think of fire and emergency services, you think of fire straight away. But there's a lot more to it than the emergency side of things as well. You know, a lot of people calling in to register burn offs, that's, a lot of work in terms of taking those calls. But they're really helpful because then it, you know, people are able to realise that, you know, they see smoke and they think, oh, no, should I call it in? If they do call it in, we can see it on our map and make sure that we're not sending resources unnecessarily to fires. So that's another thing that we do that perhaps people don't realise.

[Silvana] This is a job that keeps people safe every day. Is that what keeps you doing it?

[Mark] Yeah, it's really great to be a part of that whole process. So the Comms Centre, we have a vital but brief role, but a very important role in the in the process of an emergency. So it's really great to be a part of that. You know, once we get the information we need, and the fire crews are on the way, they arrive and they start doing what they do. Yeah. It's just a really good feeling to be part of that. And, yeah, very satisfying.

[Silvana] And finally, what advice would you give to somebody who's maybe considering also being a call taker?

[Mark] Give it a go. It's really great fun. You know, every day can you know, it can be different. You never know what you're going to get on the other side of the phone. It's a great environment, really good people. And it's a really good feeling to help people as well. Even though we're not there on the frontline, you know, we do some really, really good work in that Communication Centre. We have a really good group of people, and to be part of the whole process is very satisfying feeling.

[Silvana] Thank you so much for the chat.

[Mark] Thank you for having me. It's been great.

[Male Narrator] Are you looking for fast, accurate and official information, that helps you to make informed decisions to stay safe during an emergency? The Department of Fire and Emergency Services Emergency WA app lets you set up watch zones for places important to you. So, if an emergency happens in your watch zone, you'll receive alerts and warnings. The best part? It's sent direct to your mobile device. Download DFES' Emergency WA app from the App Store or Google Play today.

[Silvana] Thanks for listening to Mics and Sirens. I'm your host, Silvana Pulitano. Join us in the next episode when we step away from the phone lines and on to the frontline of one of

the State's worst flooding disasters. Visit the show notes of this episode for more information.