

## Transcript

### ***On West Gray, Episode 8, Emergency Communications w/Chief Kevin Foster & Russell Anderson***

**Runtime: 10 minutes 15 seconds**

Tiffany Vrska 0:16

What's up, everybody? Welcome to on West Gray, the monthly podcast about all things local government in the city of Norman. I'm your host, Tiffany Vrska, Chief Communications Officer for the city of Norman, and we appreciate you tuning in. Today we have a pair of guests with us from the Norman Police Department: Police Chief Kevin Foster and emergency communications manager Russell Anderson. Gentlemen, it's great to have you with us today.

Russell Anderson 0:40

Thanks for having us.

Chief Kevin Foster 0:41

Thank You.

Tiffany Vrska 0:42

Absolutely. Now, we wanted to have you both on with us to talk about the emergency communication side of the Norman Police Department. Dispatchers are FIRST first responders. They field not only emergency calls, but are oftentimes a go to for any types of questions or concerns that citizens may have. They're Jack's of all trades. And we certainly could not function without them. So we wanted to talk a little bit about what they do. So Russell, if you could tell us how many staff members make up the Emergency Communications Division and what is their average day to day look like?

Russell Anderson 1:16

So the Communications Division was allocated 26 personnel, three of those administrative and or technical so that leaves 23 people on the comm center floor to answer 911 calls, dispatch police, fire, EMS, animal welfare and parking service. We process about 1000 calls a day. Busiest time is between 11am and 8pm. And then Thursday, Friday, Saturday, obviously you're gonna have the busy party scene.

Tiffany Vrska 1:49

Oh, yeah, for sure. So you said that the busiest times 11am to 8pm most days?

Russell Anderson 1:56

For the most part.

Tiffany Vrska 1:57

Gotcha. That's interesting. I thought maybe it might be later but kind of--

Russell Anderson 2:02

It kind of grabs the lunchtime rush hour and then the after work rush hour plus you get the school's letting out in between.

Tiffany Vrska 2:09

Sure. So what type of trainings do they undergo to be able to do that job?

Russell Anderson 2:15

So every dispatcher that's hired goes through a six week dispatch Academy. So they're learning the basics of call taking. They're learning the tools that we use the computer programs that we use to make our job easier. And then after that, for a communications officer one, they'll they'll finish up with on the floor training of six weeks, with a two week SIGN OFF period with a supervisor.

Tiffany Vrska 2:40

Every time I go into a dispatch center, and I have been in a couple now, I feel like they are looking at 18 screens at one time. Is that near enough time to learn everything?

Russell Anderson 2:51

It's a lot. It's a lot to learn. Definitely the first phase is the biggest too. I mean, you've got to learn the difference between a larceny, a burglary and a robbery, all three different things. On top of all the other stuff that we're we're dealing with all the computer programs, but after that they go into their, their phase two, or their communications officer two training. And so that includes another six weeks of patrol and four weeks of fire. And so they're not they're not really left out on their own for at least half of a year. So they're always with a communications training officer.

Tiffany Vrska 3:23

Gotcha. And you think about just knowing who to call to an emergency, that is a lot of pressure and responsibility.

Russell Anderson 3:29

Absolutely.

Chief Kevin Foster 3:31

And we're regularly trying to hire these people. We're in a process right now trying to get people and we are still down two public safety sales tax positions that we have not got yet that would bring our staffing levels up also.

Tiffany Vrska 3:45

Right. And that brings me to my next question. There's vast shortages in the dispatching profession right now. Not only at Norman, I think a lot of departments across the country. Can you speak further to that and how exactly NPD is working to recruit and retain dispatchers?

Russell Anderson 4:05

So just getting people to apply for a job right now is complicated, let alone on the public safety side. So it is challenging. We hold hiring seminars, we contact our applicants regularly to make sure they stay involved. One of the hardest things about keeping them involved in the process is that we're going through the same background that a police officer goes through. So I mean, it's taking sometimes six months before we can even hire somebody

Tiffany Vrska 4:38

Is it true that you guys have a therapy dog for the dispatchers? Did I see that online?

Russell Anderson 4:45

We have the first therapy dog in the whole state, or in the country actually, dedicated specifically to a dispatch center.

Tiffany Vrska 4:53

Awesome. Has that do you think that that has helped your dispatchers?

Russell Anderson 4:56

It definitely helps my dispatchers. It helps everyone in the building really, and then when we do hold the higher seminars and they come down, Belle is always the star of the show.

Tiffany Vrska 5:05

I love that. That's what I was gonna say, tell them that they get to hang out with the dog at work, because that would be a key for me. So the Emergency Communications Division is currently housed in the basement of the police department. But we're on the verge of a brand new state of the art communication center in coming weeks. That's going to get started, I believe with the groundbreaking. So can you tell me a little bit about this new facility, and anything that your team would like to share about the progress there?

Russell Anderson 5:33

So a little bit about the current facility: It was remodeled in 2000. We moved from upstairs into the basement. At that point, we had a minimum staffing of two people on shift. So this was in 2000, November 2000. It was set up so that really only four people could work together. And then we actually had the city of Norman operator down there with us, as well as local bank alarms. So we're monitoring local bank alarms at that same time. Took about six to eight years before we outgrew that, we moved our room staffing up to four people. And we did some remodeling. And it was really only a few years before we outgrew what we remodeled, and that was six people could fit in there. So we've been kind of sitting at that maximum of six people dispatching for several years now. So the expansion into the new Comm Center, which will be 16 stations, it's a long time coming. There'll be some wonderful amenities like, we're gonna have an exercise room. So you imagine what a dispatcher goes through the stress of some of the calls that they take, there'll be an outlet for them. They'll have a quiet room. So it'll be a place where they can certainly just kind of relax. And then just an outdoor break room and a full functioning, not quite fully functioning kitchen, but a kitchen where they can, you know, have their own meal sit down with each other and just relax.

Tiffany Vrska 7:03

Sure. And you said there'll be 16 stations. So if you needed to have all those filled at one time, that would be possible?

Russell Anderson 7:09

Yep. Or expansion to other agencies if they still want to partner.

Tiffany Vrska 7:14

Very cool. So when is this groundbreaking?

Russell Anderson 7:17

Groundbreaking at two o'clock on January 19. We're really excited.

Tiffany Vrska 7:22

Okay, and everybody can come on out to see what you guys got going on and hear more about the project.

Russell Anderson 7:28

Absolutely.

Tiffany Vrska 7:28

Awesome. Well, Chief Foster, is there anything else that you would like to add about what your dispatch team does?

Chief Kevin Foster 7:37

He's covered it very well. They're very stressful job that they have down there. And like the decompression room that he talked about that we'll have the new center is a critical part. Because you just don't realize how rough it is to take a call, and you hear people in need or being assaulted, that is very injured, and you're trying to get help to them. And there's nothing you can do but listen, very stressful job. And you're stuck in one position. And right now that is in the basement of the police department. So I will be very thrilled to get them out and in a place where they can decompress in a decompression room or have a little bit of or like step outside, in an area to relax a little bit and recover from some of those more stressful, tough calls that they take. I would also close with saying we're regularly hiring for communications, or regularly hiring police officers, records, animal welfare, just go to our website and you can always apply or go to [NewNormanCops.com](http://NewNormanCops.com).

Tiffany Vrska 8:43

All right, [NewNormanCops.com](http://NewNormanCops.com) or [NormanOK.gov](http://NormanOK.gov). Either one of those will get you the information that you need to know. Well, thank you both so much for being here with us today. We're really looking

forward to the groundbreaking ceremony on the 19th at two o'clock, and that is over across from our water treatment plant?

Russell Anderson 9:05

Across from the water treatment plant and we've acquired parking at the Wildwood church.

Tiffany Vrska 9:09

Okay, so if folks want to go they just go to that church and--

Russell Anderson 9:13

We'll have a ride for them.

Tiffany Vrska 9:13

Perfect. Okay. Well, thank you all so much again for being with us. We appreciate you. Questions or commentary about on West gray can be sent into public affairs at [NormanOK.gov](http://NormanOK.gov). Shout out to our producer and editor, Mr. Bryce Holland, of the city of Norman communication office. Listeners are reminded that city council elections are coming up on February 14. The city council members in odd numbered wards will be up for election. So that's wards 1, 3, 5 and 7. The deadline to register to vote in this election is January 20. Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed and always remember to cast your ballot. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for tuning in to On West Gray.

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