

Working The Phones

by Jackie Hill, Port of Seattle P.D.

As a member of my department's Crisis Negotiations Unit, I felt there was a need to keep up my skills as a "professional talker/ listener ". There just weren't enough callouts to keep those skills honed. So I took up the suggestion, I'd heard several times, to volunteer at a local Suicide Hotline. This was the opportunity to keep up techniques and skills, plus giving back to the community, which our departments love to tout. I signed up for a year commitment, plus two months of training, three times a week.

The classes were good. The trained instructors really believed in their mission. The volunteers were an eager group, who had various reasons for being there, which were similar to why most of us wanted to be police officers: To Help People. Someone was there to further their degrees in social work, others, idealistic people who couldn't work in the states, to some whom needed to give to the community. Really, some very nice people.

The courses ranged from dealing with the mentally ill (220's), suicide and homicidal callers, chronic callers, the substance abusers, and crisis intervention. Plus there was learning about the many resources available in the community for those who needed it. Our 'final' was a series of mock phone calls where other trained volunteers played various roles as suicides, 220s and chronics. The majority of my classmates were apprehensive, and some were very stressed out during this phase. It gave me an appreciation for their dedication, since this was for, me rote. The classes were held in the morning and evening hours, which played havoc with my sleep and work schedules since I work nights. But, heck, I figured this was worth it.

"Working the phones" as it was affectionately known, at first was fun. The calls offered a variety of people and situations. Some were hopelessly pathetic cases. **T**he crisis calls were the most challenging and at times could be draining. After a while the voices became recognizable, the chronic caller, and if there was a gap from their calls, you missed them. There was also the class of caller who thought you were going to come and personally take their "pain in-the-ass" 7-year-old off their hands. These types of callers were very demanding and thought the world (i.e. you) owed them something. Thank God there was a mute button on the phone, so I could vent about their stupidity without their hearing. There were innumerable whining calls. You know the Boyfriend/girlfriend, ex-husband/ ex-wife, leaving me, not understanding me calls. I thought they should change the phone number to 1-800- WHINERS.

Occasionally, there were calls that intertwined with the job. Like the very intoxicated caller, who was at a corner pay phone, threatening to shoot any cop that got close. The phone worker did an EXCELLENT job keeping this idiot on the phone while we waited for the local gendarmes to arrive. Of course it was during shift change, so this poor worker is stuck talking with this idiot for 40 minutes. When the cops arrived all what was heard was a loud "Thump!" Some yelling and a moment later a gruff voice saying, " we got him in custody." The comment from one of the supervisors was, "Gee, I hope they didn't hurt him." I said I hope they did. Maybe he'll think twice before he does this again. This guy happened to be a slow learner, 'because less than a week later, several of my colleagues were dispatched to get this same guy threatening to kill cops.

There were several times when my 'copness' got in the way of being the 'caring & compassionate' phone worker. My reviews tended to reflect this. It's hard to turn off the 40+ hours a week of wearing the uniform and for 5 hrs a week, the Birkenstocks. My cop humor also, at times, alienated me from some. Like the day it was encouraged for us to attend an "Assisted Suicide" course. My response was "Gee, aren't we supposed to be preventing them?" The silence and stares were deafening. OOPS! The first rule of humor is knowing your audience.

Generally, was being a volunteer phone worker worth it? Would I recommend it? Yes, & No. There were times when I did leave at the end of shift knowing I had helped someone through a crisis. A real crisis, like the suicide of a loved one, or someone near taking that step to end their life. Those were very satisfying. However, it seemed as if a lot of shifts went like this: A beautiful, Sunny afternoon and I'm stuck in an office, and took a total of seven calls. Two were Obscene (cheap jerks too pathetic to dial 1-900-123-4567), and five directory assistance calls (folks who never heard of a phone book).

I guess you need to make your own decision. I left because I wanted to complete my college degree. I don't regret the time I put into it or working with the people I volunteered with. It's refreshing to know there are dedicated people in our communities who are willing to put in part of their lives to helping. Personally, I think I give it enough now.

If you are interested in volunteering at your local suicide hotline, they are available in all counties. Look in the front cover of your phone book or dial the operator for directory assistance.