



# DISPATCH MATCOM

*Megan A. Peters*

Up the stairs of the Wasilla Police Department, down a hallway and behind a secured door is a key component of Public Safety in Southcentral Alaska: MatCom.

MatCom dispatches for the Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Wildlife Troopers and the Wasilla Police Department. MatCom also takes my calls on a regular basis as I deal with media inquiries.

This particular Saturday night in September I was going on a field trip. I headed to MatCom to actually see and hear what the dispatchers deal with. I have done a few ride-a-longs with troopers to get a better handle on their duties; it seemed only natural that I find out what happens on the other side of the ever-cackling radio.

Four of the six work stations were manned when I arrived just after rush-hour traffic. Each workstation consists of a minimum of five computer monitors and two keyboards. The clicking and clacking of fingers dancing across the keys were constant and an almost steady flow of beeping sounds filled the air.

“Public Safety Dispatch” and “911, what is your emergency?” were repeated so often it was like they were being played from a cycled recorded message.

One of the first calls I stopped to listen to came at 7:30 p.m. I hadn’t plugged in a headset yet so I could only hear the dispatcher’s side of the conversation and watch what she was typing in the “details” box on her screen.

“Sir, What kind of problems? Is she running away?” Dispatcher Marcia asked.

“She’s arguing, rude and disrespectful” came up one letter at a time in rapid succession.

“Sir, what is it that you want law enforcement to do? What do you need help with?”

“Wants troopers to come talk to her. She needs to realize that I am the father in house” appeared in the detail box.

After Marcia disconnected the call she turned to look at me. “Those calls are actually pretty common. People have trouble with their teens and want cops to come over and scare them.” Marcia used air quotes to emphasize the “scare.”

While Marcia filled in the details box more thoroughly I looked at the monitors in front of her. About 13 windows were open and almost all of them looked confusing. “How long does it take for someone to learn how to do this? Not just training, but to be proficient and comfortable.”



### **Dispatcher Jessie listens to radio traffic and inputs data into the computers at MatCom.**

She lifted her hands away from the keyboard and swiveled toward me. “Training, with someone sitting with you the whole time, usually takes three months. For people to actually be comfortable... I’ve heard dispatchers say any where from a year to two years.”

The ringing computer took her attention away. The caller was reporting a tree on some power lines. The wind storm the night before had wreaked havoc in the Valley and left many outer-lying areas without electricity.

Out of the more than 100 calls in the past 24 hours, the vast majority were in regards to downed power lines and people angry that their electricity hadn’t been restored. “Sir, other than passing along the message to MTA, there isn’t anything we can do for you. The police can’t fix the power lines.”

Her discussion with the caller went on for a little bit longer. I took the time to look over her monitors again. When she got off her phone she attempted to explain them to me. One window she called CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch), another listed the identifiers of officers in the field, one was for the pending cases, a map of the area and where officers were. I quickly lost track of what was what- save the map.

Marcia was about to head out for the night. She walked me through what three dispatchers were doing at their stations. “She’s dispatching for Wasilla Police Department, she is taking calls and running NCIC over there, and she is dispatching troopers.”

“NCIC?”

“It’s the system we use to run names and plates. When the dispatcher there isn’t running things, they are usually trying to find charities to pick up the dead moose or entering warrants that come in after hours.”

Marcia left me in the capable hands of Jodi, the dispatcher coordinating trooper activities. A sea of blinking lights and windows were in front of me. I obviously had a glassy-eyed expression as I stood there so Jodi re-explained a few of the windows. She pointed to the one for trooper-generated activity (traffic stops or some other type of work initiated by the trooper) and explained the different color codes. If that wasn’t enough information to take in, she pointed to a different window and explained how the colors appearing there meant completely different things. In between her explanations she was taking in information from a trooper and inputting data in yet another window.

When she was talking to the trooper I tried to take down notes to use as quotes for this article- however, when I repeated what I heard back to her and asked her what it meant she just gave me a puzzled look. Apparently while she was able to communicate in code while maintaining conversations on multiple events, performing data entry and giving me a quick tutorial on what her job duties were I couldn't manage to correctly write down what I was hearing. My head spun.

Dispatcher Jessie arrived at MatCom at about 8:00 p.m. As she walked over to what I dubbed the Trooper Desk the other dispatchers oowed at her new bangs. Jodie and Jessie switched out their headsets while Jodie gave a quick recap of which trooper was where and what cases were pending. Most of the recap related to hunters dimming out people they thought were poaching. (It's amazing how passionate hunters feel about following the rules! One man called back four times to check the status of the responding Wildlife Trooper).

After Jessie settled into her chair and reviewed the monitors I dreaded another hopeless explanation of what was on the screens. I jumped into reporter-mode looking for the personal side of the job. "How long have you been a dispatcher? At what point did you actually feel like you were on top of the ball?"

Her fingers paused and the clacking of keys stopped for a moment. "I've been here for three years, which is good— I usually get bored at jobs but there is enough going on here that I stay happy." Her answer was postponed while she responded to a trooper on the radio. "I remember being here for about a year when I had an epiphany. I stopped and I just thought 'I got this. I got this.' I've been good since."

"What part of the job do you love/hate the most?"

"[Some] People are just so mean. I get called names all the time," said Jessie. I made the mistake of asking her what kind of names and she rattled off a list of terms and recapped one particular incident that aren't suitable for publishing on a government website. "But what I hate the most is when people call me stupid. It is just so rude. I hate it."

Jessie told me the best part of the job was when she got a call that she felt she really helped make a difference on. She told me about a little boy that called 911. He was hiding in a closet upstairs in his bedroom while calling for help. His mother and her boyfriend were fighting. "He was so scared and he was afraid they were going to hear him and he'd be in trouble. The troopers got there and he didn't want to go open the door. I got him to throw his key out the window to the troopers. I felt like I really helped him. Those calls are the best."

A few more hours in dispatch passed. I tried my best to follow the different calls for service. After Jessie relayed a vehicle description to a trooper I asked her if that was for the DV call out in boonies. It wasn't. It was for a call that I missed completely. I just couldn't keep it straight. I told Jessie that I'd make a lousy dispatcher.

By the time I walked out of MatCom at about 12:30 a.m. the dispatchers took calls reporting everything from drunk drivers to a wayward ferret and DVs to power outages. One of the things Marcia told me when I first walked in to MatCom was true "when they don't know who else to call, people call troopers." I couldn't help but think it was a cheesy line stolen and modified from the movie Ghostbusters but it rang true.

