

Error 1: Delayed Response

911 Dispatcher Sued for Not Sending Police Quickly

Dec. 7, 2005 — A Colorado mother is suing a 911 operator for not sending the police quickly enough to rescue her daughter from being kidnapped. After two calls, it took 47 minutes for police to arrive on the scene.

Le Thu Nguyen was abducted by Omar Green, the father of her two children, on a July morning four years ago. He forced his way into her car, drove around for some time, and then killed her in Denver's City Park. Her body was found later in her car by family and friends.

In December 2002, Green was sentenced to life in prison plus 12 years for first-degree murder, second-degree kidnapping and third-degree assault.

“I think when 911 is called they should have responded,” Susan Duvall, Nguyen's mother, said. “It's an emergency.”

Duvall said it didn't have to end this way. She said that Denver dispatcher Jeanette Price answered two calls about what looked like an extremely volatile situation between a man and a woman: one from Duvall and one from a pizza-delivery man.

Two 911 Calls

The delivery man calls first. John Chauvin does not know Nguyen or Green. He describes seeing a black male

jumping into the passenger side window of a car that a young Asian woman is driving.

Chauvin: He jumped through her window while she was speeding away. ... He's still in the car with her.

Price: OK, but are they yelling and screaming at each other — are they talking? Are they fighting?

Chauvin: I think he's just telling her what to do.

Price: Normally if they need help, they're going to fight or scream or something. So they may have just been playing around.

Chauvin: No, I don't think so.

Price asks him again and again: "Are they fighting? Is she screaming?" It is a question Price asks eight times during her two-minute call with Chauvin and three times during her eight-minute call with Duvall.

Chauvin says Nguyen is not screaming, but makes it clear that he does not think things are fine.

Nguyen's mother calls soon after Chauvin. She has been called by the nail salon where her daughter works. The women in the salon, who are related to the victim and knew her former fiancé had been stalking and threatening her, have seen Green jump into the car.

They immediately call Nguyen's mother, who in turn calls 911 to report that her daughter is "being carjacked by her

ex-fiancé, who we're trying to get an order of protection against, because he abused one of the children.”

“My daughter is very scared of him. He abused their 4-year-old baby. He's threatened my daughter,” Duvall tells Price during the call. She also says that her daughter has applied for an order of protection against Green, but that she does not realize that the order is in place but it has not been served yet on Green.

The dispatcher asks whether it is possible they could be getting back together. In the ABC News interview, Duvall said she felt Price kept interrupting her.

Duvall: Right but she tried to escape from him but he still got into the car.

Price: Right, but we didn't even talk to her. Does she have a cell phone or anything?

Duvall: No she doesn't. What the problem is that he's been stalking her ... and she moved in with me last month because he hit their 4-month-old baby.

Price: I mean a lot of times they end up making back up together, they end up making up?

Duvall: Right well, that's not this case.

Price: Well we don't know because we haven't talked to her.

Duvall: Right, well I would just like to record it because she fears for her life from him.

An Uphill Legal Battle

Price and her lawyers maintain that she was just doing her job.

“Emergency services call takers and dispatchers are required to make critical judgments under very tight timelines for the purpose of quickly determining whether a particular situation requires a response and if so, the nature and the necessary personnel and equipment,” said Price’s attorney, Jennifer Gifford. “The commitment of emergency services resources in situations that do not warrant them can diminish the availability of these resources for other emergency needs. Ms. Price utilized her professional judgment and training in an effort to ascertain what would be an appropriate response.”

Duvall’s lawsuit is an uphill battle because like all states, Colorado has tough laws that make it very hard to sue city, state and local governments.

Her lawyer, Greg Gold, has named Price the defendant in a wrongful-death lawsuit and says her actions contributed to the murder.

“What enters my mind, when they ask, is she kicking is she screaming. ... I’ve been carjacked before ... the first thing they tell you is don’t kick, don’t scream,” Gold said.

To win the case, Duvall will have to prove that the dispatcher “willfully and wantonly” disregarded a serious threat to someone’s life.

“We feel she’s as dangerous on the other end of the 911 call as any criminal out on the street out there,” Duvall said.

If Duvall wins, Colorado law says that when suing a government official, the plaintiff can only get \$150,000 per person. Nguyen’s two children would recover \$300,000. In addition, the state says that if the plaintiff loses the case, the plaintiff must pay all fees incurred by the government employee.

Duvall’s attorneys were spurred on by some members of the jury that convicted Green. Several jurors approached the lawyers and said: “Look, we think something has to be done about that dispatcher. We listened to the 911 tapes many times, and we were appalled by her conduct. Something must be done.”

Duvall said that she wished she had been more forceful on the phone and had not tried to collect herself before calling.

“Don’t take no for an answer,” she said. “Keep pushing. Keep trying. I thought I was doing everything right and it still didn’t help. You have to push past all resistance to keep your loved ones safe.”

Error 2: Failure To Listen

Another APD dispatch error occurred on October 10, 2002, when dispatch received a call about a body in the JC Penney Garage in downtown Anchorage. Police were sent to the caller's location rather than the location of the decedent. The computer trace on the location of the call was correct – but the dispatcher did not listen to the caller who told her that the incident occurred at a different location - the JC Penney Garage. The failure of the dispatcher to carefully listen to the caller resulted in a one hour delayed police response to the correct scene. According to documents provided by APD, these types of data errors occur frequently, at least once a week, but usually more often than that. Mrs. Godfrey's call was the first one that was a grave emergency.

Error 3: Dropped Digits on Address

WALTERBORO, S.C. — John Creel's call for help, polite but shaking with panic, was doomed in the first few seconds.

"Yes, ma'am, my name's John Creel," he tells a Colleton County sheriff's dispatcher at 4:22 a.m. on June 12, 2005. "My wife. She quit breathing. 20908 Augusta Highway."

"209 what?" the dispatcher says.

"Augusta Highway," Creel says.

"209 Augusta Highway?"

"Yeah, please get somebody here. She's got food in her mouth or something," Creel says, pleading, "Please hurry."

The error - dropping two digits from a five-digit address - had ambulances racing to the other side of the county more than 20 miles away.

Creel, constantly reassured by the dispatcher that help was coming, struggles to revive his wife until the moment ambulances arrive 36 minutes later. Elaine Creel, 62, died at the scene.

The Sheriff's Office released a copy of the 32-minute tape to the public Tuesday after initially

refusing a Freedom of Information Act request from The Post and Courier.

Together with several internal e-mails documenting calls delayed by dispatchers' mistakes, also obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, the materials raise questions about the reliability of the county's 911 system.

An inspection of the tape also shows the dispatcher missed a clue, a nearby crossroad, five minutes into the conversation that could have signaled emergency crews were going to the wrong location.

It also raises the question of why the correct address wasn't displayed on the dispatcher's monitor. Officials familiar with the county's 911 system say it should have because Creel made the call from a land phone line.

Error 4: Inappropriate Humor

The country seems to be experiencing a period of strange behavior by public safety dispatchers. The latest example is by 5-year Watauga (Tex.) police dispatcher Mike Forbess. He answered a call from a mother who said she needed help with her 12 year-old daughter, who had kicked a hole in a door. Forbess replied, "OK. Do you want us to come over to shoot her?" There was a long silence as the caller apparently absorbed the comment, and then the woman said, "Excuse me?" Forbess immediately realized that his humor was unappreciated, and apologized to the woman. After the call, he told his supervisor of the incident, and Forbess was later disciplined with a letter of reprimand from the police chief who warned, "This type of response cannot be tolerated, and this letter shall serve as notice that any future unprofessional responses while answering the 911 line will be cause for termination."

Error 5: Use Of Wrong Map

Pasadena, Texas: A 30-minute response delay by an ambulance to an EMS call in Pasadena (Tex.) is under investigation, after the victim died from a heart ailment. The February incident apparently resulted from dispatching a northside ambulance to the victim's home, which is on the far south side of the city. The mis-route stemmed from dispatchers looking at the wrong map, city officials said. A police officer arrived quickly and started CPR, but the man could not be revived. The dispatch error was corrected after 7 minutes, but it took another 25 minutes for the EMS unit to arrive. Mayor Melvin Embry says the ambulance crew became lost enroute, and the city's CAD system is outdated.

Error 6: Assumed A Prank Call

A Detroit 911 Operator was found guilty of a “willful neglect of duty”. She could spend up to a year in jail when sentenced in March. No other operator in our country, from what I understand, has been charged with a crime regarding how they have handled emergency calls except in this case. There was one other operator that was charged in this case but that case was dismissed.

This case is about a call from a 5 year old child calling to say that his mother passed out. The call came in at almost 6 o'clock one night in February of last year. The operator testified that she could not hear the child and thought it was a prank...however, she told him she sending the police to check up on him. She didn't really do that. So the young child waited and waited.

Almost 3 hours later he called back...this operator was rude to him but did send authorities in less than 5 minutes. What they found was that the five year old child's mother was dead; later it was determined that her death was from an enlarged heart condition. Could she have been saved 3 hours earlier? Only God knows for sure.

This little child sat for 3 hours waiting for the police or an ambulance to come and help his mother...and they never showed because the first operator lied to the child. I cannot imagine how a 5 year old handled waiting for help for 3 hours by himself. It must have taken a lot of courage to call back. His father says the child is still dealing the trauma.

The jury deliberated for 3 hours before a guilty decision was returned. I bet that, that 3 hour wait for the decision felt like a lifetime to the former 911 dispatcher. Still, I found it ironic, since that young child waited the same amount of time waiting for help to come to him and his mother. That 3 hour wait for help was a lifetime....his mother's lifetime! Help did not come in time to save her life.

Error 7: Wrong Address

A two-month investigation has determined that dispatch error is to blame for sending an ambulance to the wrong address in San Joaquin County - a mistake that may have contributed to the death of a heart attack victim.

Officials said it took nearly 30 minutes after the initial call for an ambulance to arrive at 47-year-old Katinia Minoneti Paea Finau's home. She died at an area hospital.

The San Joaquin County Emergency Medical Services Agency report said dispatchers misunderstood the street name and sent the ambulance to a rural area of the county instead of to a street address in Stockton.

Emergency dispatchers from American Medical Response and the California Highway Patrol committed errors, the investigation found.

Officials said recommendations are in place to prevent this type of mistake from happening again.

Error 8: System Failure

DALLAS — Dallas' new \$6.5 million dispatch system went offline for at least 30 minutes Thursday morning, forcing police to revert to an old-fashioned method of sending police and firefighters to emergency calls.

Officials said the problem arose because of an error by a technician who was working on the system.

"It was human error," said Worris Levine, head of the city's communications and information services department.

While the system was offline, 911 operators wrote information on cards. Runners took those cards to police and fire dispatchers, who then sent out emergency workers.

The computer-aided dispatch system went online Aug. 22 to replace a 30-year-old mainframe. The software is used for sending emergency workers where they are needed, monitoring their locations, and processing reports that police officers file on their in-car computers.

Officials insist that the dispatch system has worked the way it was intended and that most of the technical difficulties aren't directly related to it, but instead are coincidental.

Among the problems: Some officers were having trouble checking to see whether suspects have outstanding arrest warrants, and others have had trouble filing reports on their in-car computers.

"I don't know what's broken, but I'd like it all fixed," said Senior Cpl. Chris Wagner, who works on a crack house action team in the southwest patrol division. "People are still doing their jobs, but it's just slowed down our work."