



Champion COMMUNITY Page



Emergency 911 operators handle all sorts of calls

By LISA TALLYN
Special to The Champion

From violent assaults and robberies in progress to warnings about balloons in trees, Halton Regional Police communicators never know what kind of situation will face them on the other end of the phone line during a 12-hour shift.

For the 36 men and women who take the 911 calls that come into Halton Regional Police Service in Oakville, variety is the spice of life.

"It's exciting," says communications supervisor Sandra Godfrey, who has worked in Halton Police communications for 14 years. "There's something different every day."

Ms Godfrey says on average, during the summer about 161 911 calls come into the police headquarters each day, and that drops slightly to about 155 daily in the winter.

Communicators answer all 911 calls in the region and put them through to OPP, Milton, Oakville, Burlington and Halton Hills fire departments and Halton/Mississauga ambulance, depending on the situation.

For calls that require Halton police assistance the communicators dispatch officers to where they are needed.

Regular police complaint calls also go through communications. "Conservatively 75 per cent of all 911 calls are false," says Ms Godfrey.

Problem calls

Many of the false calls are kids dialing 911 from pay phones at malls for fun, and others are from people calling police with routine complaints who say they don't know the administration number, or can't be bothered to look it up.

"They are taking us away from someone who could really have an emergency," says Ms Godfrey.

Summers are busier in the communication room, so are holidays, and nights when the moon is full.

During a full moon the callers are a little bit more stressed and a little bit tighter wound," says Leanne Ball, who has been a communicator for 12 years.

Ball says they have some regular callers, including chronic complainers who vent their frustrations. Communicators have to answer each call individually, even from the drunks, for the one time the caller may actually need emergency assistance.

UFO reports

Other regular callers include one woman who phones to discuss UFOs and the fact that she has lined her walls with tin foil to reflect rays directed by visitors from other planets. Another caller tells them the balloons are in the trees again.

John Black, a communicator for the past seven years, says an elderly woman used to call regularly to inform police about million-dollar transactions that took place at her door frequently.

They would often tell her police were responding to reassure her. He says one day the woman didn't sound like herself on the phone so they sent a police officer to her house.

Her husband answered the door. He wasn't sure where his wife was and had no idea she called police regularly. They found her in a closet with the telephone.

While some of the regular callers keep the communicators

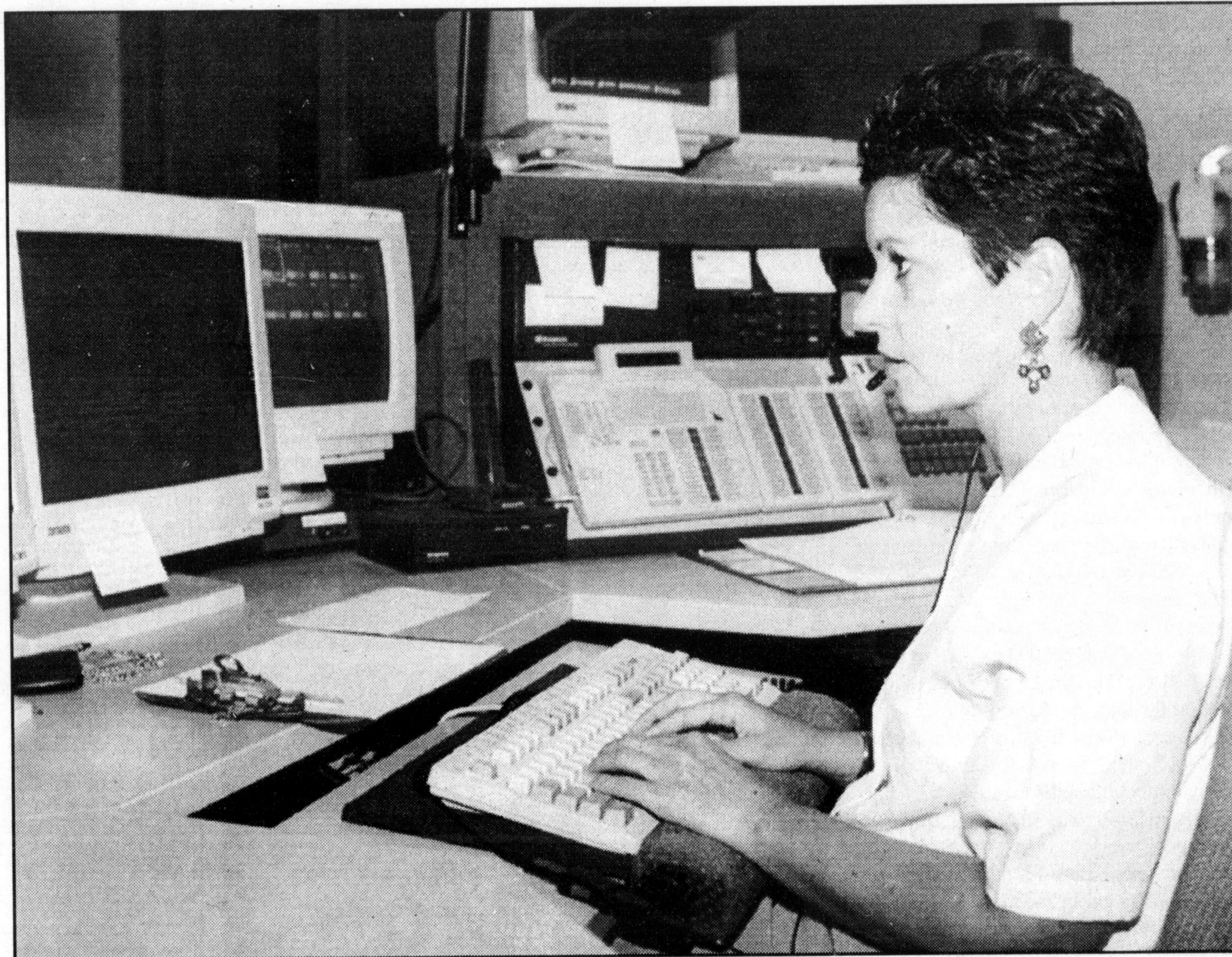


Photo by LISA TALLYN

Communications supervisor Sandra Godfrey is one of 36 men and women who take the 911 calls that come into Halton Regional Police Service headquarters in Oakville. Most calls are false, others are tragic and the stress can be great. Communicators answer all 911 calls in the region and put them through to OPP, Milton, Oakville, Burlington and Halton Hills fire departments and Halton/Mississauga ambulance, depending on the situation.

entertained, they stress, however that they are not there to chat, and that with no notice they have to be prepared to deal with stressful situations that can often involve hysterical callers.

"If you have to yell at them, you yell them," says Mr. Black. "You cannot let yourself get too involved in their situation otherwise you don't ask the right questions and you don't get the right information."

The more information the communicators get the more prepared the emergency personnel will be when they arrive on the scene.

Stressful job

He says there is a lot of stress involved in the job, particularly when they receive calls about bad accidents, or from police officers in the midst of dramatic situations, like a pursuit or when they've cornered a suspect.

Vicki Gravelle, a part-time communicator with Halton who has 15 years of experience, says the calls that stand out in her memo-

ry are the ones involving children.

She recalls one from a 12-year-old boy who had just been assaulted by his dad and called 911 from his bedroom while his father could be heard ranting outside the door.

She says calls from police officers for immediate help are also memorable.

Dealing with tragedy

A call from a 12-year-old girl who found her mom dead early one morning is a call that Karen Henshaw, a communicator with Halton for the past four years, remembers vividly.

She also recalls one about a baby who was kidnapped in Burlington.

While the communicators say the fact they don't know what they'll have to deal with each time they take a call can be stressful, it is that variety that appeals to them most about the job.

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