

## THE CALL TO ACTION

Dispatchers send firefighters to heart of emergencies

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“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

With this short phrase, an intricate and highly choreographed set of actions begins.

For those of you who have used the services of the Louisville Fire Department or for the merely curious about what goes on behind the scenes, I’d like to take a moment to explain the sequence of events that brings us to the scene of a problem.

First is the initial call, which is answered by the Boulder County 911 operators in the communications center in Boulder. They will ask a variety of questions to determine what is going on and then decide who needs to be dispatched to resolve the issue. This may take up to a couple of minutes to complete.

The 911 operator then transmits a radio alert signal to activate the pagers the firefighters wear 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This tone is followed by a verbal description of the nature and location of the problem, for instance: “Louisville Fire, respond to 503 West Cactus Court, 503 West Cactus Court, on the report of a possible structure fire. RP (reporting person) states that she can see smoke coming from the roof area. Unknown if there is anyone inside.”

Please note that other than the salaried chief and training division chief, the Louisville Fire Department is an all-volunteer department. Every night from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m., there is a crew of four to five volunteer firefighters at the station, and during the day there is usually a crew of two to four volunteer firefighters standing by.

After the tone is received by the volunteers, the crew at the station quickly goes to the engine. But before they get on, they must put on their protective gear (bunker gear or “bunks”). This includes pants, boots, a flash hood and jacket, which must be zipped and velcroed. We train to do this in about 30 seconds.

Now onto the truck!

It is our goal to have a truck rolling within one minute after an alarm is sounded. However, if there is no crew standing by, the volunteers must come to the stations from their homes and jobs. Countless meals, family time and sleep are given up to respond to these calls. It may require up to two to four minutes to get a qualified crew together to roll out a truck.

Now the engine is rolling, lights flashing, sirens wailing and air horns blaring. The engineer/driver is working his way through traffic in a truck the size of a school bus but with one to two tons of water on board, looking in all directions to make sure everyone on the road is aware that a huge red truck is trying to get through. The officer on the passenger side is talking with the dispatcher to learn more about the nature of the call while at the same time watching in all directions for any traffic dangers to his truck and personnel and also operating the siren and air horn. He is also often giving directions to the engineer on which route to take and formulating a plan for when they arrive. He may also be talking to the crew in the back to give assignments. Finally, he may be talking with other responding trucks, giving orders for where he wants them to locate when they

arrive.

In the back, the firefighters will be putting on their air packs and masks. Bells and alarms are going off, and everyone is listening to the officer in front talk with dispatch, the engineer and the other trucks. The more experienced firefighters are telling the new ones to calm down and, “Just follow my lead and stick close to me.”

We train repeatedly to “pack up” in 60 seconds or less.

Now we arrive on scene. Depending on the address, it may take four or more minutes from when we leave the firehouse until we arrive. It’s all a matter of location.

At this point there are about a hundred different things that could occur, and we train to handle them all. Typically, though, this is what happens:

A firefighter is dropped off at the closest hydrant, and she pulls a 5-inch diameter supply hose and a 30-pound bag of tools and valves from the truck. When the hydrant person signals she is set, the engineer moves the truck toward the scene and positions it for the attack. He then sets the truck to pump and jumps out to start connecting the truck to the supply hose. The officer radios a size-up description of the situation to the dispatcher and other trucks and then does a quick walk around to learn about the problem and decide on the best course of action. He is also trying to find out if anyone is inside.

The firefighters are pulling off 200-foot sections of hoses with nozzles and grabbing tools and a thermal imaging camera from the various storage compartments on the engine and getting ready to go inside the structure. They are also putting on their masks and mentally preparing themselves for what they must accomplish. The order is given to charge the hose line with water and the first team enters the building. Now the real work begins.

I hope this gives you an idea of what must happen just to get a crew of firefighters on scene. The 52 men and women under my command are an unbelievably dedicated group of individuals. They are your neighbors, your friends, your spouses, your parents, the shoppers next to you in the grocery store. But when that pager goes off, each is transformed into a highly trained individual, an integral part of a team dedicated to protecting the citizens of Louisville and willing to risk their lives to do so. Each and every one of these men and women, including myself, is a volunteer firefighter.