

“911, what is the location of your emergency?” This is a phrase repeated thousands of times each year in the Benton County Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), more commonly known as our 911 dispatch center. For most people, the PSAP is the black box that exists between their 911 call and the public safety services they need. Those who have stepped inside of a PSAP know this is a busy place full of technology and amazingly talented people who are the first, first responders in any emergency. Knowing how to best interact with a PSAP can save precious seconds when those seconds count most.

When a public safety telecommunicator (PST), the modern term for a dispatcher, answers your 911 call, their primary consideration is your location. Before even learning what your emergency is, a PST must learn where you are in order to get you the help you need. In the days of land line telephones, this question was easily answered with the address information tied to the telephone. The proliferation of cell phones has changed this vital aspect of PSAP work completely. While location services for cell phones have improved dramatically, the location information we get with a 911 call from a cell phone can be vague and sometimes unreliable. Being prepared to describe your location as specifically as possible is going to enable the PST to get you help quickly and make a very stressful situation a bit less tense. As your 911 call is ringing, be thinking about how you can best describe your location. Do you know the address from where you are calling? If you are driving, do you know the name or number of the road you are travelling on and the nearest mile marker or crossroad? Is there a landmark you are near that you can describe? All these things will help the PST answer this first and most critical question.

Once a PST knows your location, the PST will want to know what is going on. Emergencies tend to be chaotic and difficult to describe. The PST knows this and will attempt to learn what services are needed. You can help by telling the PST the most urgent or dangerous thing about your situation first. Is there a fire or vehicle crash? Is someone having a medical emergency? Is there a crime in progress or some other life-threatening situation? Starting with the most urgent aspect of your emergency will help the PST sort out what public safety resources to start your way. In any situation involving conflict or threats, the PST is going to be asking about access to weapons. It is important that first responders know about weapons a suspect possesses and weapons a suspect may obtain. A specific description of your knowledge regarding weapons and a suspect’s ability to access weapons is going to be very important as first responders develop a plan to keep themselves and everyone involved safe.

A PST is going to have several questions for you about your emergency. PSTs are trained to get as much information about your emergency as possible to ensure that you are getting the right public safety services and that everyone involved, including the first responders, stay safe. After telling the PST about the most urgent aspect of your emergency, you will have the opportunity to relay important remaining details about your situation. The PST will need to know details like, whether everyone is out of a burning building, if there are any injuries at a vehicle crash, how long the person experiencing a medical emergency has been feeling ill, or if a suspect is still on scene at the crime you are reporting. When in the heat of the moment, it may feel like the PST is wasting time or not taking your situation seriously by asking these questions. As you are answering questions, either the PST talking to you or another PST who is listening is working to get public safety services headed your way. The PST is trained to continue getting detailed information from a caller for as long as is necessary. As the PST seeks more information, help is on the way.

Important and life changing work takes place in PSAPs every day. Like many other employers, PSAPs are struggling to find people to do this vital work. If you’ve ever thought of pursuing a career that

makes a difference in your community and people's lives, a career as a PST is worth exploring. PSAPs all across the state are looking for people with good communication skills, who are comfortable with technology, and have the ability to multi-task. With starting pay ranging from 50k to 60k per year, good benefits, and a pension at retirement, these are great careers especially considering most PSAPs require only a high school diploma or GED. This work could be your calling. To learn more, check out the information at www.911itsyourcalling.com.

I hope that none of you ever need to make a 911 call. In the event you do, remembering to give your location and reason for the call right away is going to help us help you. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.