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## Rock County 911 offers assurances to residents

Several years ago, a Gazette staffer rose early one morning to make a work-related, long-distance call from home. Out of habit, he punched 9 like he does to connect to the outside world at work. He compounded the error by double clutching on the 1. Halfway through the call, he realized he was dialing wrong and hung up.

Before he could redial, his phone rang. It was Rock County's 911 center.

"Is there an emergency?"

"No," he answered, puzzled.

"You dialed 9-1-1," the female dispatcher said.

He suddenly realized his error and felt foolish. He explained what had happened, but the dispatcher said an officer would be on the way. He said that wasn't necessary, but the dispatcher said it was standard procedure.

An officer soon showed up and searched the house amid apologies.

That incident illustrates that a 911 foul-up such as the one that happened when a Madison woman was murdered shouldn't happen in Rock County.

To recap, authorities disclosed last week that Brittany Zimmermann, a UW-Madison student, apparently dialed 911 from her cell phone shortly before she was murdered April 2. The dispatcher hung up, did not call back or send police and went on to another call.

Rock County procedures and policies are designed to prevent such a scenario. Agencies are dispatched for any 911 hang-up call, even if the person calls back and claims it was a mistake. If the person doesn't call back, the dispatcher will.

As Kathy Sukes, operations manager, explained in Friday's Gazette: "You never know; there could be someone there holding a gun to their head."

Rock County also can find cell phone callers. It used a state grant to install a Pictometry system that plots locations onto digital aerial photos.

That technology, perhaps the best in the area, might not work if the caller is using an older cell phone or calling from a spot with interference. But in those cases, the dispatcher can determine a general area based on the nearest cell phone tower.

The technology, working since 2005, helped locate Tami Wescott in January after she suffered a diabetic reaction while driving, struck a tree and called 911 but didn't know where she was.

"...If we hear something that sounds suspicious or strange, we will exhaust all resources to find him or her," Sukes assures residents.

Authorities say the Dane County dispatcher failed to follow procedure by not calling Zimmermann back. Madison Police Chief Noble Wray disputed a county official's claim that the center doesn't have the technology to pinpoint cell phone calls.

Dane County handles far more calls than Rock County. Maybe it doesn't have the manpower to visit each residence errantly calling 911. But Wray said the call contained enough information that police should have been sent.

Wray claims it's too early to tell whether a better response could have prevented Zimmermann's murder or helped capture her killer.

From our view in Rock County, the Madison case looks like a lawsuit in the making.

As that case shows, policies and technology are only as good as the workers using them. But we're glad that Rock County officials had the foresight to install procedures and technology designed to prevent such incidents here.