

Some of the operators at the Goodwood command centre are in front, from left, Vuyokazi Nethe, Jamie Thomas, Marilyn Booyen, Wayne Chadow, and back, Winston Davids, Quinton Leon and Toivo Ngqwebo.



A vehicle on fire on the corner of Platteklouf Road and the N1 highway.



Toivo Ngqwebo from Kuils River is passionate about helping people.

A nod to the unsung heroes of firefighting

KAREN WATKINS

It's 12.05pm. A bell rings at the City of Cape Town's Fire and Rescue Service command centre at Goodwood fire station, signalling an emergency call – a car is alight on the corner of Platteklouf Road and the N1.

Within minutes, a fire engine and water tanker are dowsing the flames – freeway cameras feed footage of the incident to the bank of monitors at the command centre.

At 12.11pm, it's all over and the water tanker leaves the scene as a tow truck arrives.

This is all in a day's work for the emergency dispatchers at the command centre.

Head commander Craig Cyster is very proud of his team. He says the dispatchers' target is three minutes "from call to tar" and 15 minutes for the firefighters to reach the scene.

"Firefighters may be at the coalface among the flames, but without the control centre staff doing their job efficiently, we would not be able to manage the City's 28 fire stations and see that the skills are balanced evenly across the board. These are the unsung heroes."

And it's a very high-pressure job, he says.

A call comes in and dispatcher Toivo Ngqwebo picks it up. The woman on the other end of the line is frantic, screaming for help: a shack is burning and her relative is trapped inside. Mr Ngqwebo keeps cool, calmly asking questions and typing the answers into the Emergency Policing Incident Control (Epic) tracking system. At the same time, he's listening to messages coming in over the radio and eyeing the bank of monitors.

Before this job, Mr Ngqwebo, of Kuils River, worked at a back office at the Civic Centre. He had no contact with people and hated it. Now he lives to help those in need, he says.

With one phone call, the dispatcher can alert Metro police, law enforcement, traffic and emergency services, 107, fire and rescue, disaster management, special investigations unit, social services and the stompie hotline which records where people have been seen tossing their cigarette butts.

The Epic system shows which relevant responder is closest to the incident and how long it will take them to get there.

And responding units can be fed vital information on the type of emergency and its location, whether there are injuries, road closures and the nearest available hydrants.

Members of the public who report an incident get an SMS with a reference number so they can follow up if they wish to.

The dispatchers have also had their fair share of strange calls - everything from people asking for money to someone singing.

Then there are the animal-related call-outs, including pets getting stuck in tricky places.

Cats or exotic escaped birds up a pole or in a tree can be particularly challenging.

"We go, put up a ladder, the cat or bird jumps or flies to another tree," says Mr Cyster.

Occasionally they help the police with special circumstances, such as when a burglar was caught in a roof void. Or the time a UCT student's drone was stuck in a tree on Devil's Peak. Even if someone is stuck in a lift they go.

"The person could be predisposed to anxiety, have a heart attack, and then it becomes an emergency," says Mr Cyster. "We don't get a lot of prank calls anymore but whatever it is we take it seriously and everything is catalogued."

Mr Ngqwebo says every school child should be taught how to make an emergency call and which number to phone – 107 from a landline and 021 488 7700 from a cellphone.



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Lt Gen (Ret) V.R. Masedo

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We are also mandated to promote the fundamental rights of soldiers.

The Office investigates complaints by the members of the public concerning the official conduct of a soldier on duty. As such, members of the public have 90 days to lodge a complaint with the Office, from the date the incident occurred.

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