



Klickitat County Department of Emergency Management's Goldendale dispatch center staff were on duty during the Underwood Fruit & Produce fire last October. Back row, from left, are Filiberto Ontiveros, Nicole Vincent and Vicky Ramsay. In front, from left, are Pam Schilling, Shirley Chapple and Melina Geary.

## Communications Officers Recognized for Efforts

*Coordinated effort at Goldendale emergency dispatch center earns state Telecommunications Team of the Year Award*

**By Jeanie Senior**

The October 2017 industrial fire at Underwood Fruit & Produce quickly grew into a major event that involved more than a dozen fire departments, a power outage that knocked out a water supply, a major highway closure and an air-quality advisory.

For communications officers at the Goldendale dispatch center for the Klickitat County Department of Emergency Management, the fire meant several hours of intense effort that

required two teams of operators to put in extra hours. Their coordinated effort impressed Julie Buck, chief of operations and 911 coordinator for the emergency management department. She nominated six communications officers for a statewide award.

This October, Shirley Chapple, Vicky Ramsay, Filiberto Ontiveros, Melina Geary, Pam Schilling and Nicole Vincent were named recipients of the 2017 Telecommunications Team of the Year award by the Washington State Chapter of the Association of Public

Safety Communications Officials and the National Emergency Number Association.

The award was a surprise, Melina says.

Vicky and Shirley were just 15 minutes from the end of their 12-hour night shift when the 911 call came in. A tugboat operator on the Columbia River reported seeing flames in Bingen.

“He just could see flames, he couldn’t tell me where it was,” Vicky says.

She dispatched Bingen and White Salmon firefighters, who reported that the fire was a huge one burning at the Underwood Fruit complex just west of downtown Bingen.

“It’s amazing how fast you can wake up,” Vicky says of the urgent move to emergency dispatching.

Filiberto and Melina—there to relieve Shirley and Vicky—plugged into other consoles to start work. It was going to be a busy morning.

Shirley and Vicky stayed at their consoles almost four hours more until emergency demands dwindled. Meanwhile, another communications officer showed up to help.

In her nomination, Julie noted the two day-shift operators stayed more than a couple of hours at the end of their shifts, without prompting, so their partners could get a bit of extra rest.

In addition, she wrote, team members “set up their own incident command and figured out who was doing what and never stepped on each other’s toes.”

Julie came to Klickitat County from a Colorado communications center that handled major incidents, including the 2012 shooting at an Aurora movie theater where a gunman killed 12 people and wounded 70 others.

The Klickitat County team “steps up to the plate every day like those in a big city/urban communications center. Just because they are in a small community in no way diminishes the hard work and

dedication they have to their job,” Julie wrote.

Melina and Filiberto say team members were stunned to be nominated for the statewide award.

“Her putting us in for that award meant so much to me,” says Melina.

She has worked for Klickitat County for 3½ years. Before that, Melina worked eight years in New Mexico.

Filiberto has been there for two years, with 13 years of previous experience in Nevada.

The two say it was notable that the department’s two most senior communications officers were on duty that morning. Shirley, who since has retired, held the job for 23 years. Vicky has been there 15 years.

Filiberto says the extra staff was necessary because other calls don’t stop during a large event.

Besides the fire traffic, there was a flood of calls from people who spotted the fire’s towering flames and enormous smoke cloud. They wanted to make sure emergency services had been alerted.

Eventually, the 911 center called out 11 Klickitat County volunteer fire departments, and firefighters from Skamania County, Hood River and The Dalles. Dispatchers summoned a train from Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway that is equipped to fight fires.

There were concerns about an ammonia leak from the building’s cooling system.

The fire burned through power lines, and some hydrants were not working, so water tankers from several fire districts were called in.

A health advisory was issued for White Salmon and Bingen because of the thick smoke. The fire burned for several days, eventually destroying the building, the plant’s office area and about 150,000 boxes of pears.

The good news: No one was hurt.

Things are both busy and back to normal at the Klickitat County Department of Emergency Management, housed in a four-year-old building on a rise just south of downtown Goldendale.

In the 911 center, each staff member works in front of four computer screens, handling a steady array of calls. Each half circle desk elevates so communications officers can sit or stand.

Filiberto, the 911 training coordinator, says it takes about a year to train a communications officer to work on their own.

Dispatchers are trained to ask questions that allow them to pass the correct information to emergency personnel.

Training, backed up by a computer program and a handbook, helps operators talk someone through performing CPR, delivering a baby or stopping bleeding.

Dispatchers deal with emergencies that involve wildfires and evacuations, lost hikers and injured climbers, crimes, suicides and other tragedies. The job requires knowing the roads and geography of Klickitat County’s 1,900 square miles.

Team members usually get a chance to debrief with first responders after major events. Also, Filiberto says, first responders will let 911 staff know the resolution of an emergency call.

Melina says it is hard to predict what kind of a call might cause stress that lingers with a dispatcher, but counselors are available.

Communications Officer Dani Ellickson, who has held her post for three years, says the position was a deliberate career change from working in the corporate world. She had a long-time interest in emergency management, and she is a search and rescue volunteer.

“This is the first time in my life I can truly say I love what I do,” she says. ■