
Detroit Free Press

METRO EDITION

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 16, 2008

BOY'S 911 CALL MARKED AS PRANK

'She hung up on me,' he testifies at dispatchers' trial

BY BEN SCHMITT

The Detroit Free Press

DETROIT The first 911 call was coded by operators as "pk" for prank.

The second call, three hours later, was coded "family trouble."

On both occasions, a 46-year-old woman lay unconscious in her nightgown on the floor of her Detroit apartment as her 5-year-old son tried to get help. And on neither call did dispatchers request EMS.

On the first call, 911 dispatcher Sharon Nichols, 45, told the boy, Robert Turner, "I'm gonna send the police to your house and find out what's going on with you." Then she hung up, according to transcripts. She never requested any action.

Only after the second call and a scolding did 911 operator Terri Sutton, 48, request a police response. Police arrived and found Sherrill Turner dead. They then called for EMS assistance. It was later learned that Turner died of an enlarged heart.

But before calling police, Sutton told Robert: "You shouldn't be playing on the phone," and "Now put her on the phone before I send the police out there to knock on your door and you're going to be in trouble."

Both operators are on trial in Detroit's 36th District Court, charged with misdemeanor counts of willful neglect of duty in connection with the Feb. 20, 2006, phone calls at 5:59 p.m. and 9:02 p.m. They face up to a year in jail if convicted.

Robert, now 7, dressed in a Spider-Man T-shirt, testified Tuesday that he put his hands on his mother's chest and didn't feel a heartbeat. He said he called 911.

"She hung up on me," Robert said. "She said, 'Stop playing on the phone.'

When Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lora Weingarden asked him how the operator treated him, the boy replied, "Not good."

E.J. Reeves, who supervises the 911 call center in Detroit, testified that if a child calls in and says his or her mother has passed out, then EMS should be requested before police.

She also testified operators are trained to "assume any call that comes in is an emergency."

Sutton's lawyer, David Lee, contended in his opening statement that his client called police, proving she did not ignore the boy.

Nichols' lawyer, Cornelius Pitts, told jurors that Robert's mother already was dead when the call came in. He said the trial will expose flaws in Detroit's 911 system and that the city is trying to scapegoat the dispatchers.

"It was a rush to judgment based on this city administration's cowardice, ineptness, their interest in saving their own hides, to blame the operators," Pitts said.