

# Detroit Free Press

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FRONT PAGE

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## OPERATORS IN 911 CALLS CHARGED

### *Pair scolded Detroit boy, could get jail*

BY JIM SCHAEFER AND BEN SCHMITT  
*The Detroit Free Press*

DETROIT In a move viewed as unprecedented, the Wayne County prosecutor charged two 911 operators Wednesday for dismissing a 5-year-old boy's calls for help on the day his mother collapsed and died.

"Wow. I can say I've never heard of that," said Rick Jones, a top official with the 7,000 member, National Emergency-Number Association, a professional organization for 911 personnel.

In announcing the misdemeanor charges at a news conference, Prosecutor Kym Worthy said: "The actions of these two 911 operators were egregious .... This is not what we expect or should expect at any time from our 911 operators."

When police finally arrived at the boy's west-side Detroit home after his second call in February, his mother was dead.

Charged with willful neglect of duty are Sharon Nichols, 43, a city worker for nearly 17 years, and Terri Sutton, 47, a nearly six-year employee. A city union official said the two Detroit women would be suspended today. They face up to a year in jail if convicted.

Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings declined comment Wednesday because the family of the boy, Robert Turner, now 6, is suing. But she said in a statement that the department was pursuing disciplinary action, including possibly firing the women. Nichols and Sutton could not be reached for comment Wednesday. They are expected to turn themselves in for arraignment today or Friday.

Kimberly Harris, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1023 in Detroit, which represents 911 operators, said the charges are unwarranted.

Harris said the operators had trouble hearing the boy because of faulty headsets. Transcripts of the calls, however, do not reveal the operators asking the boy to repeat anything.

"These operators are being put out to hang like scapegoats," Harris said. "I can't believe that they have been charged."

She said both women were reassigned to the Police Department's records bureau after the nationally publicized furor in early April over the boy's calls to 911. She expected them to be suspended today.

"They feel like they've been ostracized and sent out to pasture" Harris said. "They are very, very upset. Shocked is more the word."

AI Garrett, president of Michigan Council 25 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said the operators' union likely would fight any suspension, adding that he is unaware of any operators being charged criminally in Detroit for such matters.

"I do question the timing of this thing," Garrett said.

The department knew about the incident long before the 911 recordings surfaced in the news media and took no action until the public controversy, he said.

Robert Turner called 911 on Feb. 20. He spoke first to Nichols at 5:59 p.m. for 43 seconds, Worthy said. Nichols did not send the police. Robert called back at 9:02 p.m. and spoke to Sutton for 1 minute, 16 seconds.

Police were sent to Robert's home sometime after his second call. They found him in the house alone with the body of his mother, Sherrill Turner, 46. Her death later was attributed to an enlarged heart.

Worthy said Wednesday that officers were sent to the home only to reprimand the child for what the operator perceived was a prank call. "I think they should no longer be operators," Worthy said to reporters after reading aloud the transcripts of Robert's calls.

Jones, from the national 911 nonprofit group based in Arlington, Va., said proper policies and training are needed to help operators handle calls from children. Since the incident, Detroit 911 operators have been mandated to take an etiquette course, Harris said.

Robert told both operators his mother had "passed out," but did not give more information on her condition. Both operators scolded him.

"It's never OK to do what they did," said Jones, whose group advises its members on proper protocol for emergency operators.

The operators criminal charges may be unprecedented, but suspensions of people who handle emergency calls are not.

At least one Detroit Fire Department dispatcher was disciplined recently after a Ferndale man was killed in an auto accident on Christmas Eve. Although the man died almost instantly, the department came under scrutiny because his body - and the car, burned for more than 20 minutes before firefighters extinguished the flames.

On Wednesday, Robert Turner's guardians expressed relief when they heard about the criminal charges. "Fantastic," said Ty Patterson, who has custody of Robert with his wife, Dee, who is the boy's sister.

"It just simply confirms that our anger, our sadness our disappointment in the stem was in the right place."