

Description Of Communications Section Disputed

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Within the police department, the communications section—the public's telephone link with police—is described as the "penalty box," where policemen are assigned away from direct personal contact with citizens.

That description surfaced this week when a report by analysts for the city's personnel department said police generally are assigned to communications "for reasons of health, discipline or incompetence in the field."

But several high-ranking police officials challenged that statement Thursday. They said the majority of the police officers working in communications section are solid, competent cops, the problem cases don't predominate, there are other police assignments which could fit the "penalty box" description, assignment to communications isn't punishment and the section often is a sanctuary for experienced officers who are "burned out" after years of stress as street cops.

A VETERAN police captain said some officers volunteer for assignment to communications because they want a less demanding assignment.

"After 23 years on the street, he said, "some police officers have been out there too long.

"Is it fair to fire a man and take away his pension after he has put in 23 of the best years of his life on the street, but burned himself out?"

Assistant Chief William Bracke, whose command includes the communications section, called the operation "the most technically precise, yet most seriously criticized unit in the police division."

Bracke said people who call for police help often are hysterical, sometimes they're drunk, many times they don't give accurate addresses or descriptions of the problem.

The job requires a cool, experienced police officer in charge, Bracke added.

AND AMONG those kind now in communications are three who are physically disabled, but mentally sharp.

One has suffered two heart attacks, another is recovering from a kidney transplant and a third lost a leg in a bout with cancer.

"I want to use his brain," said Bracke. "That's irreplaceable."

Still, some police are assigned to the communication sections and other non-street duties because they've had two or more departmental disciplinary actions taken against them.

Police Chief Myron J. Leistler



Enquirer photo BY GORDON MORIOKA

POLICE AND civilians work amid computer terminals at communications section in District 1 headquarters on Ezzard Charles Drive.

said that assignment is "not an element of punishment," but is placed in a low-stress job when "we see he has characteristics which cause him difficulty in dealing with the public."

Leistler said assignments which require little or no public contact and could be termed "penalty boxes" are the police auto-impoundment lot in the west end, the central unit for processing warrants, the program management bureau and duty in Hamilton County Municipal Court.

The veteran captain said such assignments can be a "place to put people who become eccentric (cynical, inflexible) in their response to the public."

THE COMMUNICATIONS section includes 43 civilians and 34 police officers under the command of Lt. James Brunck. Of the civilians, 16

are clerk-typists and 27 are assistant operator-dispatchers.

They work three rotating police shifts, plys two overlapping shifts.

Bracke said the operator-dispatchers—those who answer calls from the public, then radio the police cars—are selected through a batter of 11 psychological tests.

"Yes," said Bracke, "we could assign all civilians if we were allowed to do so, but we'd always need a sergeant on duty to deal with the non-routine cases."

Sgt. Charles O'Mera, a communications section supervisor said that relations between civilian personnel and officers run smoothly "99% of the time." O'Mera, who is on light duty, said in his 14 years in the section he has never seen anything with gross sexual overtones. "There's a lot of kidding, but nobody's forced anything on anybody."

If there had been, O'Mera said, "I wouldn't let my daughter work here."

HIS DAUGHTER, Debbie O'Mera, has been a police dispatcher for seven months. "It's ridiculous," she said of stories of sexual harrasment, adding that she was speaking only of her own shift. She praised the sworn officers, saying "I've never been so supported in any job I've ever held. I've never known my sergeant to raise his voice.

Sergeant O'Mera, who has 11 months until retirement said he joined the communications section when "it was preferred duty." Many men who have been assigned in the last 10 years have had trouble in the districts, he said.

Bracke, meanwhile, said he "used to be a traditionalist who

thought that only policemen with at least 15 years' service should be assigned there, someone who has seen and heard everything a thousand times."

Bracke said he has seen similar operations in other cities manned entirely by civilians with a policeman in charge. He added those civilians were professional and competent.

But Elmer Dunaway, president of the Fraternal Order of Police, said he would prefer that the communications section be staffed entirely with police officers "because civilians never worked in the field and don't know what it's like at all.

"The civilians are working there because they want to be and some of the policemen have been assigned there for punishment," Dunaway said.