

Busy emergency lines put hundreds on hold

By Sarah Sturmon

Post staff reporter

When Taylor and Audrey Cornett called Cincinnati emergency dispatchers to report their camper was on fire, a recording answered: "Please hold."

While his wife waited for an operator, Cornett ran down the block from their Mt. Washington home to pull an alarm at a fire box.

As many as 20 percent of the 2,500 daily callers to the city's emergency communications office get the recording the Cornetts heard, said Police Communications Sgt. Joe Atherton, a supervisor there. The total includes officers trying to reach

wreckers and other ancillary services.

Except in large crises, he said, they are not on hold long. But to the caller, a few seconds can seem like forever.

"That recording just went on and on," Mrs. Cornett said of the incident June 11. "Our concern was what would have happened if we couldn't have run down to the corner to pull the box, or what would have happened if the fire was in the house?"

Assistant Safety Director David Rager is trying to determine how often emergency callers get the recording. He said he thinks it's unusual

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In the Cornetts' case, four operators were on duty, but had too many incoming calls to handle, said Cincinnati Police Chief Lawrence Whalen, whose police division oversees emergency dispatchers for both police and fire departments.

Although the city has unlim-

ited emergency lines coming into the dispatching center on Ezzard Charles Drive, the callers have to wait for an available operator

Rager said the department has up to 12 people answering calls during the busiest shifts but fewer operators during periods of lesser demand. He said more operators can be called in for emergencies.

A machine installed in January keeps daily counts of how

often the recording is used and a panel on the wall shows operators how long the calls have been holding.

The Cornetts wrote City Hall after the fire, which destroyed the camper, and their letter prompted Council Member Steve Chabot to ask for a report on how often people get the recording. That request was sent to the city manager Tuesday.

Whalen said the addition this

week of 12 new E-911 operators should help reduce the number of times callers get the recording.

The E-911 dispatchers are being added to prepare the city for a new emergency dispatch system to start in August.

That system allows callers to dial 9-1-1 for help.

It also records where the call is coming from.