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Opinion

Bernie Keller leaves 911 legacy to county

Just Wednesday, we published a letter from a Derwood reader who thanked the 911 emergency system, among others, for saving her life after she was stricken by a heart attack.

Sentiments such as that should make Bernard W. Keller proud.

You're forgiven if you don't recognize the name. One of the "little people" in our world who goes about his work without much fanfare, Bernie Keller was instrumental in setting up the county's 911 system in 1974.

The 911 system is something we take for granted and hear little about unless there's a foul-up. That's unfortunate because, if you think about it, 911 is a marvel of technology, planning and coordination.

For that alone, the public should thank Bernie Keller, who retired from the county Police Department Dec. 1 after 25 years

in the Communications Division. Most recently, the Wheaton resident was deputy director of the division.



Bernie Keller

As the Police Department coordinator in charge of setting up 911 in those unsophisticated early '70s, Keller created a computerized street location system. What this meant was: If someone called up with an emergency and gave an address, police could make a printout that included the street name, the hundred block and the main street that ran off the caller's street. It might not sound like much by today's standards, but it was impressive in 1974.

In 1985, some counties in Maryland still were without a 911 system. The state appropriated money to start new operations or upgrade older ones. So

the benefits of Keller's earlier work trickled down. The county, with Keller's continued assistance, was able to use the funds to modernize its system. Now, when a phone number is dialed, a computer automatically locates the address of the call. If someone is too ill to speak, he can still get assistance.

Before retiring, Keller was working toward implementing the next 911 generation, known as computer-aided dispatching (C.A.D.). This will cut out some of the manual work on the receiving aid of a distress call, and will further speed up response time. Eventually, each police car will be equipped with a computer keyboard. Also, police will relocate to a new, improved dispatch center.

Surely, there are others who could have done what Bernie Keller accomplished in his 25 years. But he brought a certain diligence and intelligence to his work that should give him satisfaction in his retirement (although he is talking of doing some private consulting work). Beyond that, there's the knowledge that his efforts have saved lives, and will continue to do so. How many of us daily grinders will be able to say that when we retire?