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## **THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT DUTY SERVICE WHO ANSWER THE EMERGENCY NUMBER**

### **Abstract**

This article is about the staff of the disaster management duty service, the professionals who answer the 112 emergency numbers received by the Call Reception Centre and forward them to the county directorates of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management in case of disaster. Following an introduction to their position within the organisation, I will describe the legislation that governs their tasks and then highlight the importance of the work they do. The duty service has a key role to play in ensuring timely interventions, which require responsible and immediate decisions, and for which adequate preparation and continuous training are essential to prevent stress and burn-out among staff members performing this complex task.

**Keywords:** duty service, 112 emergency number, competences

## **A KATASZTRÓFAVÉDELEM ÜGYELETI SZOLGÁLATA, AKIK A SEGÉLYHÍVÓSZÁMOT FOGADJÁK**

### **Absztrakt**

Jelen cikkben a katasztrófavédelem ügyeleti szolgálati feladatokat ellátó állományról esik szó, azokról a szakemberekről, akik a Hívásfogadó Központ által fogadott 112-es segélyhívószámokat katasztrófavédelmi illetékesség estén továbbítva fogadják a Országos Katasztrófavédelmi Főigazgatóság megyei igazgatóságainál. A szervezeten belüli elhelyezkedésüket követően ismertetésre kerül a feladatuk ellátását jelentő jogszabályok, majd rávilágítok az általuk végezt feladat fontosságára. Az ügyeleti szolgálat kiemelt szereppel bír a



beavatkozások időben történő megkezdéséhez, mely feladat felelősségteljes, azonnali döntéseket kíván, melyhez megfelelő felkészültség és folyamatos képzésfejlesztés nélkülözhetetlen annak érdekében, hogy az összetett munkakört ellátó állományi tagoknál a stressz és általa indukált kiégés megelőzhető legyen.

**Kulcsszavak:** ügyeleti szolgálat, 112-es segélyhívószám, kompetenciák

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The single European emergency number 112 was introduced on 29 July 1991 as a result of a decision of the European Council, and has been in use in Hungary since 1998. Since May 2014, the Call Reception Centre has been receiving calls from 112 and 107, and since January 2016 it has been extended by the central connection of 105. The structural design and roll-out of the new domestic system was already beyond the scope of many international call centres, and we were not lagging behind the then leading Dutch and Finnish examples. [1] Among the achievements of the disaster management in 2014, the intensive development of the 112 emergency number was reported, as well as the ongoing coordination of the operational management of the police and disaster management. [2] But how well do we know the expert professionals behind the emergency numbers who help citizens, whether it is a fire or an accident, or any kind of damage, emergency or disaster? The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the emergency services' duty staff, who they are, what their tasks are and what legislation they work under. Following this study, I would like to draw attention in a future article to the wide range of competences and skills that these professionals need to have in order to perform their daily tasks, and the state of the citizen calling 112 (typically tense, nervous, worried, crying) should not distract the emergency worker from his or her task and objective action.



## 2. DISASTER MANAGEMENT DUTY STAFF IN THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

The National Directorate General for Disaster Management (hereinafter: BM OKF) was established as a budgetary body of the Ministry of Interior on 01.01.2000 by succession. The legal predecessor of the budgetary body was the National Command of the BM Fire Brigade and the National Command of the BM Civil Defence, its main activity according to the classification of the public finance sector 'Specialised administration of fire protection'. The core activities of the BM OKF are set out in detail in the Constitutive Act, defining precisely the tasks related to the management of professional disaster management bodies, the tasks related to the management and coordination of disaster response, the core activities of the water and water protection authorities, as well as the tasks to be performed in connection with international cooperation. [3]

The Act CXXVIII of 2011 on Disaster Management and the Amendment of Certain Related Acts (hereinafter: Kat.véd. tv.), which clearly declares that disaster management is a national matter, a joint task of several actors (such as citizens, civil protection organisations, the Hungarian Defence Forces, law enforcement agencies, other state bodies and civil organisations) and that *"those involved in disaster management provide the information necessary to inform citizens about the effects of threats to life, limb, material assets and the environment"*. [4]

When people hear the word "disaster management", the vast majority of lay people associate it with the following words and phrases: fire, firefighter, burning house, rescue from a burning car, explosion in a factory building. Of course, there is much more to it when we talk about disaster management. § 3.8. of the Cat.def. act. 3.1.1.1 of the Civil Protection Act states that disaster management is *"the totality of planning, organizing, coordinating, implementing, managing, establishing, operating, informing, alerting, communicating and controlling activities in the protection against various disasters which prevent the occurrence of a disaster, the prevention of the occurrence of a disaster, the prevention of imminent hazards, the elimination of their causes, the reduction of their harmful effects, the protection of the life and property of the population, the safeguarding of basic living conditions, the implementation of rescue operations and the creation of conditions for recovery."* The complexity of the concept is fully understood by professionals and researchers in the field, and the public is perhaps now beginning to appreciate



the wide range of tasks that disaster management encompasses, which, although diverse, are closely interrelated. Disaster management includes industrial safety, which has been operating as an autonomous authority in our country since 2012, with highly qualified professionals from the authorities ensuring the performance of its tasks and the supervision of hazardous plants and activities. [5] The other branch of integrated disaster management is fire protection, which aims to *"provide appropriate solutions to real-life problems by means of legislation and standards, to protect citizens by ensuring consistent compliance with and enforcement of fire safety rules, to create the conditions for effective intervention in fire fighting, and to ensure the basic safety of the personnel involved."* [6] The third field is civil protection, which is *"a system of tasks, means and measures for the whole of society, the purpose of which is to protect the lives of the population in the event of a disaster or armed conflict, to ensure the conditions for survival and to prepare the population to combat the effects of such disasters and armed conflicts and to create the conditions for survival."* [7]

The organisational structure of the BM OKF clearly reflects its scope of activities, the given organisational units have been established according to the tasks to be performed, within which the work processes are typically organised into inspectorates-general and departments. The focus of this study is on the staff of the disaster management duty service. In connection with the performance of operations management tasks, the emergency services are subject to the provisions of the Act No. 49/2011 (XII.20.2011) of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Hungary on the coordination of emergency services..) of the Federal Ministry of Emergency Situations [8] defines the duty service as follows: *"the service of the duty, which is established to receive signals of fire and damage incidents and other extraordinary events and to take the necessary measures, to ensure permanent contact with the cooperating bodies, to notify the bodies and persons entitled and obliged to take action, to inform the leaders, and to operate continuously without interruption in a rotating duty schedule."* The law further stipulates in other paragraphs that the department performing the task must be provided with the means necessary for the performance of the task and must be on duty continuously, and cannot be diverted to other duties. [9] In Hungary, a Call Reception Centre has been set up in Miskolc and Szombathely, where call handlers receive, pre-screen, process and forward calls received via emergency numbers to the necessary destinations. [10] Depending on the nature of the emergency call, emergency response units provided by the disaster management, ambulance and police services



are involved in taking further action, ensuring that the caller's emergency call is dealt with professionally and as quickly as possible.

In addition to the two Call Reception Centres, in all counties (and in the capital), the County Inspectorates are organised as regional bodies under the Disaster Management Directorates (a total of 19 County Directorates and 1 Metropolitan Directorate in the organisational structure of the OKF), which operate the Directorate's County Head Office, the Disaster Management Operations Service and the Operations Management Office, as well as coordinate and direct the activities of the duty service of the local body concerned. [11]

Given the natural and civil disasters that have occurred in recent decades, disaster management has an increasing role to play. In order to perform these tasks, trained professionals are needed, and the National University of Public Service plays a prominent role in this field, aiming to ensure that the country has a sufficient number of well-trained professionals to participate in disaster relief. [12] In terms of education, not all professionals involved in rescue, relief and rehabilitation are required to have a higher education qualification, and some jobs can be filled with lower education. At the same time, each job is associated with specific expectations, and the existence and continuous development of key competences are necessary to ensure that the quality of the performance of the task is high.

### **3. THE "INVISIBLE" PROFESSIONALS BEHIND THE 112 EMERGENCY NUMBER**

According to Article 5 of Act C of 2003 on Electronic Communications, the Minister responsible for electronic communications "shall ensure that citizens are adequately informed about the single European emergency number "112" and its use." On the basis of this Act, the NMHH Decree 8/2020 (9.12.20) on emergency calls to the single European emergency number and national emergency numbers provides for the provision of the necessary material conditions for the performance of the tasks.[13]

At the international level, as a non-governmental organisation, it is important to mention the





European Emergency Number Association (EENA), whose mission is to find answers to how citizens can be helped in an emergency. This NGO has published a number of professional recommendations and documents over the past decades, providing professional guidance for professionals working in this field. One of these operational documents, for example, is Psychological support for 112 call handlers, in which relevant information and best practices on the subject have been compiled to help call handlers in their work. [14] More than 80 countries have joined the Alliance, with more than 1500 professionals representing the emergency services. The EEAN was founded in 1999 by Olivier Paul-Morandini, who became acquainted with an emergency service operating outside during a trip to Canada. On his return to Europe, he set up the Association, recognising the importance of NGOs in helping these emergency services to think together. [15] The Alliance holds ongoing professional conferences, publishes international data in the form of thematic publications, and makes every effort to support and improve the work of emergency professionals.

Duty staff are there to protect the safety of citizens, providing a continuous "safety net" for all those who find themselves in danger, emergency or disaster situations. They are the trained professionals who make professionally considered decisions on the next tasks based on what the caller tells them, but they are also the professionals who are often forced to receive and handle false calls, often listening to disturbing, false calls from citizens. The duty staff are also trained to deal with different types of crisis situations, so that they can react quickly and effectively in emergency situations, remaining calm and composed and making professional decisions rationally, without being influenced by emotion.

Information has a crucial role to play in preventing disasters of any kind. The usefulness of information lies in the fact that it reaches the right person at the right time, with the right level of detail. M.C. Shubin Tad and K. A. Janardhanan in their study classify information into three groups which are closely related to each other: pre-disaster, during disaster and post-disaster information related to activities. Pre-disaster activities include risk assessment, risk prevention, analysis and research, among others. Operations and response activities to hazards are classified under the category of information during a disaster, while information related to recovery and reconstruction is classified under post-disaster activities. The information gap, properly bridging information gaps, is an important pillar of effective disaster management. During a disaster, it is of paramount importance to send messages, to have warning/alert systems in place, and to have



helplines through which people can contact the relevant body. [16] The quality and quantity of information is of paramount importance when a 112 call is made by a citizen, the reception and interpretation of this information determines the timeliness of the response of the organisation or partner organisation to the event reported by the caller.

Preventing any tragedy from occurring or repairing damage that has already been done by citizens is linked to visible heroes such as firefighters, paramedics and police officers. They are the everyday legends who are visible, who are in the media, who people associate with the role of rescuer and helper. I think it is important to stress that behind these visible figures there are many "invisible" professionals who work on the same rescue and assistance tasks, preparing the ground for the rescue process or organising the effective intervention of their counterparts in the event of an incident. One of these back-up professionals is the duty staff of the disaster management service, who should have the necessary expertise to manage the conversation along guided questioning when receiving calls for various emergencies. The ability to react quickly and to organise the information given is of paramount importance. Upon receipt of a call to 112, the call taker must follow strict rules in the conversation with the call originator, following pre-defined protocols and procedural instructions, taking decisions, taking necessary and justified further action, involving the relevant partner services. Good communication skills, both with citizens and with the Commission and its partner organisations, are a basic competence without which the incumbent cannot perform his/her duties. Equally important is the ability to cope with stress, as the time of 112 calls is not known (anyone can call for help at any time), nor is it known in advance what type of incident the citizen is expecting help for. Some of the competences listed above are not an exhaustive list of the matrix of competences expected of duty staff, but they are sufficient to show that there are complex requirements to be met by those who choose this profession.

As a job, call answering integrates several professions and places high demands on the mental processes, state and personality of call takers. *The complexity of call reception tasks can be divided into 3 groups:*

1. mental stress and decision making, based on potentially unreliable information, potentially conflicting demands and activities that could have a detrimental effect on other people, the organisation or the call taker themselves,



2. interpersonal complexity, resulting from the need for trust and cooperation between different stakeholders, and from the emotional strain,
3. time and energy demand requirements, in particular those tasks for which the timeframe is very limited and for which there is no or only limited possibility of correction. [14]

The summary study by István Csomós and Katalin Molnár, published in 2016, is closely related to the issue under review. They provided an insight into the history of the introduction of 112 in Hungary, and gave an overview of the initial processes, the first training of operators in Hungary and their experiences. In 2013, 749 call takers were trained, with 20-20 hours of psychology and communication training. In 2014, the authors conducted a follow-up study with 40 participants, undertaken on a voluntary basis, and concluded that more emphasis should be put on training of operators, including case analysis and situational awareness. Although Part I in the title of the paper suggests that the authors have continued the paper, no follow-up study can be found in this follow-up. [17] The learning aid ESR 112 was written for the participants of the training of the operators of the Call Reception Centre of the Unified Emergency Call System, and the Miskolc Law Enforcement College was entrusted with the task of providing the knowledge. The subject matter covers the competencies required for call takers, general psychological issues such as human behaviour, personality psychology, and in separate chapters, it goes into more detail on communication, communication disorders and basic crisis psychology. In their concluding chapter, the authors draw attention to supervision, which for those working in this field deserves increased attention due to the type of task they are performing, as they are subjected to constant mental and psychological strain, which can lead to burnout due to prolonged emotional strain and increased stress. [18]

As a result of a 2004 survey in Sweden, in which telephone operators were interviewed by the authors, operators defined their job as "being responsible for someone else's life". Their job is complex and difficult, they have to be flexible, compassionate, efficient and courageous to make the right decisions. Their difficult work requires a responsible attitude, the ability to cope with stress, patience and a wide range of personal and professional knowledge. Interview participants expressed the need for more guidance, feedback and training for their work, which would increase their sense of security, reduce stress and thus enable them to deliver better outcomes for those who need help. [19]





## 4. SUMMARY

There is almost no domestic literature on the professionals presented in this article, and in the last twenty years, since the emergency number has been operating in its current structure in Hungary, there has been no comprehensive, comprehensive research or survey in Hungary. I believe that, as the zero step of interventions and rescue operations, the study of the stock deserves more attention both from the social and scientific research point of view. The personnel working in this field not only provide citizens with a sense of security 24 hours a day, but also serve both the organisation and the citizens as professional law enforcement personnel. In summary, duty disaster management is a vital component of any nation's disaster management system. It is essential that this department has a prepared, reliable and efficient emergency response team that can respond quickly and effectively to emergencies, helping to minimise damage and contribute to saving lives by reacting in a timely manner and making the right decisions to start the chain of intervention necessary to intervene as justified.

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