

**LOCAL NEWS**

# The We Energies call center became an unlikely hub for helping people in search of loved ones after the 9/11 attacks

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Annette Bennett still gets emotional talking about that day 20 years ago when she took a call from a woman looking for her husband who worked in the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York.

Suddenly, the woman started screaming, as did people in the background. The screaming continued for a couple of minutes, then someone else came on the line.

“Somebody else picked up the phone — it wasn’t the initial lady — and said, ‘He just walked in the door,’ ” Bennett recalled.

The overheard reunion was a brief and rare moment of joy for Bennett, who was working as a customer consultant with We Energies. The company's customer contact center had become the point of contact for people looking for their loved ones in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, due to a connection they had with another Milwaukee company that had a contract with the Department of Justice to provide crisis communications during disaster events.

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More than 700 We Energies employees volunteered to take more than 14,000 calls in the days following the attacks, gathering information on missing persons — what they were

wearing that day, any tattoos or birthmarks they had, what their morning routine was like — for the DOJ, in hopes of finding out if a missing family member or friend was alive or, tragically, was one of the 2,977 people killed in New York, Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C., that day.

In late August this year, five employees who still work for the company gathered on the third-floor plaza of We Energies' headquarters in downtown Milwaukee to recount memories of working in the call center on that fateful day.

Most stories did not have happy endings like Bennett's. In fact, none of them had any kind of resolution. Employees recalled taking calls from other wives looking for their husbands, nephews looking for their aunts, parents looking for their children, then passing the information on to the DOJ for the follow-up work.

Their memories of that day are a mixture of our collective experience — hearing about the first plane and wondering if it was an accident, then hearing about the second and realizing it wasn't — and their individual experience, of feeling their own sense of fear while also hearing the fear and panic in the voices of those they talked to.

“Some of the people that were taking the calls, as soon as they got off the call, they would take their headset off, put their head on their desk and just start sobbing. Because not only are we dealing with, what just happened to our country, and then we were getting all this information about people. ... We were blessed. We were safe. We were in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, away from everything. And you hear it on TV, but when you actually talk to somebody who is there ...” Bennett said, trailing off.

She recalled one man who was looking for an aunt who worked at the Pentagon. He knew she worked on the side that wasn't hit, but he was still distraught trying to find out if she was OK. He asked Bennett if she could just get up and look for her, and then rapidly began describing what she was wearing: a blue skirt and white shirt, a black blazer, her hair in a bun, like she always wore it.

Bennett apologized and said she couldn't go look for her, then tried to ask him more about the woman, including how tall she was.

“I don't know!” she said he replied, and he continued to plead with her: “‘Could you just get up? Just get up and go look for her! Please!’

“They thought we were there,” Bennett said.

Even though the employees were merely taking down information to pass along to other people, they all said they felt like they were making a difference and are proud of the role they played.

“I do feel like I helped people,” Bennett said. “I may not have physically helped somebody, but it was a voice for them, at a time when there was so much fear. We were a voice, and they felt, at least somebody is listening, at least there’s somebody out there.”

“I think the whole world wanted to reach out and try to help those families that were looking for their loved ones,” said Michelle Waters, who was a team leader in the call center at the time. “It just made me feel proud that we were able to do something.”

“We’re Midwesterners. This is what we do. You help. Somebody comes over, you add another potato to the pot, you know? You just help,” Bennett said.

Danielle Bly, who is now the company’s vice president of supplier diversity, was a 23-year-old management trainee at the time. She said working in the call center on that day had a “profound effect” on her.

In addition to jumping in wherever she could help, including taking calls, Bly was tasked with dropping off the paperwork with details about the missing people at the end of the night, since she lived close to the drop-off site.

“I do recall just me and that box of papers in the car, and that feeling of wow, I hope we’re able to find ... it was such a feeling of loss, and helplessness, right in the midst of it all. To be able to contribute or play even a small part felt huge and overwhelming,” she said. “I felt good about that, but balancing that with the tragedy that was going on in the world, is very minimal compared to a first responder, anyone else, right?”

While the pain the callers were experiencing is unimaginable, listening to that pain took its toll on those answering the phones, too.

“There were times I had to get up and walk away, and just catch my breath,” Bennett said. “There were a couple of calls where I would just start crying, especially when you hear about little kids. ... People calling: ‘My wife took our son downtown, and I can’t find them. Can you help me find my child and my wife?’ You hear this and you hear the pain in their voices and the fear in their voices, and it was just ...”

We Energies had professional counselors available for anyone who needed them, but staff also found solace in a conference room where Ken Steinbach, then a senior training

specialist, was training employees.

“He graciously was a shoulder. A lot of us came in there,” Bennett said.

Steinbach said he would have had a harder time taking calls than being a shoulder to cry on, but even just listening to the stories second-hand was heartbreaking.

“It brings on a lot of emotions on both ends of the spectrum, at least for me. It’s a proud moment, but it’s also very, very sad,” he said.

## **Emergency connection**

How a call center in Pewaukee became the epicenter for fielding calls from people looking for loved ones after 9/11 is a product of another Milwaukee company.

FEI Behavioral Health is a crisis communications company that, among other things, provides counselors and trauma specialists to staff phone lines in disaster events like fires and plane crashes.

Bill Mastoris, who was the operations manager for We Energies' call center in 2001, said FEI wanted to expand its footprint and was in talks with We Energies at the time to do so.

The morning of Sept.11, the company called We Energies.

“They said, ‘Hey, we have a contract with the Department of Justice, and nobody ever anticipated this magnitude of an event, and we need help,’ ” Mastoris said.

FEI needed more space for its own staff, plus additional people to help screen calls — gather basic information so FEI and the DOJ could provide them with the appropriate assistance. By 5 p.m. that day, We Energies was taking calls.

Mastoris said his military background helped him in the important work they had to do quickly that day.

“Whenever you’re dealing with a casualty, a situation, you focus on, what do we have to do? And then you start to put the pieces together and start to execute,” he said.

“The technical side of this was pretty impressive. ... When I think about our telecommunication folks at the time, they really stepped up and were able to get solutions in place very quickly,” he said, noting that while they had systems to deal with large call

volumes for things like storm response, those systems weren't configured in a way to filter thousands of calls at a time from around the country for an event like 9/11.

"These folks really were able to hammer that out very quickly and put it in place," he said. "People kind of take that technology for granted often, but that was 20 years ago. Stuff was kind of in its infancy."

The call center stopped taking all but emergency calls from We Energies customers in order to shift focus to the larger emergency.

Employees received a basic hourlong training before taking calls, and Bly said that the consultants were able to put their previous training to use as well.

"We had our own soft skills that we could implement," she said.

That first day, the phones were mostly staffed by call center employees who volunteered to do so, some like Bennett working close to a 16-hour shift. After that, We Energies put out a request for volunteers from the entire company, and people from all departments, including then-CEO Richard Abdoo, volunteered, often coming after they worked their regular day job.

"It was a company that pulled together," Bennett said. "It wasn't just a few people taking these calls, it was our whole company. ... Everybody came together and helped."

We Energies employees followed a script, asking questions to fill out a form provided by FEI and the DOJ. Initially, the form was a piece of paper, but Mastoris said by day two, their technology team had developed an online form that fed a database for the DOJ.

FEI and DOJ staff took it from there, providing counseling or other resources for the friends and family members.

While We Energies employees weren't providing any counseling or actionable information for callers, they did their best to provide some comfort.

"You just have a lot of empathy," said Mastoris, who would take calls for about an hour every night, and said it wasn't easy hearing the heartbreaking stories but not being able to give them any information on their loved ones. "We would go through and capture the information and assure them that somebody would reach out to them once they had sorted out some of the information."

The employees said they were not permitted to talk about the work they did that day, and outside of telling a husband or a wife, none of them did until a media event 10 years ago.

They still got emotional thinking and talking about it at the 20-year reunion.

“It resonates some of the same feelings, that same emotion,” Bly said. “It was so real at the time, and for lack of a better word, it was scary. I was scared, just not knowing. I was nervous for what the outcomes would be in the days to come. But at the same time trying to balance with the opportunity to do just a little bit, to be able to help in some way, felt good. But it was overwhelming.”

Bennett said she still thinks about the calls she took, and every Sept. 11 when they read the names of those who were killed during the Remembrance Ceremony, she wonders if she talked to one of their loved ones, or even the very person reading the name.

“It gets to me every time, because I can’t imagine. I go home to my husband. I go home to my children. I go home to my family. I never had to have that fear, you know?” she said. “It makes me thankful for what we have. It makes me appreciate my family. That I never, thank God, had to go through that. How blessed I am that I can go home every night and say hi.”

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