Safety is a Common Language Fatality File



A man died after a 911 dispatcher hung up on him when he wouldn’t speak in English, a lawsuit says.

Heriberto Santiago Jr. called 911 to report a fire last year but spoke in Spanish on the call.

He and his 14-year-old nephew died because dispatch hung up, the lawsuit alleges.

A forklift operator at a Pennsylvania Walmart died after 911 dispatch hung up on him when he called in and didn’t speak in English, a lawsuit filed in federal court says.

The man, 44-year-old Heriberto Santiago Jr., called 911 in July 2020 when a fire broke out in his Lehigh, Pennsylvania, home. He had been in the house with his 14-year-old nephew, Andres Javier Ortiz.

When Santiago reached the dispatcher, believed to be a woman named Sonya O’Brien, he “attempted to notify” her of the fire in his home and “frantically begged” for emergency assistance, the lawsuit says.

But the dispatcher “did not speak or understand the Spanish language nor did she utilize a Spanish language help line nor did any other dispatcher assist her in this regard.”

She allegedly instructed Santiago to speak in English before hanging up on him, according to the complaint.

“As a result of the 9-1-1 dispatcher’s/Ms. O’Brien’s lack of training, uncaring, negligent, reckless and outrageous conduct in hanging up on Mr. Santiago and failing to take all steps to provide emergency assistance, Mr. Santiago and Mr. Ortiz perished in the fire,” the lawsuit says. “According to the coroner’s report, Mr. Santiago and Mr. Ortiz died from smoke inhalation and carbon monoxide toxicity.”

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in the Pennsylvania Eastern District Court, says witnesses revealed that the 911 emergency call center refused to incorporate “county trained dispatchers to utilize language help lines” in 2019. Witnesses also said dispatchers improperly handled emergency calls, “which created safety risks and concerns to county residents.”

The lawsuit also details discriminatory practices faced by administrators of color at the 911 emergency call center. A Puerto Rican woman who served as administrator said

supervisors and dispatchers frequently referred to individuals of Latino and Hispanic descent as “you people.”

White dispatchers in the past have openly said they “do not like taking calls from Spanish people,” the lawsuit says, adding that they often “refused to use a ‘language line’ translation service when on the phone with a Spanish speaker.

Lehigh County, the defendant in the case, called the allegation “baseless” in a statement to Insider. Santiago called dispatch and spoke in English, according to a timeline of the events provided by Lehigh County, and the call taker “told Mr. Santiago that help is on the way; the fire department has been dispatched.”

The statement also said a Spanish-speaking individual called in a minute prior to Santiago. The dispatcher “immediately transferred” that call to a translation line, “which is our standard operating procedure.”