ON-CALL TEAM TO THE RESCUE

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It’s just an unassuming flip phone, the kind you might not even be sure they make anymore.

But it gets passed like a torch among the members of the New Hanover County Schools On-Call Team, and when it rings, it’s like a Bat-Signal in the night.

And it often is in the middle of the night.

To be fair, the On-Call Team does have some superhero traits.

They are a premiere squad specially selected for their talents.

They assemble at a moment’s notice and activate their super tradesmen powers to get people out of a jam.

And even though they’re hiding in plain sight, many in the district don’t know about these white knights in Carhartt and steel-toed boots.

“We’re the first responders in front of the first responders,” said James Dillon, leader of the On-Call Team and alarms locksmith foreman for the district.

Any time there is a building emergency anywhere in the district, at any hour, the team member on call hears the violently loud ring of the team flip phone, and he springs to duty.

He might leave his kid’s soccer game to capture a rabid fox loose on a football field.

He might leave a holiday dinner to repair a broken window at a school.

He might wake up in the middle of a perfectly good night’s sleep to fix a water main bust.
The team's goal is to have someone on-site within 30 minutes of a call and fixing the problem, or at least triaging it.

The On-Call van is a bit like the team's Batmobile, with tools for every trade, so a locksmith can fix a broken pipe, or a grounds technician can fix an electrical outage at a football stadium, like Kevin Jordan did last week.

They call each other on the phone to walk through repairs they aren't sure about, and they call each other up when they need reinforcements.

They are, more than one member said, a brotherhood.

When a rare snowstorm hit Wilmington a few years ago, the above-ground pipes at Mary C. Williams Elementary burst and water was pouring into classrooms. Plumber Shawn Norton was first on the scene and shut off the water, then the rest of the team arrived and worked together through the night to clean up drywall and ceiling tiles and flooded classrooms.

“It was cold, the water we were standing in was cold, there was no heat. It was tough. It was a long night,” remembered Kevin Jordan.

“What stood out for me that night was when you stopped by my house and got me a new pair of socks because mine were soaked,” Dillon told him.

“We opened the school the next day,” Bill Carr said. “There was not any water on that floor when we left.”

“That's what we do,” Jimmy Bell shrugged. “We get 'em back up and running.”

During hurricane season they protect district buildings and serve the community looking to the district for shelter.

James Dillon remembers rushing to beat the storm to deliver milk to a hurricane shelter, and Jimmy Bell spent an hour and a half during Florence single-handedly stacking sandbags in the pouring rain to keep Forest Hills Elementary from flooding.

And the On-Call Team’s work hasn’t slowed during Covid.

“Somebody's still responsible for those schools,” Kevin Jordan said simply.
Possums and raccoons and snakes of the venomous and nonvenomous variety still end up where they shouldn’t.

Alarms still go off at 3 a.m.

Kids still get a hold of backhoes that contractors left keys in and tear up the grounds, deer get stuck in fences, and fugitives abandon their vehicles in front of a school’s front door before fleeing on foot.

They never know what the call will be, but they’re always ready.

“We don’t hesitate. We just jump and go,” James Dillon said. “We’re not in it for the glory. We’re a big supportive team for this district.”