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updated 2:11 p.m. HT, Tues., Feb. 23, 2010

MONTGOMERY, Ala. - Linda Casey dialed 911 and screamed, "Oh, God!" over and over again into the phone after finding her daughter beaten to death in the driveway of their North Carolina home.

Later that day, she heard the 911 recording on the local news and vomited.

"This was not only the most painful thing I have ever been through, it should have been the most private," she said in an e-mail.

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Dave Martin / AP

Sonny Brasfield, executive director of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama, says he drafted 911 privacy legislation after people began complaining to officials about the public release of calls.

Because of situations like Casey's, lawmakers in Alabama, Ohio and Wisconsin are deciding whether to bar the public release of 911 calls.

Missouri, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wyoming already keep such recordings private. But generally, most states consider emergency calls public records available on request, with exceptions sometimes made for privacy reasons or to protect a police investigation.

"Nationally there is a growing concern about the release of audiotapes that don't involve newsworthy people or events — just things that people like to hear because of their sensational nature," said Sonny Brasfield, executive director of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama, which drafted legislation in the state to bar the release of 911 recordings. "There is a concern nationally that these kinds of things are having a chilling effect on people's willingness to call 911."

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### Considered valuable tool

Open-government advocates disagree and say that prohibiting the release of the recordings takes away a valuable tool that has exposed botched calls.

For example, a Detroit dispatcher in 2006 scolded a 5-year-old boy for "playing on the phone" while his mother lay unconscious. When police arrived, the boy's mother was dead. In a 2008 call in Memphis, Tenn., a 911 operator asked, "What's your emergency?" then fell asleep.

"It's crucial that we're able to hear how our public safety calls are being handled," said David Cuillier, chairman of the Society of Professional Journalists' Freedom of Information Committee.

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The public release of audio has also led to accolades for dispatchers who have helped save lives, and helped vindicate operators accused of mishandling a call.


In states where 911 calls are made available to the public, news organizations generally make their own case-by-case decisions on whether to air a recording, taking into consideration issues of taste, sensitivity and news value.

"We strongly believe that 911 recordings should be public record because they can reflect on the performance of public agencies," said Thomas Kent, standards editor of The Associated Press. "It certainly can be hard to listen to 911 recordings, and we use them very sparingly on the air and online. Our decision to use such recordings depends primarily on their relevance to important news, not the atmospherics."

### Media self-regulation urged

Cuillier, a professor at the University of Arizona's School of Journalism, said the answer is better self-regulation by the media.

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"I see this all around the country. There'll be a media outlet that maybe goes a little too far — pushes the boundaries on something — and people do not like that," he said. "And then you'll have demands that it be taken down, you'll have a backlash, you'll have legislation that makes it all secret."

WSPA, the Spartanburg, S.C., TV station that aired Casey's 911 call in 2008, apologized a day later and removed the recording from its Web site.

"That 911 call was me realizing my daughter was dead," Casey said. "I did not care to share that with the world and that private moment of grief should never have been used to sell papers, or up ratings."

Brasfield cited one particularly upsetting example from Alabama involving a call made by a boy whose grandmother was being mauled by a dog.

Gary Allen, editor of an online magazine for dispatchers, said new technology makes it easier than ever to splice and copy 911 calls. And cell phone calls are more dramatic and on-the-spot, making the audio irresistible.

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