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**Public Safety Telecommunicators as Emergency Service Providers:
The First, First Responder**

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ABSTRACT

The job duties of the police, fire or ambulance dispatcher have grown increasingly complex and technical in nature; however, state mandated training requirements, standards, benefits and individual agency perception of the position may not appropriately address the nature of the work performed. A lack of accurate recognition of the responsibilities and duties associated with the position is negatively affecting a mission critical component of public safety. The position of dispatcher, or public safety telecommunicator, should be recognized as an emergency service provider, not a clerical position.

There is increasing recognition of dispatchers as a first responder by public safety agencies despite the position holding a classification of clerical at the federal level. This recognition needs to extend to training, standards, policies and benefits at all levels of government. Extending recognition would help ensure resolution of stress related issues occurring at rates similar to other first responders. Recognition would also assist with improving training success and retention, rectification of performance deficiencies resulting in loss of life, and the enhancement of the skills of those employees who can have a profound positive impact on the provision of public safety and the safety of first responders.

There is dwindling resistance in public safety in regards to the idea that dispatchers will have a significant effect on the outcome of the safety of others, but a prevailing notion that the position is clerical in nature. As long as these concepts are in opposition, the safety of first responders and the public may be diminished as some telecommunicators will be trained like clerks, rather than emergency services personnel.

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INTRODUCTION

Public safety telecommunicators, otherwise known as dispatchers, call takers, or telecommunicators, are a vital component of public safety provision; however, the role of a telecommunicator may be more obscure than that of other first responders. While public safety telecommunicator responsibilities vary to an extent from one public safety agency to another, the job duties only rarely require the telecommunicator to be present in the field. Telecommunicators may be call takers, radio dispatchers, or a combination of both. According to a study conducted by the Association of Public-Safety Officials (APCO), telecommunicators are 59% civilian but may also be sworn personnel (APCO International, n.d.),. Telecommunicators are almost exclusively stationed in an office-type environment unless they are performing specialized functions associated with critical incidents (“About TX-TERT”, n.d.), tactical dispatching (Harper, 2015), or community policing and outreach services. Telecommunicators serve their communities as a disembodied voice rather than a physical presence at the scene of an incident or emergency. Their lack of visibility, both to field units and the public, may contribute to a lack of understanding of their critical function in regards to resolving emergencies.

Some of the duties typically assigned to the telecommunicator include the following: answering non-emergency and emergency phone calls, radio dispatching police, fire and EMS units, providing pre-arrival medical or safety instructions, managing in service and out of service resources, accessing public safety databases and performing a variety of administrative tasks. A simplistic view of their role may lead to a perception that it is clerical in nature, but, in reality, it is much more complex. They are the first point of contact for callers who need emergency assistance and the vital link to

public safety services. They provide for, and monitor, the safety of first responders as they resolve high-risk incidents. Telecommunicators experience the pressures of resolving emergencies vicariously through the callers and other first responders.

Due to the complexity and stressful nature of the position, telecommunicators can profoundly affect the outcome of responder safety and emergencies affecting the public by either causing irreparable harm or saving a life. The information they gather, or miss, the actions they advise or do not take, can dramatically affect the health and safety of others, even from a distance. They experience stress related issues at a rate similar to other first responders due to the nature of the job. Due to the potential to have a significant impact on the safety of others, the position of public safety telecommunicator should be recognized as an emergency service provider, not a clerical position.

POSITION

Telecommunicators are recognized as first responders by some in the public safety community. Holdeman (2013) articulates that while first responders are typically identified by their physical response to an incident and “the term first responder is jealously guarded” (Holdeman, 2013, para. 2) by some members of the fire, law enforcement, and emergency medical services, he disagrees with the term “first responder” being exclusive of telecommunicators. He recognizes the importance of the call-taker who is assisting hysterical callers, rendering first aid, and determining and dispatching the appropriate response, among other duties. The author further explained that, while telecommunicators do work in a controlled environment, there is still an expectation of personnel attrition of 50% or higher from the beginning of training through

the end of probation which highlights just how difficult the job is to master (Holdeman, 2013).

Police Chief Magazine addressed the dispatcher's importance in the provision of the public safety by stating, "In a way, the dispatcher is the first of the first responders" (Harris, 2015, p. 42). Dispatchers are in the "9-1-1 and police agency nerve centers" serving as the first contact for those who are requesting assistance and sending the correct emergency services (Harris, 2015, p. 42). The author identifies the difficulty of the job and the complications placed on telecommunicators by outdated and/or inefficient technology that contributes to an increase in turnover and decreases safety and efficiency (Harris, 2015, p. 42). He explained how telecommunicators can be an invaluable and active part of public safety provision when provided with adequate tools, training and technology.

Decreasing telecommunicator attrition rates and increasing an employee's dedication to the agency includes multiple factors including an increased salary for newly hired employees, supervisors who are supportive, and whether or not employees believed that their work is valued, according to the APCO Retains study. The study concluded that fifty-six percent of agencies experienced a decline in the retention of telecommunicators over a three year period (APCO International, n.d.). Events seeking to recognize telecommunicators' contributions to public safety include National 911 Education Month ("April Education Month", n.d.) and National Public Safety Telecommunicator Week (Text of To designate the second week in April as "National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week", 1992).

Telecommunicators experience stress related issues at a rate comparable to other first responders in police, fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) fields. Each field is repeatedly subjected to situations that result in cumulative stress, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. Per a 2013 study conducted by psychology student and telecommunicator Brooklyn Mundo, there was no significant statistical difference between the stress levels experienced by police officers and dispatchers. Mundo (2013) compared existing studies and methodologies employed to evaluate police officers to derive data that was able to be related to existing studies.

Studies on telecommunicator stress are not as prevalent as studies on other first responders. As more studies are conducted and methodology improved, study results are demonstrating an increase in the percentages of telecommunicators reported as experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other types of stress related dysfunctions. Michelle Lilly, PhD, and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Northern Illinois University, reported in 2012 that 3.5% of telecommunicators she interviewed developed PTSD like symptoms following the worst calls they had taken in their careers (Pierce & Lilly, 2012). Lilly further expanded on her results in following studies. In the follow up to her 2012 study, the percentage of telecommunicators with PTSD increased to 18-24%. Lilly attributed the increased percentages to an improved process that included a larger sample group and a different measurement scale for determining PTSD symptoms (MacLellan, 2015).

Per Ty Wooten of the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), many dispatchers do not work in partnerships or teams that would allow them to process a high stress incident with each other or other first responders following a traumatic event

(MacLellan, 2015). Telecommunicators may disconnect from one traumatic call without knowing the outcome and have to move immediately to next crisis call without having talked through what they experienced with others. Wooten also stated that dispatchers are subjected to one negative experience after another as a part of their job. Wooten states, "Remember, people call 911 on the worst days of their lives. And it's one day after another for the operators, and that's when we start to see an accumulation of stress" (MacLellan, 2015, para. 12).

In addition to working alone, telecommunicators are also subject to the cultural mindset prevalent in public safety that employees should just get over their stress because it is a natural component of the work. The lack of a supportive social network, coupled with the mentality that telecommunicators are not exposed to trauma because they do not physically arrive on the scene diminishes resources that could be used to reduce stress (MacLellan, 2015). According to Dave Larton, a *9-1-1 Magazine* associate editor and dispatcher, "...911 dispatchers can develop stress disorders even though they weren't at the scene, because they were at the scene (MacLellan, 2015, para. 10)." While telecommunicators are dispatching police, fire and EMS resources, they must remain on the line to continue listening to what is occurring on the scene of the incident. The information they obtain is provided to responders. Larton advised that a dispatcher may feel, "...responsibility in the situation but has a limited ability to help. We can't reach through the phone and take action; all we can do is listen, and that creates a lot of stress for us" (MacLellan, 2015, para. 10).

The Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology titled "*Job-related stress and work ability of dispatchers in a metropolitan fire department,*" stated that

dispatchers, "...often have to manage different emergencies in quick succession without having an opportunity to cope with their emotions and speak with others about their feelings" (Oldenburg et al., 2014, p. 7). This isolation or solitary perception of dispatchers is in comparison to firefighters who have the opportunity following significant events to discuss their team efforts to resolve incidents and relate individual emotions upon return to the station (Oldenburg et al., 2014). The same group of fire department dispatchers were evaluated for job related stress against a control group of personnel within the same department performing administrative and clerical non-dispatch duties found that dispatchers demonstrated precursors to stress related health problems like higher heart rates. The dispatcher had an increased number of sick days compared to the control group during the previous year, more chronic stress and an indicated need for assistance with reducing the amount of stress experienced. The dispatchers, in comparison to the office workers, experienced more psychological distress and a lower self-assessed ability to work efficiently due to the decision making and coordination requirements associated with dispatching first responders and mitigating emergencies (Oldenburg et al., 2014).

Although telecommunicators do not respond with frontline field units to handle an emergency, studies that refer to stress levels experienced by other first responders such as fire fighters recognize that dispatchers are the first and important part of the rescue process. The telecommunicator who is responsible for answering the initial request for service may also be expected to dispatch police, fire and/or EMS, remain on the line to assist the caller(s), control the call and initiate pre-arrival medical intervention. Their responsibility is to dispatch emergency responders, relay critical

information, and manage mission critical components of operations means, “they bear high work-related responsibility” (Oldenburg et al., 2014, p. 1). Along with that responsibility comes significant liability. Oldenburg et al. (2014) also stated, “Errors in communications, for example, a wrong treatment priority, will compromise safe and effective patient care. Dispatchers’ failures may lead to a delay in care and may contribute to the patients’ death” (p. 1).

Telecommunicators can significantly affect the outcome of public safety both positive and negatively for other first responders and the public. News articles repeatedly report on the errors made by telecommunicators resulting in significant harm or death. In 2014, A Leon County Sheriff’s Deputy was shot and killed, and another deputy injured, when they were ambushed at a house fire. Three dispatchers were subsequently fired for failing to advise responding units about the alert on the suspect that indicated he had threatened law enforcement (Associated Press, 2014). In 2008, the Denise Amber Lee Act, which effected legislation pertaining to 911 training, passed unanimously in Florida. The legislation was in response to the kidnapping, sexual assault and murder of Denise Amber Lee. A 911 caller reported Denise banging on her captor’s car window as he drove down a street. The information received via 911 was never relayed to police officers by dispatchers as the suspect passed by multiple police units. Denise was found murdered less than 3 miles from the location she was observed at by the 911 caller. The Denise Amber Lee Act requires all 911 call takers and dispatchers in Florida to complete 232 hours of training and pass a state test. The goal of the nonprofit Denise Amber Lee Foundation is to improve telecommunicators’ performance through several factors including training and improved protocols,

technology and standards, due to the profound affect telecommunicators can have when they make errors (“Florida’s Denis Amber Lee Act”, 2012).

Training and empowering telecommunicators can have a significant positive effect on public safety. Their role in improving results and mediation of crisis situations is evaluated in many articles including *Fire Engineering’s, “Handling the Mayday: The Fire Dispatcher’s Crucial Role”* (Norwood, 2012). A well-trained telecommunicator can prove to be a vital link between fire fighters trapped in a structure, the incident commander and a rescue team. The article compares dispatchers to pump operators to explain their multi-tasking role in a context more relatable to firefighting functions. Norwood (2012) states that dispatchers, “...complete numerous tasks simultaneously in the first 5 to ten minutes. Then, and only then, if no other incidents or 911 calls must be attended to, can they focus on tasks, one at a time” (para. 4). A well-trained and skilled telecommunicator can assist fire teams in many ways and especially during maydays by hearing what the incident command might miss; a fire fighter calling for help on a channel that is hard to hear on the scene or a channel not monitored by the incident commander. From the time the mayday is called and acknowledged, the telecommunicator can inform the incident commander and initiate several other tasks from gathering information from the fire fighter in distress to calling for additional apparatus (Norwood, 2012).

Additional studies have also demonstrated that trained telecommunicators can improve the outcome of medical emergencies since they are the first point of contact and the first professional public safety personnel to begin triaging patients. With limited, inexpensive training and simple protocols, telecommunicators were able to increase the

bystander performance of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) by five times. This is significant because it highlights just one more way telecommunicators can profoundly affect the outcome of an emergency because CPR can double the survival rates of patients when administered early on (Besnier et al., 2015). Other studies indicated that telecommunicators receiving emergency medical dispatch training were able to identify stroke patients 80% of the time, a significant increase in recognition, which resulted in a marginal improvement in response time by emergency medical services (Watkins et al., 2013).

COUNTER POSITION

Despite some support of telecommunicators as an integral part of public safety provision, or in the same field as other first responders; the federal government still classifies telecommunicators as clerical staff in the Standard Occupational Classification. "Police, Fire and Ambulance Dispatchers" are classified as "Office and Administrative Support," not "Protective Services" according to the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics website (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017b). They are listed in the same category as bill collectors, clerks, customer service representatives, receptionists, secretaries and tellers (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017c). While telecommunicators may have some administrative duties in common with these job descriptions in the Office and Administrative Support class, their responsibilities can have significant impact on first responders and public safety. While the classification description does identify the stressful nature of the job, high turnover rate, shift work and other factors associated with the position of telecommunicators, it lacks wording

that would help classify the position in the category of Protective Services (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d). Protective service positions would include police officers and fire fighters, among others (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d).

APCO submitted comments in response to the Standard Occupational Classification Revision Notice of the Office Management and Budget that would effectively seek to change the “Position of Police, Fire and Ambulance Dispatcher” to “Protective Services” from “Office and Administrative Support”. APCO is proposing two changes to the classification. First, APCO seeks to rename the position “Public Safety Telecommunicator” from “Police, Fire and Ambulance Dispatcher.” APCO’s contention is that the title of “Public Safety Telecommunicator” is more inclusive than the current title that does not include all other services telecommunicators provide when coordinating and resolving emergency services. Since telecommunications is often split into two or more distinct functions, call taking and dispatching, the updated title would be more appropriate than dispatcher (APCO International, n.d.b, p.1). The adjustment of the classification would also address the advanced nature of the position, which has evolved to use much more technology and employ improved techniques. APCO acknowledges that, especially at smaller agencies with less resources, one telecommunicator may be, “simultaneously questioning the caller, dispatching first responders, and using advanced technologies to retrieve caller location, medical information and pertinent location history (such as whether there is a history of violence associated with an address) (APCO International n.d.b, p. 2).” The comments also reference the importance of Congress’s acknowledgement of National Public Safety

Telecommunicator Week (APCO International, n.d.b, p. 2). In addition to the title change, APCO recommends moving telecommunicators to the Protective Services classification. This recommendation is based upon the fact that telecommunicators, “perform tasks that – unlike non-emergency dispatchers – share the same protective mission as law enforcement officers, firefighters” (APCO International, n.d.b, p. 2).

APCO further distinguished the role of telecommunicator from administrative roles in their comments to the Office of Management and Budget by elaborating on the complex duties performed by telecommunicators. Some of these duties include negotiating with distraught callers or suspects, interrogating callers to ensure an appropriate response, providing medical first aid, and providing for the ongoing relay of incident details to first responders (APCO International, n.d.b, p.3). In the comments, APCO continued to acknowledge the incidence of stress related issues experienced by telecommunicators and their role in performing lifesaving duties for the public, as well as their role in saving the lives of first responders (APCO International, n.d.b, p.3). APCO stated that, “The information gathering, resource management, and other tasks performed by public safety telecommunicators bear a greater similarity to questions asked by law enforcement officers, warnings given by firefighters” (APCO International, n.d.b, p.3).

When telecommunicators are viewed as administrative clerical staff, the expenditure of resources to train and reduce the incidence of stress would seem excessive; however, when considered as first responders or emergency service providers, the increase in starting pay can improve the retention of new hires and the validation of the role of existing staff by supportive management can improve the morale

of existing employees (APCO International, n.d.). Additional improvements to technology can be instrumental in reducing personnel loss as, “aging and single-purpose hardware exacerbates turnover” (Harris, 2015, p. 42). Preserving existing employees through enhancing equipment can be critical when it is acknowledged that, “the long hours and emotional intensity associated with the profession makes high turnover a fact of life” and employees will cost more money to hire and train (Harris, 2015, p. 42). Those are cost savings and an investment in experienced personnel in addition to the benefits of having new resources. NENA’s standard for Acute/Traumatic and Chronic Stress Management points out that some agency’s may be able off set costs associated with treating employee’s for stress if an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is already available. If an agency must spend money to assist employees with reaching resources for stress management, they can expect those costs to be recouped by a reduction in personnel loss, reduced liability, less time off and other cost savings benefits (NENA PSAP Operations Committee, 2013).

RECOMMENDATION

As many professional organizations and agencies begin recognizing telecommunicators as a vital link in the public safety chain, disparities in standards, benefits, training and recognition may become more apparent. As telecommunicator retention is on the decline (APCO International, n.d.) and prospective telecommunicators fail training at a rate as high as 50% (Holdeman, 2013), agencies will need to focus on making sure pay is commesurate with the job requirements and other public safety positions and ensure that telecommunicator contributions are properly recognized (APCO International, n.d.)

A high incidence of stress and post traumatic stress disorder is becoming more clearly documented in dispatching and has been demonstrated to be as high as it is for other first responders in the field. Agencies in particular will need to make sure that dispatchers are receiving the same benefits as other first responders (Mundo, 2013) and that a culture that stigmatizes seeking help or treats telecommunicators as if their experiences are not detrimental to mental health does not prevail to ensure the overall health of all telecommunicators, personnel retention and best performance possible. Agencies will need to facilitate telecommunicators networking with other responders to reduce isolation and should include telecommunicators in activities typically geared towards helping first responders decompress after a tragic event, such as debriefings (Weiner, 2013).

Training requirements for telecommunicators vary widely with as many as 18 states having no minimum requirements in 2010 according to APCO International (Losavio, 2010b, para. 3). APCO representatives considered the lack of minimum training standards “a major public safety threat” that is “putting lives at risk every day” (Losavio, 2010b, para. 3). A lack of training requirements and the inherent risk associated with public safety providers being inadequately prepared for job duties was so significant as to warrant the attention of Representative Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) who indicated federal oversight of the 9-1-1 system may be warranted (Losavio, 2010b, para. 5). There is a disparity between the potential to cause irreparable harm and a lack of state or federal regulatory activity mandating minimum training standards. Legislators, constituents, professional organizations such as APCO and NENA, and private individuals will need to continue to work proactively to ensure training standards

are instituted where lacking or face the possibility of having training requirements instituted in response to tragedy such as the death of Denise Amber Lee in Florida rather than proactively (Losavio, 2010a, para. 6).

Since 2015, the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement has required enhanced training for telecommunicators and carries several tiers of licensing to honor the accomplishments of telecommunicators in a similar manner to that of peace officers (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, 2017).

Recognition of the field as an emergency services profession, as opposed to a clerical position, will need to continue to be pushed at all levels of government, including the federal level. Professional organizations continue to petition the Department of Labor's Office of Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to reclassify telecommunicators despite push back (APCO International, 2016). While a reclassification does not necessarily grant telecommunicators any immediate gain in benefits, the reclassification has significance in that it would recognize the nature of the work appropriately and potentially begin a shift in transitioning the position completely into the field of emergency services instead of administrative services. However, APCO feels the OMB still misunderstands telecommunicator duties due to its initial rejection of APCO's comments regarding reclassification (APCO International, 2016). It is worth noting that the Bureau of Labor Statistics, also a division of the Department of Labor, considers public safety dispatching to be a similar profession to the federally regulated Air Traffic Controller per its online documentation. It also denotes a pay discrepancy between air traffic controllers and police, fire and EMS dispatchers of over \$80,000 (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). The

discrepancy of how the government views and assigns value to similar professions with such disparity highlights the need to continue advocating for accurate representation for the profession.

Through multiple articles published by public safety professionals and in the news, it is demonstrated that telecommunicators can have a profound effect on the outcome of emergencies, both positive and negative. Telecommunicators may be the only link between first responders and injury, or worse, and have been acknowledged for their actions in assisting front line field responders staying safe. Fire departments rely on telecommunicators to assist with emergencies such as maydays and a telecommunicator may be the only person on a scene to hear a mayday and initiate protocols even though they are participating in the emergency remotely (“Raw Audio: Roanoke”, 2016). This is just one of many examples of a telecommunicator assisting first responders in the field.

Public safety telecommunicators can have a profound effect on the outcome of emergencies and be a critical provider of public safety, just like other traditionally accepted first responders. Studies are also revealing they can be profoundly affected by critical incidents, like field units. The media provides no shortage of stories on telecommunicators who helped or harmed a case or persons during the performance of their duties, which implies a great deal of responsibility and liability that can be mitigated by the expenditure of agency resources. The goal of acknowledging telecommunicators as emergency service providers is not to take away significance from other front line responders who risk their lives in the field during incidents, unlike telecommunicators. The goal is to create awareness of the diversified skill set of personnel already in place

at public safety agencies, the sometimes extreme complexity of their job duties, and the incredible resource they are for the community and first responders, assuming they are equipped, trained and empowered to perform at their peak. Industry organizations and progressive agencies are already recognizing telecommunications employees in a class aside from office and administrative staff, but there are still changes to be made and services to be enhanced for these first, "First Responders." Since much remains to be done to recognize and validate the dispatch industry as a critical role in public safety, the position of public safety telecommunicator should be recognized as an emergency service provider, not a clerical position.

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