

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**The Invisible Helping Hand:  
Telecommunications Profession**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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**By  
Erika McComis**

**Bridgeport Police Department  
Bridgeport, Texas  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance and growth of law enforcement communications as a profession. The availability of education and the lack of support from their state and local administration inhibit the further growth. Often times, local funds and time management prohibits the training of those in communications. However, this hurdle can be jumped through the implementation of inter-department collaborations. This paper will look at state requirements and professional association expectations of the communications profession. By increasing the expectations placed on the communications profession, agencies will be able to decrease the number of inadequately trained dispatchers behind the radio consoles. The lack of properly trained communications officers can lead to mishandling of calls, such as the Denise Lee case discussed further in this paper. Although there have been significant strides made in the communications profession, there is still room for growth which starts with the support of our state and local administration.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement communications officers, commonly known as dispatchers or telecommunicators, have for years been just a “voice” on the other end of the radio. In actuality, the communications officer performs as the central control of first responder resources, gathering pertinent information and disseminating that information to the other “side” of the radio as quickly and efficiently as possible (Burton, 1973). If the proper information and facts are not obtained upon the first contact, which lies on the responsibility of the communications officer, the resulting situation can be compared to a train leaving on the wrong track. In other words, if the initial information given contains inaccuracies, the trains (responding units) are not able to go in the correct direction and may collide with each other.

The daily tasks and expectations placed on communications by law enforcement, emergency services personnel, and the public have increased the duties assigned to communications personnel. Communications should no longer be seen as just a “voice,” but the epitome of strength, dedication, and professionalism afforded to the law enforcement community. Ideally, communications can be viewed as the backbone of public safety; the center spoke in the wagon wheel upon which all public safety response depends. The public safety personnel rely heavily on accurate, precise communications on each call for service. They know that the proper information obtained and relayed helps to ensure their safety and allows them to make the decision as to what apparatus/personnel should respond.

Communications officers work in the background to dispatch the police and emergency services personnel to respond to calls. They must maintain an organized

approach to answer multiple incoming calls, give pre-arrival instructions, and send each call for service out over the radio. While not always recognized by general public, communications forms a vital support system, relied on heavily by police and emergency personnel.

Well-trained communications officers can tell by a mere crack in the officer's voice or the speed of their radio traffic that something out of the ordinary has occurred. In return, the officers depend on the consistent, calm tone of voice the communications officer transmits. No matter what incident occurs in the communications center the dispatcher must remain calm on the radio to assure the officer that they will do everything in their power to keep them and the public safe. Many times the reassuring voice of the dispatcher allows the officer to continue through their traffic stop or their call for service. The police officers have faith that through continued professional training, industry-developed quality standards and mere dedication to those they serve the communications officer will use their training and ability to keep the officer in the field safe. Dedicated communications personnel know that a shift has been successful when, at the end of the day, ALL go home safely. Telecommunicators in law enforcement act as a professional group and should be given the same respect as their counterparts for their continued service, knowledge, and dedication to the law enforcement and emergency services community and the citizens they serve.

## **POSITION**

A profession has been redefined several times over the years by various scholars and the definition often concerns the structure and "attitudinal" attributes (Hall, 1968). The proper structure of a profession remains important for growth and future

direction. The telecommunication profession functions close to its counterpart, the law enforcement officer, as often times the calling to serve the public brings a new recruit to the door. The desire to consistently strengthen the profession and its reputation in the community keeps them working in the field. One of the attributes discussed refers to education and technical competency as the backbone of a professional organization (Bumgarner, 2002). For years the telecommunications world has had few expectations placed upon it by others or themselves; however, as the profession grows so will personal standards and outside expectations of local administration and state commissions.

The educational requirements of the communications profession have continued to grow over the past few decades with the continued technology growth in our nation. The role of the telecommunicator has evolved from someone simply answering the phone and writing down the information to a position that relies almost entirely on computers and radio for integral communication with their fellow public safety personnel. This technological growth has also increased the requirements for being a dispatcher and as such so has the professionalism within the telecommunications community. Persons employed in this field have been a part of the growth and are now asking for the same respect as the officers and emergency services personnel. They feel their continued drive to excel and provide the best possible service to the officers and the citizens qualifies them to be recognized in a similar manner.

Police officers once began their careers being sent out on patrol with little to no training and left to themselves over the years to develop their own procedures for dealing with life on the streets. The officers applied their knowledge of daily interactions

to their own adopted rules and regulated their own personnel. In September of 1970, in accordance with TCOLE Section 1005 (a) (1) the basic peace officer requirements were set forth and included 140 hours of classroom training (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education, n.d.). The requirements from TCOLE have drastically changed over the past few decades to meet the demands placed on the officer by the citizens and to ensure they have the knowledge available to the officer to protect themselves and the community while patrolling out on the streets. The same has occurred for communications, as the dynamics of the public has changed so have the dynamics for communications whereas before TCOLE had no requirements for communications (TCOLE, 2014).

The requirements for a basic telecommunicator license in 2011 included a 40 hour basic certification course, a TDD training course, and one year of being on the job. The profession has strived to create increased educational demands placed on telecommunicators in order to encourage law enforcement management to support the needed training requirements of a dispatcher. Industry pioneers have succeeded in their efforts to obtain support from Texas Legislation and the TCOLE commission and hope to see the increased support in the law enforcement administration on a local level. In 2013 the commission reviewed and amended the training requirements for a telecommunicator and now requires a pre-employment psychological evaluation, the same requirements as a police officer. The current educational requirements include those set forth in 2011 with the addition of Crisis Communications, a field training program, and personnel orientation provided by the hiring department. Texas House Bill 1951 requires the local agency to provide no less than 24 hours of continued

education each 24-month period of employment (Licensing and Regulation of Telecommunicators Act, 2013).

Goode (1957) stated that “the attitudinal attribute of professional referents are shaped by professional associations and the standards of the profession.” In May 2007, the Texas Police Chiefs Association began the Best Practices Program to ensure the member agencies have standardized policies for the protection of both officers and citizens (Hafner, 2009.). According to the TPCA Best Practices website there are 66 agencies that have gone through the process and have met the 164 standards required to be a recognized agency (Texas Police Chiefs Association Foundation, 2012). Texas Best Practices have included a set of standards developed for the communications center that covers areas such as facility security, emergency phone communications, radio capability, warrant maintenance and others (“Texas Law Enforcement,” 2012). Each agency participating in the accreditation program must meet each standard set forth by the foundation.

The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) on the other hand has dedicated an entire program with 213 standards, to public safety communications accreditation to implement a process that reviews and internally assesses the operations, procedures, and the knowledge of the communications center (CALEA, 2010). The standards set forth are all voluntary and allow the communications center personnel to prove their continued commitment to excellence to not only the community but to the law enforcement patrons that they serve. By including communications in the accreditation process it shows the public and local administration the strides they are taking to continue their pursuit in professional excellence.



Another professional attitudinal characteristic referenced by Hall (1968) concerns the service-oriented mind of a professional. The professional believes they are in a vital role and that the service they give to the public and practitioners are beneficial (Hall, 1968). A good communications officer should have the desire to meet the needs required of them while on duty by meeting the demands of the officers in the field and by providing assistance of those calling in. The communications officer need to be able to make swift decisions in mere seconds to ensure the proper instructions are given to the caller and that the appropriate resources are sent to help the caller. A good telecommunicator uses their brief emergency medical training to make decisions in 911 emergency calls. The communications officer must recognize that the few short minutes on the phone with the citizen can be the difference between life and death. The dispatcher should also have the initiative and integrity to go above and beyond what the public expects of them to ensure they have taken every step possible to assist the officer or the citizen.

In May of 2010, Dispatch Magazine On-Line had an article regarding a 9-1-1 dispatcher that received a call for help from a female that had been sexually assaulted. The female who was still near her attacker was able to maintain an 18-minute phone conversation with the dispatcher ("Quick Thinking," 2010). The dispatcher knew with her training and work experience that the best possible outcome could be reached by keeping the caller on the line and asking questions that could be answered with a simple yes or no. This type of conversation would keep the attacker from noticing the victim was on the phone with law enforcement. The dispatcher was able to obtain enough information from the caller to direct the officers in the area of the female victim.

The victim was given a code phrase of “I remember that” by the dispatcher to alert her when the victim could see the officer. The dispatcher was able to assist the officers in arresting the suspect and possibly saving the life of the female.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

A common misconception can be made that anyone could step in to the role as a communications officer and be able to perform at the expected level. Granted, the average person with common computer skills would be able to function in the computer-related aspect of the job. However, this profession requires much more than computer knowledge. The Bureau of Labor and Statistics links to the Occupational Information Network which has seventeen pages of job duties listed for a police, fire, and ambulance dispatcher (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). The equipment alone in a communications center can be mind boggling. The communications officer has the responsibility of monitoring all radio channels of police, fire, and EMS, answering all incoming calls on the administrative and emergency lines, handling accurate documentation of incoming calls via the computer-aided dispatch system, coordinating the checking of person’s driver license status via the Texas Law Enforcement Telecommunications System, monitoring cameras throughout the facility, assisting the patrons who come in to the lobby for assistance and the all-inclusive “all other duties as assigned.” No wonder some people get overwhelmed within the first few days, sometimes even the first few hours. A new dispatcher soon realizes that if they fail to do their job, asking the appropriate questions, giving the proper pre-arrival instructions, and sending the needed personnel, the life of the person on the other end of the line could be in jeopardy.

In January of 2008, Denise Lee, lost her life due to the lack of an appropriately-trained person answering the phone when a bystander called and reported a suspicious vehicle. The caller told the dispatcher that she saw a female screaming and appeared to be asking for help in a vehicle that she saw going down the road next to her. The caller gave the dispatcher the vehicle information along with the direction of travel. The dispatcher on duty failed to notify deputies in the area since the actual call came in to the municipal police department. Mrs. Lee, who was murdered, was later found after her abductor was pulled over by a state trooper once the information was finally relayed to officers. Had the dispatcher on duty immediately broadcasted the information to area officers and contacted neighboring agencies immediately Mrs. Lee may have been found alive ("Denise Lee Case," 2007).

Currently, the communications profession still lacks the proper required amount of training they must achieve within the first year by state agencies such as the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE). Although there have been significant strides in the training requirements, as the profession continues to grow the need for increased training will also grow. TCOLE only mandates that someone employed as a communications officer take Crisis Communications, TDD/TTY training and the 40 hour basic telecommunicator course before their first anniversary (TCOLE, 2003). These basic classes cover just what it states, the minimum training requirements in general, in order for the person to be able to perform at minimum standards. The training provided discusses call classification procedures, crisis intervention and management, the telecommunicator's role in public safety, basic communications skills, radio communication techniques, liability issues and a short session on stress management

(TCOLE) This brief training is definitely not sufficient to prepare the new telecommunicator for situations they will be asked to handle on a daily basis.

The dispatcher, just as a police officer, will need several weeks of on the job training along with several hands on classes to prepare them for their career in law enforcement. The Association of Public Safety Communication Officials, commonly known as APCO, has conducted research on training programs that they feel should be necessary for the communications profession to survive and continue to grow. APCO, along with the National Emergency Number Association, has lobbied for the requirements of TCOLE to be increased as the demands on communications have steadily increased over the years. One focus of the recommended training leans towards making the candidate better able to communicate information and better define their role in the responsibility of emergency services responder safety (APCO, 2006). Other training areas that are being researched include the implementation of incident command system training, tactical incident dispatch training, and emergency medical dispatch training. By going more in depth with each of these incidents and requiring more hands on incident training at the local law enforcement agency level the communications officer will be better equipped to handle these difficult situations at a moment's notice.

The lack of continued training for communication personnel in most agencies is the result of an insufficient amount of funds being allocated to train each dispatcher. The agencies do not view the dispatcher training as being as important as police officer training since the minimum training hours required for a communications officer during each cycle are much fewer than those required for police officers. Each person

employed at an agency should be seen as an investment for the agency; the result of that investment depends on the amount of effort put in to that investment. Individual agencies can overcome this issue of lack of training funds by offering combined in-house training or using online training resources. Texas 9-1-1 Trainers (TNT) has partnered with BlueBoardIT to provide cost effective training online for dispatchers. The agency pays ten dollars (\$10) per employee annually and the courses are created by other law enforcement telecommunicators and subject matter experts (Blueboard/IT, n.d).

The in-house training could be done in combination with the training of police officers to allow each part of the team to see what occurs on the “other” side of the incident. This combined training would also allow the agency to better provide the training without a budgetary increase, as most agencies plan and execute training classes throughout the year for the sworn officers. By allowing both “sides of the radio” to train together it would not only allow them to see what each person’s role is but would allow for each to gain a respect for the positions of their counterparts and identify critical areas that need improving before a real incident happens.

## **CONCLUSION**

Telecommunications has made major strides during the past several years by increasing their training requirements, developing quality standards, and holding themselves accountable to growing demands placed on the profession. Bumgarner (2002) wrote that the police profession has five work ingredients: integrity, intellect, initiative, industry (work ethic), and impact (influence on others). The communications

profession strives daily to meet these same ingredients for its own professional excellence.

Each time a communications officer answers the radio or the phone they impact someone's life. Whether or not a positive impact occurs depends on the individual communications officer and the investment the particular agency has made in the training, work environment, and professional standards required of the individual. The industry has made significant progress in improving the training provided to communications and has done so by working hand in hand with law enforcement officers, emergency services personnel, and communication-based professional organizations. However, there still remains much needed growth for improvement in the education requirements set forth by the governing state agency, TCOLE. Organizations are working diligently to get these training deficiencies on the priority list of TCOLE in the interest of providing better service to the community. Communications personnel are working together with their fellow officers to maintain a high degree of loyalty and integrity to each other in order to successfully serve our communities professionally and efficiently. With proper funding and expanded training requirements, the communications officers' profession should be able to reach the level of respect it desires and attain the goal of ever-improving effectiveness.

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