

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Training within the Communications Division  
as it relates to the University of Houston Clear Lake Police Department  
and Policy Implementation**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Telecommunication operators are extremely important members of the law enforcement team. Unfortunately, they are often slighted when training issues are addressed. Professional liability continues to command a high level of attention in law enforcement and legal communities. One important link in the chain of the criminal justice system is the telecommunicator. If the telecommunication link of this chain of responsibility is less than optimal, devastating outcomes may result. As police officers are required to perform additional duties and receive advanced training, telecommunication operator training should follow.

This research project examines information regarding the perceptions about the necessity for telecommunication operator training and presents solutions to alleviate these issues. Law enforcement agencies across the State of Texas completed surveys to aid in the synthesis of information about telecommunication operator training. An excellent survey return rate of 68% was experienced and each of the four major geographical regions in Texas were represented.

As a result of this survey research, it was determined that law enforcement professionals appreciate the importance of telecommunication operator training beyond the mandated 40-hour initial course. The outcome data from this study will be utilized to create a policy to mandate initial and on-going training for telecommunication operators in the University of Houston Clear Lake Police Department. This project will lead to a well-trained telecommunications division. Consequently, this should enhance the safety and welfare of law enforcement professionals as well as civilians.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                              | Page |
|------------------------------|------|
| Abstract                     |      |
| Introduction.....            | 1    |
| Review of Literature.....    | 4    |
| Methodology.....             | 8    |
| Findings.....                | 9    |
| Discussions/Conclusions..... | 10   |
| References.....              | 11   |
| Appendices                   |      |

## INTRODUCTION

“Just a dispatcher...” How many times have these words been heard and yet have failed to stand in support of critically important telecommunications operators, otherwise known as dispatchers? Imagine this scenario: A 911 call is placed. The caller states that someone is walking around in her yard. The well-trained and savvy telecommunications operator immediately asks the caller what the intruder is wearing, a description of his features, whether or not he has a weapon, vehicles on the scene and many other pertinent questions. A primary officer is dispatched, as well as back-up units, because the dispatcher has determined that the intruder is armed with a “large” weapon and an unknown van is parked in the street in front of the house. The officers arrive, positioning themselves safely away from the van in question. An arrest is safely conducted and the potential intruder successfully charged.

Now imagine the same scenario without a well-trained dispatcher. A call comes in to report an intruder. The dispatcher fails to ask supporting questions and dispatches an officer without backup. Furthermore, the officer arrives without knowing that the van parked in the street doesn’t belong there. The officer parks behind the van, steps out of the unit, and is ambushed. In this case, the poorly trained dispatcher was responsible for failing to provide vital information to the responding officer. The lack of training and knowledge by the dispatcher ended the life of a well-decorated officer.

How can one expect professional performance by telecommunications operators who receive little, if any, standardized training? One rarely hesitates to support education and training for police officers, as this type of expenditure is generally perceived as an investment in safety. Unfortunately, in many agencies, few resources are available for education and training

for dispatchers.

The current state of training within the Telecommunications Division in the University of Houston-Clear Lake Police Department is in dire need of improvement. Currently, no standardized program exists to address training issues within this division. The current procedure for training a new telecommunications operator is to simply utilize a critical task checklist when the new operator has performed a task. There are no other formal training practices. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the need for a mandated dispatch training program within the organization to ensure the successful completion of initial, ongoing, and continued training by the telecommunications operator.

To determine the attitudes and beliefs of law enforcement agencies in Texas regarding introductory and continuing telecommunications training, survey research was conducted. As a result of the synthesis and analysis of this research, a standardized telecommunication training program will be established. This should ensure adequate and proper training of telecommunications operators in the University of Houston-Clear Lake Police Department.

An additional outcome of this research project will be the development of a written policy to address the need for a standardized training program for telecommunication operators within the University of Houston-Clear Lake Police Department. The policy will be reviewed and approved by the Chief of Police and implemented into the policy and procedural order manual of the department.

Quality training, guidance and directions for telecommunication operators will be written into policy. This policy will provide each telecommunication operator information and guidance on how to perform the job responsibilities of a telecommunication operator.

The establishment of a comprehensive, continuing education program for telecommunications operators should ensure an elevated level of competency. This heightened base of knowledge should enable the telecommunications operator to perform at an optimal level, thus supporting the ongoing education and training experienced by law enforcement officers. Furthermore, as the level of knowledge by telecommunication operators increases, so should the level of safety experienced by the front-line officers. Therefore, an investment of time and financial resources into telecommunications operator training may be considered an investment into the lives of departmental officers.

In addition, if telecommunication operators perceive their roles in criminal justice as important enough to warrant specialized training, morale and job satisfaction may increase. As morale and job satisfaction improve, longevity and employee retention may also increase. This should contribute to a department with well-trained, experienced telecommunications operators. An improvement in these areas will likely enhance the overall operations of the police department.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Law enforcement agencies have been in existence in America since the 1840's but it wasn't until the late 1960's when the State of Texas established the Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education. The purpose of the commission is to regulate and maintain specific rules and regulations for police officers and telecommunications operators. Since the inception of the commission, training issues have been discussed at great lengths.

"Just watch the other officers, kid. Watch what they do and listen to what they say...You'll catch on quick." Not too many years ago, statements like these were the only introduction to policing that recruits received before beginning their field careers. Fortunately, advances in police training have made such inadequate recruit instruction seem like a distant memory. Today's police recruits receive training in a myriad of areas, from firearms to search-and-seizure laws, before they set out on their first patrol. However, the above instructions are still heard regularly in public safety agencies around the Nation. Rather than being directed to police recruits, they are directed to dispatchers (Sheehan, 1995).

Telecommunications operators are often referred to as dispatchers. In the past, dispatchers were trained police officers. Traditionally, it was only after years of experience that officers with demonstrated knowledge, skills, and abilities would be entrusted with the job of dispatcher (Payne, 2000). Beginning in the mid-1960's, there has been as dramatic shift toward replacing sworn dispatchers with civilian personnel. In part, this is a response to budget constraints and also because of the pressure to "civilianize" the police. (Payne, 2000). Colonel C.E. Fisher, superintendent of the Missouri Highway Patrol, once stated, "Dispatchers have evolved into telecommunicators, and law enforcement telecommunications has, in itself, become a profession" (1990).

In a study of 1,444 dispatchers in Michigan conducted by Payne (2000), it was determined that police managers were quick to assure that the new dispatchers were trained properly in radio, computer, and code procedures. However, many failed to realize how much more dispatchers need to know if they are to function as well as an officer with experience on the street. This failure to recognize the civilian dispatcher's "need to know" has contributed to their sense of frustration and the stress that they feel in the job. Payne further states that the failure to provide civilian dispatchers proper training contributes to their "second-class status." Lack of acceptance by sworn personnel further contributes to the burden that many endure. Furthermore, lack of proper recognition for their efforts can lead to confusion about their role, which contributes to anxiety and even, in some cases, job burnout (Payne, 2000).

Hal Brown states, "Police dispatchers work alone or in groups. At least in the United States, they work with state-of-the-art electronics in more and more departments, even the smaller ones now that Federal grants have brought enhanced 911 and in-car computers to the hinterlands. If they have outdated equipment, at least they can look forward to modernization. However, they may feel isolated in both settings, depending on whether they have good leadership and if they have good working relationships with those on the streets. That feeling of isolation, which also goes with feeling unappreciated, can lead to ongoing stress (Brown, 2001).

Dispatchers provide a myriad of services to the citizens of a community. Better informed dispatchers therefore make better-informed decisions, and, by doing so, provide the most appropriate response. The dispatcher's job is to listen to the information offered by the caller, ask appropriate questions to discover the true nature of the call, assess the information quickly, and make a decision about how to field the call. In Payne's study, among the issues that surfaced often were training deficiencies, lack of preparation for the real job, discontent



stemming from lack of acceptance, and the perception that officers and supervisors did not understand the complexity and importance of the dispatcher's role (Payne, 2000).

Brown (2001) believes that all communication centers, whether lonely one-person operations or huge communication centers handling several departments or precincts, should have procedures for debriefing those involved in critical incidents and should have counselors available. Dispatchers should not only have support after an incident has occurred, but education and training in methods to prevent such occurrences.

When discussing dispatcher's roles in his doctoral dissertation entitled "Contextual Disequilibrium: A Study of Dispatcher's Perceptions of Job Related Training Factors", Payne (1989) describes the potential jeopardy caused by inadequate dispatcher training. "Placing a person in such a position without proper training could place the person and the agency in a legally vulnerable position" (Payne, 1989,pg.5). He further states, "To knowingly allow a dispatcher, without appropriate training, to work in such a critical position may cause them and the public harm."(Payne,1989, pg.6) Payne states that contributing to the lack of training for dispatchers are that many are civilian and female. He implies that there may be a bias towards these groups.

Public safety telecommunications is not a static industry. It changes constantly, refining and improving its processes, adding new areas of responsibility, responding to new threats to both officer and public safety (Finley, 2001). Thus, training and continuing education are of great importance. Telecommunicators are professionals with specialized knowledge and skills acquired through training and experience. Professionals have a responsibility to keep that knowledge current and their skills sharp. The only practical way to do this is through ongoing training (Finley, 2001).

In a recent article by Holt (2001), it is stated that, "Competence in the task at hand reduces stress. *Proper* training increases competence and confidence" (pg.6). Holt infers that not only is on-going dispatcher training critical, but also that the trainer must be "fluent" in dispatcher belief systems and communication. Thus, one can't expect a well-intentioned psychologist, social worker, or police officer on a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) team to do as good a job as a dispatcher equipped with the proper knowledge. In an editorial response to Holt's article, Jennifer Hagstrom states, "In-service training and continuing education are fast becoming industry standards. Although I try to refrain from using liability as a defense for what you should and shouldn't do, it plays a major role in training. Look at it this way: if you have decided to implement a comprehensive new-hire training program, by your actions you have formally taken a stand that says training must be important and necessary. Ok, then, explain why it's only important to train new hires once and veterans not at all" (Hagstrom, 2001,pg.5). Thus, Ms. Hagstrom clearly indicates that one must not only be well trained initially, but also as a continuing process. Without adequate training for police personnel, civil liability becomes a critical issue to the law enforcement agency.

## METHODOLOGY

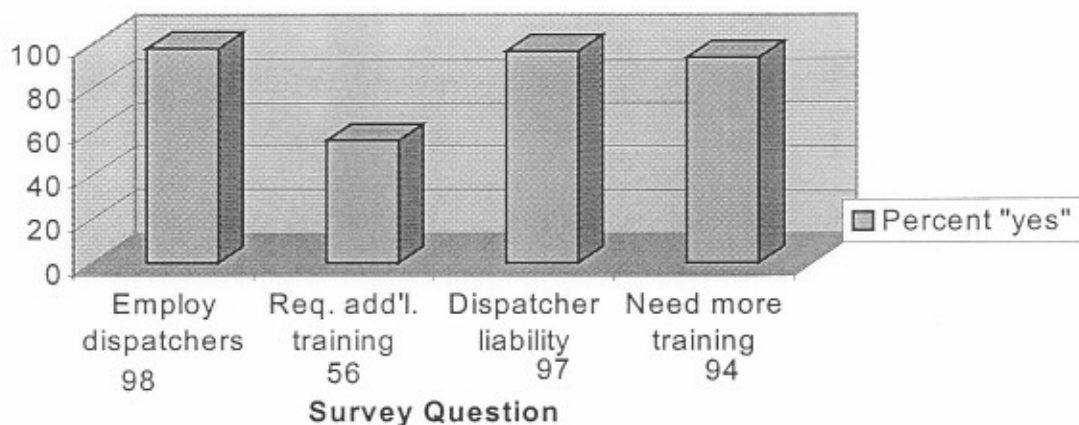
This survey research project examines the perceptions and practices related to the education and training of telecommunications operators in Texas (See Appendix A). A sample of convenience was obtained and 75 law enforcement agencies across Texas received surveys. Each survey requested information regarding agency size, geographical location, whether or not the agency employed telecommunications, and contained three questions designed to elicit a yes or no response.

Sworn and certified commissioned law enforcement officers employed by each agency completed and returned the surveys. It was the intent of this research to purposely target commissioned police officers in an effort to elicit impartial opinions about civilian telecommunications and the roles and responsibilities that they fulfill. These roles and responsibilities relate to civil liability within law enforcement agencies.

The respondents of the surveys represented a heterogeneous group of law enforcement agencies. Regarding the size of the department, one respondent was from a department with only one commissioned officer and, at the opposite extreme, one respondent represented an agency with over 800 commissioned officers and 250 civilian telecommunications. Furthermore, participants of this survey represented north, south, east, and west Texas. All but one of the respondents reported employment with an agency that also employed telecommunication operators.

## FINDINGS

Results of the survey are found in count data form in Appendix B. Of the 75 agencies surveyed, 48 responded, yielding a good response rate of 64%. 47 out of 48 (98%) of the participants represented agencies that employ telecommunicators. 27 out of 48 (56%) responding agencies indicated that they require training beyond the mandatory 40-hour basic telecommunications operator course. All but one (97%) of the responding agencies indicated a belief that telecommunicators carry as much liability as police officers. Finally, 44 out of 47 (94%) respondents stated that telecommunicators should receive more than the 40-hour mandated training. (see figure 1)



**Figure 1: Survey Responses**

## CONCLUSIONS

Today's telecommunicators are not afforded the opportunity to receive up to date or mandated training to maintain proficiency considering the expectations that are required of them. The results from this study suggest that commissioned police officers agree that training for telecommunicators should occur at an interval beyond that of the mandatory, basic 40-hour course. Unfortunately, only 56% of the represented agencies currently have such training programs in place. Almost unanimously, law enforcement professionals realize the liability telecommunications operators withstand.

In addition, the outcome of this study will show for a need of a policy and procedural manual for the University of Houston Clear Lake Police Department. The findings of this research project shows evidence that additional training for telecommunicators is needed and should be mandated. Law Enforcement agencies and their administrators rely heavily upon their telecommunicators considering they are the ones who usually have the first contact with callers. Without proper and or continual training a telecommunicator creates liability to their agency. In addition, an officer responding to a call must have confidence in their telecommunicator to ensure that all the appropriate questions are asked and answered prior to fielding the call to the officer. Without obtaining the required and necessary information, this puts the officer in a safety hazard condition.

Police departments should review current critical issues relating to telecommunications and ensure that up to date training for each employee assigned to the telecommunication division. This should occur during the initial orientation and training of the new dispatch employee, but also on a routinely scheduled and continual basis.

As a result of this study, a policy will be created to mandate initial and on-going training for the telecommunication operators in the University of Houston Clear Lake Police Department. This policy will be completed and effective September 1, 2003.

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## Appendix A

### Departmental Survey on Training for Telecommunications Operators

1. How many telecommunicators are employed by your agency?
2. How many are assigned to a given shift?
3. Does your agency employ civilian telecommunicators?
4. Does your agency require/mandate additional training for telecommunications beyond the 40-hour basic telecommunications course?
5. If yes, what courses are required?
6. Again if yes, how many training hours per year are required for each operator?
7. Do you believe that a telecommunicators role carries as much civil liability as a police officer?
8. If yes, please comment
9. If no, please comment
10. What size is your department? # Sworn / # civilian:
11. Do you believe that a telecommunicator should receive mandated training beyond their 40-hour basic course?
12. If yes, what courses do you believe would benefit a telecommunicator and the agency to reduce liability?
13. Do you have a personal opinion about telecommunications and their training requirements? If yes please comment:

Please submit to Derrell Means, Lieutenant  
University of Houston-Clear Lake Police Department

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Name and Agency



## Appendix B

### SURVEY RESULTS - Raw Data

|    |   |            |           |
|----|---|------------|-----------|
| 1. | <u>Total number of agencies surveyed</u>  | <u>75</u>  |           |
| 2. | <u>Total number of surveys completed and returned</u>   | <u>48</u>  |           |
| 3. | <u>Total number of agencies employing civilian telecommunicators</u>                          | <u>47</u>  |           |
|    |   | <u>YES</u> | <u>NO</u> |
| 4. | <u>Number of agencies requiring additional training</u>                                       | <u>27</u>  | <u>21</u> |
| 5. | Agencies that believe telecommunicators carry as much liability<br><u>as a police officer</u> | <u>37</u>  | <u>1</u>  |
| 6. | Agencies that believe telecommunicators should receive<br><u>more than mandated training</u>  | <u>44</u>  | <u>3</u>  |