

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their
Inclusion in the Department

A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute

By
Communications Supervisor
Raquel Inez Gasperson

Texas Woman's University Police Department
Denton, Texas
June, 1998

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	
Historical, Legal and Theoretical	1
Review of Literature or Practice	3
Discussion of Relevant Issues	6
Conclusion/Recommendations	8
Appendix A	10
Appendix B	11
Bibliography	12

ABSTRACT

This proposal of Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of their Inclusion in the Department for the Texas Woman's University Police Department is made to assist the Police Department in recognizing the importance of dispatcher stress and their inclusion in the departmental preparation for everyday law enforcement events. This project will define or heighten the awareness of this unique and overlooked problem within current police departments to assist its identification and resolution. The benefits of this project will increase dispatcher survival chances with endurance, speed, and strength with confidence required during emergency situations. These benefits will also improve dispatcher's long term health. The project will help police management to better understand dispatcher stress and their inclusion in the department.

Once the decision has been made to address and resolve the departmental orientation of dispatcher stress, it will then require preparation of delivery to the Board of Regents for budgeting and appropriation of funds. In setting standards for the program, time must be allocated and reasonable goals of achievement must be defined and attained for program success. All officers and non-sworn personnel's input to the program and purchase of training is an important matter that departmental managers must not overlook. The funds will be utilized to purchase dispatch training, debriefing, and interdepartmental analysis of present communication breaches of the combined staff. Once accepted by Departmental Chief all officers will be required to participate in the program.

INTRODUCTION

Dispatchers make decisions daily that effect Public Safety. This safety concern not only includes the citizens of our communities, but our police officers who face blind and dangerous situations everyday. Police dispatchers face long hours and usually find themselves in very cramped areas. Normally a dispatcher has to monitor radio traffic from patrol officers, telephones, including a 911 system and alarm systems. They further have to deal with anyone walking in wanting to speak to an officer pertaining to various situations. Dispatchers have long been the "lifeline" for the patrol officer. It's even been said that after working with certain officers for a long period, the dispatcher could tell something was wrong just by the tone of the officer's voice. Unfortunately, many administrators do not recognize the following:

- 1) occupational stress does exist among dispatchers; and
- 2) more inclusion of dispatchers in departmental development can lessen stress and strengthen the department

The problems result because police management and officers tend to view dispatchers as civilians or even "second-class" citizens. The reality is that the stress of law enforcement can highly effect a dispatcher. This information is of special interest not only to police management and officers, but also our communities. When the ordinary citizen calls in with a problem, the first person they speak with at the police department is the dispatcher. This first contact with the citizen is very important, because if the caller is injured or upset, the dispatcher has to talk the caller through his problem, find out what's wrong and dispatch the appropriate help. As has been previously identified (Payne 1997), the

telephone call for police service is the single most critical point in the entire criminal justice system.

The intended audience for this research project will be the police management for the Texas Woman's University Police Department, Denton, Texas. The police management with this research, can consider what action they would need to take.

The primary information to support this project is derived from a number of different sources. These sources would include Journal of Police Science, Police Administration, FBI Law Bulletins, Law & Order, other departmental policies on stress, training manuals and other police studies on stress.

The intended outcome of this research project is for police management to understand the stress that dispatchers manage daily without adequate training and development resources. Furthermore, through this research project a training and development policy could be submitted for an immediate resolution to this long ignored and overlooked problem. Close examination and the identification of deterrents of the stresses of dispatchers will cause positive outcomes for police management as they react to threatening emergencies, while the inclusion of dispatchers in departmental issues will produce an increased level of departmental cohesiveness and operational effectiveness; additionally, reducing dispatcher stress.

HISTORICAL, LEGAL and THEORETICAL CONTEXT

During the past eleven years, I have performed as a dispatcher, police officer, and communication supervisor. Presently, I serve as a police officer and communication supervisor for the Texas Woman's University Police Department.

In the beginning of my law enforcement career, following graduation of the police academy, I was employed by the city of Fort Worth as a police officer. I was asked to apply, in conjunction with my police officer duties for dispatch communications. It was in this position that I began to understand and experience the dilemma of dispatcher stress and the importance of their inclusion in the department.

For years, the law enforcement community has devoted particular attention to the phenomenon of "police" stress (Doerner, 258). While many researchers strive to identify the stresses experienced by police officers, very little attention has been given to the stress experienced by dispatchers. (Stratton, 1984;Burke, 1)

The word "stress" is derived from Latin and was used in the English language as early as the 17th century to mean "hardships", straits, adversity or affliction" (cited in Hinkle, 1977). Since that time, many concepts, models, and definitions of stress have emerged (Eisdorfer and Wilkie, 1978). Perhaps the most widely recognized definition of stress is the one developed by Hans Selye (1982). Selye's basic biological model contends that stress is "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (Selye, 1974). The term "nonspecific" (or common) was used because many and very different stimuli can trigger a stress reaction (Landy, 1987).

According to Barrett, (1985:36), "... Depending upon one's perspective, stress may be a response or stimuli. It may be the result of major changes in life events, an accumulation of daily hassles or uplifts, it may be seen as the interactions of an individual's abilities within his or her social context or conceived of in terms of an individual's response to the work place." For the purpose of this research, the definition of stress developed by Selye (1974) will be used. (Burke, 2).

The role of the dispatcher is often misunderstood by administrators, officers, citizens, and even among fellow dispatchers (Milender). Doerner (1987:257) states that "police dispatchers form the 'hub' of departmental activity. They communicate information to street units, direct patrol officers to answer calls for service, and coordinate response activities. (Burke, 2) Dispatchers must process a complex array of information continuously while making required, rapid judgements and responses to that information" (Ksionzky and Mehrabian, 1986;Burke, 2). In a matter of seconds, the dispatcher must decipher non-emergency calls with crisis calls for service. "With significant time pressure, the dispatcher...is required to direct the activities of multiple field units; receive, assimilate, and dispatch information from a variety of sources; and effectively communicate with officers and citizens" (Sewell and Crew, 1984:9; Burke, 2).

Police management and officers overlook the stress that police dispatchers receive during their shift. Dispatchers having received the initial contact with an emergency event are often excluded from the conclusion of the emergency. While departments tend to debrief the officers, they fail to include the dispatchers on their part in the emergency, leaving them with adrenal flowing and stress unresolved.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

Studies have found that police dispatchers have stresses unique to their own occupation. There are approximately ten aspects, as follows, of the dispatcher's job, which contributes to stress:

- 1) second-class citizenship,
- 2) insufficient training,
- 3) multiple calls,
- 4) required decisions,
- 5) anticipation,
- 6) antiquated systems,
- 7) low control,
- 8) confinement,
- 9) inadequate departmental interpersonal communication,
- 10) negative citizen contact, and
- 11) lack of professional development (Sewell and Crew, 1984; Burke, 4).

Formerly, a study in 1984 completed by Guthery and Guthery highlighted eleven (11) stresses unique to police dispatchers. They were identified as:

- 1) being relegated to a low position on the department's hierarchy and treated as such;
- 2) feeling that police officers do not care about them;
- 3) lack of breaks;
- 4) shift work;
- 5) comparable insufficient pay (for necessary skill level);

- 6) lack of uniform certification process;
- 7) insufficient development training;
- 8) constant necessity for hypervigilance ;
- 9) sexism;
- 10) calls involving abusive/irate citizens, emergency calls, or child abuse; and
- 11) lack of support and positive reinforcement from supervisors and management (Burke,5).

With the increasing number of calls for service and implementation of calls-for-service management programs, the responsibilities of the police dispatcher have risen substantially. Several studies conducted by different research institutions have determined that approximately 95 percent of all police work performed by a department's patrol force is first received, screened, and assigned through police dispatch operations. (Weaver, 16).

During Module II (March-April 1998) of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute, I conducted a four-question survey (See at Attachment 'A' and 'B') of the 18 different departments present, to respond on dispatcher stress and the importance of their inclusion in the department. The following four questions were asked:

- 1) In your department, are the officers debriefed after major/minor calls?
- 2) In your department, are dispatchers debriefed after major/minor calls?
- 3) Do you feel dispatchers are overlooked, leaving them to deal with their own stress?
- 4) Are your dispatchers included in all departmental resolutions?

Appendix 'A' a blank survey is presented following gender norming. Appendix 'B' contains the compiled survey results. Note: Eighteen different departments were surveyed which were represented by twenty participants.

The results of the surveyed departments are as follows:

Question 1) 70 %	YES	30%	NO	
Question 2) 39.5 %	YES	60 %	NO	.5 % N/A
Question 3) 75 %	YES	5%	NO	
Question 4) 40 %	YES	50%	NO	10 % N/A

In comparing our survey data findings with the previous studies of Sewell and Guthery, several stark challenges face cohesive police department structure in the address of enhanced dispatcher performance and development.

The questions in reference to debriefing officers and dispatchers, data revealed that police officers are debriefed 95% more than the police dispatchers. This data relates to the studies that showed police dispatchers felt confinement and inadequate interpersonal departmental communication.

Data revealed that police dispatchers are overlooked, leaving them to deal with their own stress, and further, police dispatchers are not included in departmental resolutions. This data relates to the studies that police dispatchers have stress because of time mandated required decisions, low situation control, lack of professional development, and lack of support and positive reinforcement from supervisors and management.

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

Dispatchers make decisions daily that effect Public Safety (Payne, 101). This safety concern not only includes the citizens of our communities, but our police officers who face blind and dangerous situations everyday. Police dispatchers face long hours and usually find themselves in very cramped areas. Normally a dispatcher has to simultaneously monitor radio traffic from patrol officers, telephones, 911 systems, and alarm systems, and station pedestrian traffic (Cameron,28). Dispatchers generally are responsible for managing any and all station pedestrian traffic. Station pedestrian traffic involves surreptitious or unscheduled persons entering the station and wanting to speak to an officer pertaining to various situations. Dispatchers have long been the “lifeline” for the patrol officer. It has been said that after working with certain officers for a long period, the dispatcher could tell something was wrong just by the tone of the officer’s voice (Cameron, 28).

Unfortunately, many administrators do not recognize the following:

- 1) occupational stress does exist among dispatchers; and
- 2) more inclusion of dispatchers in departmental development can lessen stress and strengthen the department

These problems result because police management and officers tend to view dispatchers as civilians or even “second-class” citizens (Weaver, 18). The reality is that the stress of law enforcement can highly effect a dispatcher. This information is of special interest not only to police management and officers, but also our communities (Milender).

Studies have found that police dispatchers have stresses unique to their own occupation. Here are three of the approximately ten known aspects of the dispatcher's job and three of the eleven stresses unique to police dispatchers which validate the necessity and cost effectiveness for immediate change in training and development of police department dispatch personnel. They are:

- 1) Second-class citizen;
- 2) insufficient training,
- 3) required decisions,
- 4) being relegated to a low position on the department's hierarchy and treated as such,
- 5) insufficient pay compared to the level of skills necessary to perform the job,
- 6) lack of support and positive reinforcement from supervisors and management.

With the increasing number of calls for service and implementation of calls-for-service management programs, the responsibilities of the police dispatcher have risen substantially. Several studies conducted by different research institutions have determined that approximately 95 percent of all police work performed by a department's patrol force is first received, screened, and assigned through police dispatch operations (Sewell,8). The research findings and current police department practices further substantiate the call for police departments to effectively address the performance and accountability measures contributing negatively to their dispatch personnel.

Upon reviewing the final analysis, police officers average an annual 80 hours of training, which starkly contrasts, with the zero annual amount of police dispatcher support and

development training. Police dispatchers initiate over 95 percent of all police department calls and receive zero hours of professional training per year (Weaver, 18). This contributes to the excessive turnover rate in dispatcher personnel. This turnover rate subsequently increases departmental expense for constant retraining and replacement of the position. This perpetual turnover of dispatch personnel provides a negative collateral impact on subsequent operational, fiscal, and administrative efficiency and effectiveness of the police departments.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Dispatchers make decisions daily that effect Public Safety. This safety concern not only includes the citizens of our communities, but our police officers who face blind and dangerous situations everyday. Police dispatchers face long hours and usually find themselves in very cramped areas. Normally a dispatcher has to monitor radio traffic from patrol officers, telephones, including a 911 system and alarm systems. They further have to respond with anyone walking in wanting to speak to an officer pertaining to various situations. Dispatchers have long been the “lifeline” for the patrol officer. It’s even been said that after working with certain officers for a long period, the dispatcher could tell something was wrong just by the tone of the officer’s voice. Unfortunately, many administrators do not recognize that occupational stress does exist among dispatchers. In addition, more inclusion of dispatchers in departmental development can lessen stress and strengthen effectiveness within the department.

The problems result because police management and officers tend to view dispatchers as civilians or even “second-class” citizens (Weaver, 9). The reality is that the stress of law enforcement can highly effect a dispatcher. This information is of special interest not only to police management and officers, but also our communities.

Dennis M. Payne (Internet) writes that some have suggested that the telephone call for police service is the single most critical point in the entire criminal justice system. Yet the reality is that few police responsibilities can be carried out successfully unless the initial information, determinations, and transmissions are correct. Though much attention has been paid to the discretion of police officers, very little has been paid to the discretion that dispatchers exercise in their innumerable required daily decisions, and to the ultimate impact that this can have on the overall service.

True to its mission and intent, this project compiled, organized, and analyzed the current data and research regarding dispatcher stress and its debilitating effect on departmental cohesiveness, operational effectiveness and efficiency. The intended outcome of this research project is for police management to understand the stress that dispatchers manage daily without adequate training and development resources.

Through this research project a training and development policy could be submitted for an immediate resolution to this long ignored and overlooked problem. Close examination and the identification of deterrents of the stresses of dispatchers will cause positive outcomes for police management as they react to threatening emergencies, while the inclusion of dispatchers in departmental issues will produce an increased level of departmental cohesiveness and operational effectiveness; additionally, reducing dispatcher stress.

APPENDIX A

Survey

NAME: _____

TITLE: _____

AGENCY: _____

Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of their Inclusion in the Department

1. In your department, are the officers briefed after major/minor calls?

_____ yes

_____ no

2. In your department, are dispatchers briefed after major/minor calls?

_____ yes

_____ no

3. Do you feel dispatchers are overlooked, leaving them to deal with their own stress?

_____ yes

_____ no

4. Are your dispatchers included in all departmental resolutions?

_____ yes

_____ no

Optional:

What is your personal opinion on each of the above questions? And Why?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arbogast, Karen, Relief for the Frazzled Dispatcher, Law Enforcement Technology 7-8/89 p.30-39
- Brazoria County Sheriff's Office, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Brazos County Sheriff's Office, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Burke, T.W., Dispatcher Stress and Job Satisfaction, National Institute of Justice 1/2/93
- Cameron, B., Stressing Dispatchers, Law & Order, V.32 N.2, 2/84, p.18-24, 27-34, 54
- Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (Ca), Training Specifications for the Public Safety Dispatchers': Basic Course
- Doerner, W.G., Police Dispatcher Stress, Journal of Police Science and Administration, V 15, N 4 (12/87) p. 257-261
- Drabek, T.E., HAAS, JE Study of Man-How Police Confront Disaster
- Farmers Branch Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Fayette County Sheriff's Office, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Greenville Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Houston I.S.D. Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Hurst Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Jacinto City Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998

- Lacy Lakeview Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Lancaster I.S.D. Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- League City Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- McKinney Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Marshall Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Marshall Creek Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Milender, D.D., Police Dispatcher in the Year 2000 AD: How Will Medium-Sized Departments Manage A Stressful Environment?, California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, No. 7-0125
- Payne, D.M. Role Disequilibrium Among Police Dispatchers, Police Studies, V16,N 3 (Fall 1993), p.99-112
- Pflugerville Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- San Jacinto College Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998
- Sewell, J.D. Forgotton Victim-Stress and the Police Dispatcher, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, V.53, N.3, 3/84 p.7-11
- Tyler Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998

Weaver, W.C., Training and Evaluating the Police Communication Dispatcher, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, V 54, N 4 (4/85) p. 16-19

Windcrest Police Department, "Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their Inclusion in the Department Survey", The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module II, March 1998

FA-approved
6/25/98 *Written*

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Dispatcher Stress and the Importance of Their
Inclusion in the Department

A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute

By
Communications Supervisor
Raquel Inez Gasperson

Texas Woman's University Police Department
Denton, Texas
June, 1998