

**The Bill Blackwood
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The Professional Development of the telecommunicator

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ABSTRACT

The continuous training of public safety telecommunicator's is as integral to the success to any law enforcement agency as the training of police officers. It will improve productivity by offering proficient and skilled responses to the emergency calls from the community and other public safety responders. Many law enforcement agencies will initially hire the telecommunicator and train them to perform as call takers and/or dispatchers according to agency and industry standard but that does not include the telecommunications professional in the training needs of the agency as a whole. The types of information used to support the researcher's position are a review of industry periodicals, reports by industry experts in the field of public safety, statistics obtained through public safety industry experts, national telecommunicator's training manuals, and a review of a study conducted by The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO). The conclusion drawn from this position paper is that just like the police officer, the telecommunicator should be continuously trained to refresh and enhance their knowledge. The success of any law enforcement agency is driven by improved efficiency and productivity of how calls for emergency services are handled; and this starts with the telecommunicator.

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INTRODUCTION

The job of a telecommunicator could be considered the most important part of emergency response. It should involve sufficient funding and attention to on-going or continued educational needs that the profession has not previously been afforded. It would be cost effective to better educate the division of public safety telecommunications, and this would help stop the increasingly high turnover rate, the many lawsuits, and the increasing criticism of telecommunicator liability as a result of not being properly trained. The skills of a telecommunicator require continuous attention just like the police officer, whose skills are considered perishable because of the constant changes in technology and crimes.

Continued education is a must to effectively process non-emergency calls as well as the often intense emergency calls that are received. The high-risk activity calls for police, fire, and ambulance services requires one to use quick responses and judgment to determine and adhere to the constant changing standards, protocols, and crime events, all while communicating effectively between the caller and field response teams. The telecommunicator's primary function is to be alert and ready to receive emergency calls by prioritizing, verifying, and sending the appropriate response to the correct address quickly and accurately every single time without mistake. This is what is expected from the public on the phone and from the officers in the field.

To train a telecommunicator can be one of the most difficult and critical tasks of any law enforcement agency to ensure the success of the employee. The appointed trainer, which is sometimes a senior telecommunicator or, if the agency is lucky, a certified telecommunicator as a communications training officer (CTO), must impart

knowledge on topics including: philosophies, emergency response teams, technical topics (computers, phones, radios), and listening and speaking skills and terms. The importance of ensuring that telecommunicator's are continuously trained to properly process calls for police services each and every time is usually only determined after a critical incident goes wrong, and the politicians and media begin examining the agency's operation.

It costs \$52,815 to train a new telecommunications professional, so it would be well worth the time and effort to retain the telecommunications professional (McAtamney, 2003). The same energy and effort used to continue the education of police officers is needed for the telecommunicator to keep up with the ever changing types of criminal calls for service and technology. When a telecommunications professional's training discontinues, this causes added anxiety and stresses that can be prevented, much like the law enforcement officers'.

Just like the law enforcement officer, continuing education is just as important as new hire training for the telecommunications professional. In some states, the pay of the dispatcher in training for 6 months would cost an agency \$14,268. The pay of the trainer would cost the agency \$14,981. The pay for a dispatcher to fill an empty position of a trainer would cost the agency \$21,402, which is usually time and one-half of overtime (McAtamney, 2003). It would benefit the state, and country as a whole, to provide appropriate and continuing training for telecommunications professionals because it would directly result in better responses to emergencies and aid in "maintaining a high level of service to meet the nation's needs" (APCO, 2011, p. 35).

Without properly trained telecommunications professionals and continued professional development throughout the career of a telecommunicator, the communication regarding critical and specific emergencies between the citizen and the police officer will be lacking in proficiency and skill, which may produce delayed responses and more lawsuits for the agency. Agencies and disciplines should seek to understand that the telecommunicator profession is a vital beginning to the process of keeping the nation safe. The issue to be discussed is that telecommunications professionals should be afforded a similar or comparable level of training as police officers.

Although the telecommunications professional is in a physically controlled environment, the telecommunications professional is the very first part of the 'response' to any emergency and remains a critical part of the emergency 'response' until the end, which may be until the police officer has settled the physical scene of the emergency or when the report is done and turned over to the Investigations Division. What is more, the public expects a trained professional to answer when 911 is called, and they expect a trained professional radio dispatcher to accurately send help to their emergency in a timely manner (APCO, 2011) just as they expect a professionally trained police officer to show up at the scene of their emergency.

The job of a telecommunicator is technical and skill-oriented and cannot be done by just anyone. The job of a police officer is also technical and skill-oriented and cannot be done by just anyone. The professional development of a telecommunicator is very important since the communications center is the caller's, which, most often, is the public's first impression of the agency and "operations in a center are either pass or fail,

leaving no margin for errors requiring optimal levels of operations 24 hours a day because lives, property, and responder safety are on the line every minute of every day” (APCO, 2011, p. 8).

Currently, in Texas, within one year of employment as a telecommunicator of a law enforcement agency, the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) requires that a telecommunicator obtain course number 1013 (40 hour) basic telecommunications certification course, course number 3812 (4 hour) TDD/TTY within the last six (6) months, course number 3720 (agency discretion, usually 9-12 weeks) telecommunications operator field training or communications training officer (CTO) (if reported after 06.01.2004), and course number 2120 (24 hour) crisis communication (if appointed after 12.01.2011) (TCOLE, 2009). In many states, telecommunicator's are not recognized as having a public safety job worthy of the same considerations as sworn law enforcement personnel or firefighters. There are no nationally recognized standards or minimum training requirements for this profession even though lives are dependent on the skills and knowledge of the telecommunicator. Many states do not have minimum standards, and the benefits are not the same as those of firefighters, paramedics, or law enforcement officers as stated in the PSC Online article

Dispatching: A Profession or Job?

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) certification is required as it is a proactive approach regarding emergency management and response. This certification is received once during the course of the telecommunicator's career (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). The National Crime Information Center (NCIC) certification shall be obtained for the purpose of accessing national criminal

justice information systems. This required certification is received once during the course of the telecommunicator's career with a recertification which entails a test of 20 to 25 questions. The score of 70 or above of the test determines if that telecommunicator can continue to access the National Criminal Information Center (NCIC) systems.

Telecommunications professionals should be afforded continued professional development along with the standard TCOLE requirements, which mandates that the Basic telecommunicator Certification is received during the first year of employment (TCOLE, n.d.). The course curriculum was designed in 2003 to provide the beginning telecommunicator with a basic understanding of emergency communications situations. While the focus is on how well a telecommunicator performs after the initial training received after being hired, it is imperative to continue to develop skills and knowledge to keep up with new crimes, cultures, and technology.

It is often left up to the telecommunicator to seek training, learn what is needed, and keep up to date and current with their knowledge, skills, and abilities (NAED, 2007). The knowledge involves agency policies and procedures, operation of 911, phone, CAD and radio systems, and applicable laws. Skills can include use of the computer systems, properly applying the knowledge of the policies and procedures, and keeping an even temperament with empathy at all times.

A telecommunicator's abilities, some of which can depreciate, includes multitasking, making critical decisions quickly and decisively, providing customer service, keeping track of multiple field units, and typing into the computer as auditory information is received from the phone and the radio. The telecommunicator profession

has changed vastly in the past 30 years with the development of new technology, various cultures, and new crimes. Thirty years ago, a telecommunicator's basic requirements began with a phone, radio, pencil, and paper, but this has now become a hub of new complex crimes involving active shooter incidents, terror attacks, bomb threats, domestic violence, and mentally ill situations. Additionally, there are dynamic infrastructures involving trunks, radio towers, fiber optics, and multi-screened consoles (APCO, 2011).

If the agency kept all police personnel current by making available training opportunities, this will contribute to a positive work environment, good morale, higher productivity, day-to-day job satisfaction, and greater productivity. The learning curve in the telecommunications professional's skills and technology is a factor in the growing concern of telecommunications professional's liability. Most lawsuits happen to telecommunications professionals for their failure to adhere and to act in accordance with standards, protocols, education, and training according to the Public-Duty Doctrine by failing to send proper response, delaying in dispatching response, failing to properly prioritize calls, failing to send response to the correct address, and sending the wrong unit (Hagstrom, 2001). The telecommunications professional should be afforded a comparable level of training, supervision, certification, and benefits as the police officer.

POSITION

The success of any law enforcement agency is driven by improved efficiency and productivity of how calls for emergency services are handled; this starts with the telecommunicator. Telecommunicator professionals' development should continually involve verbal judo. Originally, verbal judo, which is considered a tactical communication

skill, was originally developed to teach only police officers and correctional personnel how to resolve conflict and redirect what is considered bad behavior by using words instead of force ("PowerPhone," 2011). The telecommunicator's professional development should continually involve new computer systems, multitasking, customer service, and guidelines or best practices on how to handle new crimes. New systems and new crimes are learned by the telecommunicator on the job as they come into play.

The role of a telecommunicator professional involves many areas of activity. These actions are used in every emergency call received to ensure accurate and precise public safety response. These actions include telephone interrogation, call prioritizing, dispatch resource allocation, coordination of logistics, and resource networking; all of which impact lives via telephone and radio.

The quality of the information gathered through phone interrogation and broadcast of information via radio is vital to handling the call properly and in apprehending suspects involved in criminal activity. Quick decisions must be made based on the quality of details gathered from the initial call to be dispatched. The telecommunicator professional's skill of systematically and formally questioning the caller also plays an important part since the officer in the field may be deemed as the caller because he/she is in distressed. Without accurate information gathering, the telecommunicator will not be successful at prioritizing the call, allocating resources, or coordinating logistics, thus impacting the lives of citizens and field response (NAED, 2007).

Employee training is the process of enhancing the skills, capabilities, and knowledge of that employee for doing a particular job. After hiring any public safety

professional, to continually train the professional outside of what is required or mandated requires planning with consideration to staffing and budgeting. When a public safety professional is continuously trained, this process deems crucial for the agency's development and success as the employee will be more efficient and productive if he/she is trained well to do the particular job.

A telecommunicator, like any other employee, needs to feel valued or empowered to perform at their best and continually providing skill based training for the telecommunicator will professionalize the career of the telecommunicator (Lawson, 2006). Training will also empower the telecommunicator and make him/her feel valued as an employee (Lawson, 2006). Additional training, such as customer service, management training for team leaders, active shooter, effective listening, and questioning or interrogation skills should be frequently sharpened to maintain this required level of skill and proficiency in this ever changing environment.

Some skills of a telecommunicator are not perishable, but confidence in the skill can perish. Keeping up with the extremely fast growth rate of technology and adhering to standards and protocols including duties such as sending the appropriate response and prioritizing calls is necessary or lawsuits may occur or the turnover rate may increase. It would benefit the state and country as a whole to provide appropriate and continuing training for telecommunicator's because it would directly result in better responses to emergencies (Angell, 2010). Angell (2010), a member of APCO International, said that the telecommunications professional's job is not based on exact science, but like the law enforcement officer professional, it has just as many unusual features. The telecommunications professional also deals with people on the phone

before the officer arrives; therefore, they are dealing with all of the human responses; what they think, feel, and do. In addition, telecommunications professionals are expected to be perfect in all of their actions each and every time they respond to a phone call or radio transmission (Angell, 2010).

COUNTER POSITION

One may argue why continual training is needed for the telecommunicator if the turnover rate is at 19%. Some estimate the turnover rate for telecommunicator's to be two to three years (McAtamney, 2003). The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) International released a follow-up report to its Project RETAINS (Responsive Efforts to Assure Integral Needs in Staffing), which found that the national telecommunicator turnover rate, at 19%, was an increase of 3% since the initial study conducted in 2005 and higher than the better-known turn-over rates of nurses and teachers (Taylor, Gardner, Clark, & McCombs, 2005). Another issue faced when increasing employee training is that the agency is making the employee more valuable, which also makes them more valuable to competitors or other law enforcement agencies (Hakala, 2008).

Training public safety professionals, such as the telecommunicator, can be challenging as the cost to staff the position of the employee that is offsite for training would include paying overtime to cover the offsite training. To add to the cost of training off-site, there would also be registration costs as well as food, lodging, and travel costs to be considered. The option to training telecommunicator's would be to schedule and assign on-line training. The online training option is increasing especially since it allows for flexibility across technology formats. Employees can learn at home, on the job, or

anywhere they can use their personal computers or smartphones. With on-line training, at least the cost of travel, food, and lodging will less likely to accrue. The trick is finding a good balance between what can be delivered online and what needs to be reinforced with hands-on training or scenario training.

The options of online training are growing as it this process is flexible and also allows the trainer to revisit the training when available and to do so either at work or at home. Online training would allow the telecommunicator to work at his or her own pace. Depending on the subject matter, the telecommunicator may or may not need time away from the console.

CONCLUSION

The telecommunications professional's job could be argued to be the most vital part of emergency response. The career in public safety communications requires initial training, plus ongoing training to keep up with new crimes, laws, and technology. This career of public safety telecommunications is active and requires a unique level of knowledge and skills.

The job of the telecommunicator is not to save lives, it is to help people. For the most part, citizens do not call 911 for idle chat. The agency's field units do not request assistance because they are lonely. When a citizen or field responder request aid and support from a telecommunicator, the response is expected to be conducted in an expert and caring manner. It is the combination of training and temperament that makes a good telecommunicator.

The telecommunications professional must devote their total energy and concentration to understanding the meaning of what is being said without relying on the

person's body language. The telecommunications professional must concentrate and understand the meaning of what is being said because a distressed caller or officer in the field will sometimes not say what they mean. The telecommunications professional must also rely on the distressed caller's voice inflection and rate of breathing while listening for background noises.

The telecommunications professional must have some analytical skills to somewhat perform the "initial investigation" with the victim and sometimes the suspect. The telecommunications professional must also clarify and confirm all information received. The telecommunications professional must make sure the answers to the questions are clear. If an answer is "right here," the dispatcher wants to know exactly where. If the gun is "in the drawer in the bedroom," the telecommunications professional wants to know if it is the nightstand or a dresser drawer and the location of the bedroom. The telecommunications professional recognizes that action based on incomplete or inaccurate information may be inappropriate or dangerous for the officer or the public.

The telecommunications professional must also be skilled in setting priorities of importance in seeking and passing on information and directing and coordinating actions. There may not always be time to ask all of the questions or to relay all the significant information, so the most pertinent information is taken and/or relayed first. There may also not always be enough officers or equipment to handle all the calls that are coming in, or they may have to make a decision as to which is the closest unit to a call for service location, so the telecommunications professional makes judgments as to the order in which action should be taken or what is the most pressing call for service.

Telecommunications professionals often organize and determine who goes where and when and who is responsible for what. While processing a call for service, the telecommunications professional will sometimes organize activities of various people inside the communications center and field units. The telecommunications professional learns to anticipate and compensate for a caller's confusion and lack of information and the caller's lack of understanding the process of emergency call taking.

The telecommunications professional will eventually begin to remember random, though sometimes unrelated, bits of information for future reference. The telecommunications professional must have the skill to identify with the ways others may perceive situations or look at incidents through the eyes of the caller and be able to relay that information in such a way that the emergency responding units will understand or visualize so that they will know what to expect upon arrival. A telecommunications professional must be able to think quickly, work under stressful conditions, speak clearly, and hear and listen carefully. The telecommunications professional must be able to work well in teams and work well with the public and other law enforcement agencies. The telecommunications professional must remember and understand oral and written instructions, sit for long periods of time, and type accurately more than 35 words per minutes, especially if the agency uses a real time computer aided dispatch computer system, all while remaining calm when dealing with frightened, hysterical, or angry callers and/or field officers.

To continuously train the telecommunicator does not always include classroom training. The agency telecommunicator can learn by participating in patrol ride-a-longs, critical call debriefings, lessons-learned activities, communications supervisors

distributed-articles regarding telecommunications, and the passing on of the exact information that is passed on to field operations. (Ertl, 2011) The telecommunicator must have the talent to learn and ability to apply what is learned. The training that is received by the telecommunicator, just like the police officer, determines how well they perform in an emergency. If an agency's policy regarding the communications center states that the telecommunicator acts in the voice of the agency's Chief of Police or Commander, as the agency Chief of Police or Commander, then expert and knowledgeable representation is key. In conclusion, one reason for failure is lack of knowledge of the job of the telecommunicator and experience. People fear failure and this hinders what really needs to be done. However, people can control situation through knowledge, which allows for the removal of fear (McAtamney, 2003).

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