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Training for the Communication Technicians



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**By
Terri J. Niemietz**

**Converse Police Department
Converse, Texas
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ABSTRACT

Many agencies do not require their telecommunicators to attend training classes because they are not mandatory by state or federal law. Many agencies do not have the funds available for the telecommunicator's training. Often, other departments or projects take priority over communication centers. Telecommunicators are the first point of contact for the public when there is an emergency. It is important all telecommunicators have the proper training and knowledge needed to effectively perform their job. It is not only dangerous to the officers and fire/medical personnel they work with, but also to the general public they serve. Training should be required for an emergency telecommunicator on an annual basis because emergency events are always evolving. There are a number of articles, books, and internet websites that also give great insight into the issues that have or can arise from telecommunicators not being properly trained. Telecommunicators having training can greatly aid them in major emergencies that require a great deal of professionalism. Telecommunicators should be trained in order to know how to properly react to stressful situations. There is no such thing as a routine day for an emergency telecommunicator. Every telecommunicator must be prepared to handle any situation that may arise. A telecommunicator can only do what is allowed by the agency's administration. They must be able to make decisions that directly affect other's lives on a moment's notice. There should be funding available for telecommunicators, just as there is for other emergency responders.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergency communication center in most jurisdictions is known as one of the busiest offices of the city. It is the nervous system from which emergency personnel work. As suggested by Weaver (1995), "it is difficult to think of any function in a Police Department that is more critical than the dispatch function". Emergency telecommunicators are the unsung heroes. In many jurisdictions, the emergency telecommunicator receives low pay, works with substandard equipment, and has little to no training. In 2006, emergency telecommunicators received more than 240 million 911 calls (Vangilder, 2010). Emergency telecommunicators are tasked with the major responsibility of taking the calls and sending the appropriate resources to the public (Ihnken, 2009). The information collected not only needs to be correct, but sent out in a timely manner. Once the officers, ambulance, and/or fire trucks have been dispatched, it is the responsibility of the emergency telecommunicator to keep the first responders informed of the current call and any additional calls for service that need attention. Even after the first responders are on scene, it is the responsibility of the emergency telecommunicator to continuously retrieve, document, and update on-scene personnel. Emergency telecommunicators are often faced with having numerous emergency calls at one time and must be able to control all situations in a professional manner while working to get the assistance needed to the public.

The emergency telecommunicator is expected to be the first responder over the phone until emergency personnel make the scene. There is state mandated training for police officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical technicians; yet, for emergency telecommunicators, there are minimal requirements, if any. The demands placed on

telecommunicators with minimal training set them up for failure. This is detrimental not only for the community but also for the officers that count on the telecommunicator for survival information and dispatch accuracy.

In 2009, the Association of Public Safety Council Office (APCO) President Richard Mirgon called the lack of local training requirements for emergency telecommunicators “a major public safety threat. It’s putting lives at risk everyday” (Losavio, 2010, para. 3). For the past 15 years, APCO has been pushing legislation to have mandatory training deployed and has been met with great resistance. APCO initiated a training standard in 1995, but it is a voluntary program (Bowen, 2009). It is unlikely that there will ever be a training standard that meets all the needs of all communication centers, so the public and the first responding agencies would receive better service by adopting some standard, verses no standard at all (Bowen, 2009).

Most people believe that they will never need to call 911 until it happens. When an emergency does arise, most callers expect and count on getting a professional, educated, and calm person on the other end of the phone. Until training is made mandatory for the emergency telecommunicator, most agencies will not spend their tight resources, or make the effort, to educate this vital part of their team. However, the first link in the chain should be a strong one.

An emergency telecommunicator’s primary responsibility is to make sure that everyone they deal with is able to make it home. In most jobs, if an employee makes a large mistake or even the smallest error, it will not cost someone their life. A telecommunicator is not afforded that luxury; they must make sure that every decision is the right one, the first time. Training should be required for an emergency

telecommunicator on an annual basis because emergency events are always evolving. If someone has to call 911, they want to know that their call will be answered by a trained professional.

POSITION

Every day, each emergency telecommunicator faces the challenges and requirements of having the correct answer for every call at a moments' notice. Emergency telecommunicators are seldom afforded the option to stop and look up the answer. Training is needed to maintain their knowledge and skills so every telecommunicator is ready. Technology changes constantly, and if the city is not informed and up to date, then the communication center is not able to utilize the equipment to its fullest capabilities.

Emergency centers started here in the United States in the early 1900s (Burton, 1973). The first 911 call was a simple call made across town from city hall to the police department. They could not know then how technology would evolve from that one simple call then to the thousands of calls that happen every day now. In 1928, portable radios were used to make policing more effective. Then, in the 1930s, they started employing personnel to monitor the radio and phone lines; usually, they had police personnel take turns in the office for this duty. The calls came in over a phone line or in person and were written down for the department leaders to give out to patrolmen at the beginning of each shift. This labor intensive act and the slow response time made it very difficult to track statistical information and keep a running calculation of certain crimes from sheets of paper.

In the beginning, telecommunicators had paper logs to keep track of all the officers on the road and any additional calls holding. Now, with the involvement of computers in police departments, dispatching is much more accurate. Currently, information pertaining to the shift and calls are kept in a computer system. There are hundreds of systems that can be used, and they are known as Computer Aided Dispatch systems or CADS. It is an important key to fighting crime, and the telecommunicator must be able to type and talk, or they will hinder getting the appropriate responder to the emergency in an effective manner.

People believe that a dispatcher is the same as an emergency telecommunicator, but this is not the case. A dispatcher is someone who takes a call and simply gives the same information out, like a dispatcher for a tow truck company. A person can call in for a tow truck, and a tow truck is sent to the person's location. An emergency telecommunicator is a person who must be able to monitor radio traffic, take a call, send out help to the public, or possibly help deliver a baby over the phone.

In 1973, a book was written by Burton on how to put together an electronic and efficient emergency communication center. Looking at the book today, the information would not be helpful to use because technology has changed so drastically. To be proficient today, a current book on technology is needed because in the past 40 years, there have been substantial changes. Communication centers need to be current, or they are not effectively helping the community that they are working to protect.

Emergency personnel and the community have taken the telecommunicator on the other end of the line for granted. It is very important that a telecommunicator is able to handle any emergency that is coming in, either on the phone or over the radio. As a

telecommunicator, they need to know their agency's special language over the radio and how to respond to the codes appropriately. When an officer says, "I am 10-41 and I will be 10-76 to the jail," most people would not know how to respond. In this scenario, the officer just stated, "I am on-duty and headed to the jail." When an officer encounters a subject that is dangerous or violent, a communication technician advises the officer with the code "10-0." By using the code, the officer is now aware to proceed with caution. This is just a sample of the 10 codes that a telecommunicator may need to know. There are over 50 codes that are used, and in some jurisdictions, they have added additional codes. These codes can also change from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, what may be used in New York may not be used in Texas.

A communication center can have top of the line equipment, but if the personnel are not taught effectively how to handle the situations, then the building might as well be empty (Burton, 1973). In some communication centers, the facility is staffed with officers, and in others, it is staffed by civilians. For the past 50 years, there have been several arguments about who should staff communication centers. If an officer is employed in the center, then the department still must send them for further training in communication training. As Burton (1973) pointed out, most of the time, it is easier "to find women whom are willing to work a job with strange hours and for less pay than a man" (Burton, p. 73). So many leaders found that it was more cost effective to send a civilian to communication training than to send an officer. Regardless of who is in the center, it is imperative that the staff be properly trained.

The telecommunicator takes all incoming calls and must be able to obtain pertinent information while getting the proper help for the calling party. Until the

emergency personnel arrive, the telecommunicator must be able to play the role of a trained peace officer, fire fighter, or medical technician. If someone calls stating that their house is on fire, they expect the telecommunicator to instruct them on how to calmly and safely evacuate the structure. If a mother calls hysterical because her child is not breathing, she believes that the telecommunicator will be able to help save the child's life. If an emergency telecommunicator receives a call from a suicidal subject, the telecommunicator must be able to take control and defuse the situation. These are brief scenarios of the type of calls an emergency telecommunicator encounters on a daily basis. Without the proper knowledge and training, the emergency telecommunicator would be unable to successfully help any of these callers. There is specialized training and systems that can be utilized to guide the telecommunicator through each situation to ensure that the best outcome is achieved. Unfortunately, many departments are unable to provide their personnel with the needed training due to strained budgets.

An emergency telecommunicator handles millions of emergencies every year, and if "everything goes right, then lives are saved" (Vangilder, 2010, p. 42). The emergency community needs to unite and make it known that all parties need to be trained and given the support of the leaders in the jurisdictions that telecommunicators help protect. If the leaders would "honor the people who get through the hiring process, by giving them a safe and effective place to learn" (Perin, 2008, p. 27), the community would reap the benefits tenfold. Unfortunately, with the telecommunicator working for less than a fast food worker (Losavio, 2010), it is extremely hard to find and keep people employed for any significant amount of time. The average telecommunicator

only works in the emergency services field for 10 years or less before moving on to a new line of work because they are stretched and pulled in many directions and receives little to no down time.

One of the biggest concerns of the emergency telecommunicator is their liability and that of the departments they serve. One can open almost any monthly law enforcement magazine and find a new case against an emergency telecommunicator stating that the telecommunicator has not reacted to an emergency in the appropriate manner. However, full responsibility does not solely fall upon the telecommunicator.

A telecommunicator can only do what is allowed by the agency's administration. The administrators hold the definitive power to order and place into action the systems that allow the telecommunicator to give pre-arrival instructions. Without those instructions, many emergency telecommunicators do not have the expertise or knowledge to handle the vast spectrum of emergencies. Many emergency telecommunicators do not make it their responsibility to learn how to react to an emergency appropriately. In today's society, it is easier to pass blame to others. In the January 2010 issue of the Dispatch Magazine on-line, there were four articles on the liability an emergency telecommunicator faces in such a complex profession and how many people become discouraged on the first day on the job.

The NBC "Today Show" did a segment on the lack of training by focusing on the death of a two year old boy who died three days after being strangled by a soccer goal in 2007. The mother is claiming that no one gave her instructions to save her child. The TV report was puzzling, "it confused a dispatcher's Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) training with the ability to give CPR instructions" (Allen, 2010). Many

telecommunicators are insulted because the only reports that seem to be on the news are those of negative status. Gary Allen of the Dispatch Monthly stated that after watching the Today Show, the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) president said “this segment did not adequately represent the reality of 911 services in the country” (Allen, 2010). It is important to learn from mistakes, so they are not repeated.

COUNTER POSITION

One of the ways to combat these problems is to hire adequate staffing. It is difficult to send emergency telecommunicators away for training when there are not enough trained personnel to work in the communication center at that time. Emergency telecommunicators should go through three types of training: classroom, on-the-job-training (OJT), and continuing education training (CE) in order to perform at the top of their capabilities (Perin, 2008). In larger agencies, they have the luxury of hiring instructors to teach in house, but smaller agencies do not have the resources to hire instructors for specialized classes. It is already difficult to send them out for basic training requirements. Each state establishes its own training requirements; some require none. Currently, the state of Texas requires 40 hours of training within one year of employment (“State-by-state...,” n.d.). This training only covers information on the Texas Law Enforcement Technology System (TLETS). The problem with these standards is that it does not provide the necessary training for the vast array of situations the emergency telecommunicator handles.

One way to combat the problem with staffing is to cross-train. Agencies have an entire force of people at the police and fire departments that can be used in place of an

emergency telecommunicator. They already have some of the knowledge needed to perform the duties, making it a timely and financial benefit for all parties involved. This would also assist in the event of a natural disaster or mass casualty event, not just in the day-to-day operations. In 1997, Bandics stated it best, “the agency will benefit from having thoroughly trained candidates with a wide range of experience” (para. 6)

Despite the beliefs of society, law enforcement does not have an infinite funding source. When funds become tight, the city administration must cut the budget down, causing the training fund to be curtailed or eliminated. Without funding, the proper training cannot be obtained to not only protect the emergency telecommunicator but the community as well. The high costs of training are forcing countless departments to utilize outdated and inadequate training materials, therefore jeopardizing the welfare of the responders (Perin, 2008).

There are multiple ways to increase funding in most jurisdictions; it, however, takes a lot of hard work and cooperation between departments. There are grants available locally, on the state level, as well as federally. There are some downsides to the process of appropriating funds. These funds must be planned for in advance, and if an agency is granted funding, there can be a lengthy delay in receiving payment. Also, whoever is preparing the grant must already have specific information on what resources the grant funding will be applied towards.

Another way to receive funding is through the 911 phone fee that is collected on every phone line in the United State. The service fees are sent to the 911 emergency districts. In Texas, there a couple of different types of districts; some are managed through the local council of governments and others are 911 boards. The intended

purpose for the fees is to ensure that everyone can dial 911 and have it answered by an educated emergency telecommunicator.

It has come to light that in the past five years some states have taken these funds and used them for other purposes. Allegations were made against Kalkaska County in Michigan, stating the county was using the 911 Training funds for other activities to include paying for the Sheriff's clerical work (Emergency Telephone Service Committee, 2003). The misuse of the training money prevented the telecommunicators of Kalkaska County to attend training courses although there were numerous police officers allowed to attend their training courses. This is a grave injustice to the community. Without these funds, it causes great obstacles for emergency agencies that cannot afford the proper training or equipment needed to do their critical and vital job.

RECOMMENDATION

Most jurisdictions are currently facing a huge down-turn in sales taxes, which strains every department's training budget. In some cases, this shortfall eliminates some staffing and training budgets altogether. Therefore, these jurisdictions do not have the resources to fund new training for their emergency telecommunicators.

Excuses for not mandating training will continue until the need becomes personal to those who make the big decisions. For instance, an agency may face litigation due to a mishandled call. Or perhaps an official faces a real life emergency and suddenly needs to reach emergency services. Only then does the importance of proper and thorough training become relevant to those who decide policies and allocate funding.

An agency is only as strong as its weakest link. If the first person in the line of contact between those in need and those who can help is unable to communicate

effectively, a breakdown begins immediately. It is imperative that officials not only realize the significance of the communications personnel, but also understand the importance of the proper training of these individuals. Adequate training can be the difference between having someone on the line who can merely reassure the caller while they get help on the way and someone who can confidently direct the caller and emergency personnel. This distinction may seem subtle, but it can be the difference between an agency being the hot topic on a morning talk show or a panicking mother being instructed properly on how to perform CPR on her suffocating child.

Appropriate preparation and instruction is vital to having a strong chain of emergency communication in a community. The industry needs advocates to fight for adequate funding to be allocated for suitable education opportunities. There must be someone that is willing to take a stand and make it mandatory for there to be training on an annual basis in order to protect the community, the police officers, and other emergency personnel.

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