

Training for 911 Dispatchers:

Potential new employees are required to pass the same psychological testing as Police Officers due to the types of events they will be exposed to over the phone or radio. They are required to remain calm, professional, and accurately relay all information to the responding Officers, Firefighters and EMS personnel. Incorrect or delayed relay can greatly affect the safety of those responders.

Oftentimes there is no public safety experience required for Dispatchers, however, there are numerous trainings that need to occur after an employee is hired.

- CPR Certification
- Emergency Medical Dispatcher (EMD) Certification
- BCA Portals Certification
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)
- FEMA ICS Series
- ARMER Radio Training
- Individual Agency Policies
 - There can often be numerous agencies with different policies being dispatched by the same Center.

Mental Health Emergencies:

While we do not have specific numbers to be able to track these events, these continue to be one of the greatest increases in daily events and are very time consuming. The time-consuming piece of it is when a Dispatcher is required to stay on the phone with an individual seeking help to ensure and oftentimes reassure them that help is on the way. Individuals seeking mental health help will often call for help but will not disclose their location. This requires the Dispatcher to contact the cell phone carrier provider to request them to “ping” the cell phone for the location. Patrol Sergeant approval is needed to begin that process, a form needs to be completed, faxed back, followed up by a phone call to get the data from the cell provider (if they deem it an emergency per their procedures). There are times when a Dispatcher is asked to repeatedly “ping” a cell phone when an individual begins to purposely move their location. These types of calls can also be the most frustrating to Dispatchers due to the nature of the emergency and not being able to locate the person quickly. Most people calling for help want you to help them and will give you their address, but this is not the case with these individuals.

We have had Calltakers on phone calls with distraught individuals for longer than 30 minutes. During that time, the Calltaker is required to either put that caller on hold to answer other phone calls or just cannot answer other phone calls. The overflow phone calls then go to the Radio Dispatcher, who is not able to intently monitor the radio during the time he/she is on the phone. This scenario of the Radio Dispatcher being on a phone call happens frequently throughout the day and is a significant officer safety liability due to them being the officer’s lifeline.

Due to the Travis’ Law that was implemented on July 1, 2021, Dispatchers are now required to triage to determine if the appropriate response is law enforcement or a mental health crisis team. This is also time consuming and shunts workload to remaining staff.

Unplanned Events:

Various police agencies have asked numerous times for a separate monitored radio channel for an unplanned major event. The Dispatchers are not able to provide a monitored channel, therefore the event goes forth on this unmonitored channel and requires the Officers to have to switch their radio back to the main channel to relay information to the Dispatcher. This is a known Officer-safety concern, and this type of scenario is very stressful for the Dispatchers to have to experience and shoulder. In an attempt to avoid this scenario, the Dispatchers will make every effort to monitor those additional channels anyway.

Language Barriers:

The Dispatchers take phone calls daily from individuals who have a significant language barrier. During these phone calls every effort is made to decipher the nature of their call, which further prolongs the duration of the phone call. Oftentimes the language barriers will require a Dispatcher to contact an interpreter to have a three-way call with the interpreter relaying the information back and forth between the Dispatcher and the caller. Three-way calling becomes extremely difficult when a caller is reporting an emergency and gets frustrated when the Dispatcher is not able to understand their emergency quickly. This is also a very stressful scenario for the Dispatcher when they feel as if they are unable to provide help and assistance as fast as usual.

Towards Zero Death (TZD):

This is a state funded program designed to increase the safety of our roadways. There can be an unlimited number of officers who work at any time and all of these traffic stops start a CAD event monitored by the Dispatch Center. While TZD does provide overtime dollars for an extra Radio Dispatcher to work as part of the enforcement, these shifts are no longer sought out due to the amount of overtime being worked to just maintain our current minimum staffing level in the Center. Officers can check on for duty at any time to work these special details and when there is no additional Radio Dispatcher available to absorb all of these traffic stops, it falls on to the Radio Dispatcher.

Emergency Radio Traffic and Radio Concerns:

Due to the increase in the types of officer safety calls that are being responded to, the officers are more frequently requesting the Radio Dispatcher to go on "emergency traffic only". This means that the only radio transmissions that are allowed are those pertaining to the emergent incident. During emergency radio traffic, the Dispatcher is required to monitor the radio even more so intently and type any information into the Mobile Chat feature that is monitored by all officers on their laptops in their squad cars. During emergency traffic only situations, the Radio Dispatcher cannot answer any phone calls, which requires callers to be on hold longer or phone calls to potentially go unanswered.

Fire and EMS incidents continue to increase. These critical events are currently not being monitored by a separate designated Dispatcher, leaving room for missed information and mayday calls that are not monitored.

This Center is subject to monitoring 14 radio channels in the event we are hailed on any of them, in addition to the channels already in use.

Dispatcher PTO Usage, Work-Life Balance, and General Stress:

There are numerous hours of PTO that have been denied or only a partial shift approved due to not having the minimum number of staff working. This requires Dispatchers to have to cancel or miss family events or switch shifts with another Dispatcher. Switching shifts does

not allow for PTO to be used and increases stress and burnout, all while greatly decreasing overall morale. This results in more frequent sick calls and mandatory overtime to fill vacancies.

Due to the Dispatch Center currently being understaffed, the Dispatchers are working non-stop at an extremely high rate of speed, multitasking for 12 hours straight, with little to no breaks to eat or even use the restroom. These types of working conditions are what can quickly lead to burnout. The severity of the incidents that have become every day occurrences are only going to increase and require even closer attention to detail. With the volume of data each Dispatcher is responsible for, attention to detail is becoming a harder task to get accomplished and mistakes are happening.

Dispatchers cannot give the public the uninterrupted service that is expected and is demanded due to being understaffed, high call volume, and increased incidents. In recent years our Center changed to an ACD phone environment. This allowed us to the opportunity to learn that over 10,000 non-emergency phone calls were disconnected prior to one of our Dispatchers being able to answer it.

Technology is Ever-Changing:

Technology changes are constant and the more technology that law enforcement has at their disposal, the more staff it can take to monitor the technology to be used to its full potential. Text-to-911 is live in most Centers in Minnesota, and video and other technology capabilities are on the heels of texting. These are not optional things to monitor but required.

T-CPR is mandatory for Dispatch Centers to either provide pre-arrival medical instruction for cardiac-related medicals, or transfer to a PSAP who can provide that service. Our Center is equipped with the tools that the Dispatchers need to effectively offer pre-arrival instructions, however, there are times that this is done simultaneously with other tasks and this needs to be offered to the callers without interruption.

Officer Response Times:

Dispatch Centers are consistently understaffed. This information is verified by MN DPS-ECN using the Erlang Concept. Our Dispatch Center should have 8-9 calltakers working for our call volume and we often have 2-3 calltakers working. When there are not enough Dispatchers to answer the phone calls, the calls get answered slower, hence a slower response time. It is vital to remember that the response can only start when an officer has been dispatched. If the information is not received due to callers staying on hold, the response time greatly suffers.

87% of the 911 calls received in our Center were from wireless devices. Wireless devices do not provide the detailed location information and requires the Dispatcher to spend extra time verifying that information on the map and with the caller, if they are cooperative. Dispatchers can substantially contribute to apprehending a suspect for crimes in progress due to being able to offer real-time updates to the responding Officers. This is a great statistic; however, this also requires extra time spent on the phone with callers and other callers waiting on hold.

All of these events are manageable except when they are occurred simultaneously, which is often the case. Heightened stress quickly multiplies due to the pressures of these individual events occurring together.