

# Dispatcher

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**Dispatchers** are communications personnel responsible for receiving and transmitting pure and reliable messages, tracking vehicles and equipment, and recording other important information.<sup>[1]</sup> A number of organizations, including police and fire departments, emergency medical services, taxicab providers, trucking companies, train stations, and public utility companies, use dispatchers to relay information and coordinate their operations. Essentially, the dispatcher is the "conductor" of the force, and is responsible for the direction of all units within it.

## Contents

- 1 Types of dispatchers
  - 1.1 Public Safety Telecommunicator
  - 1.2 Transportation and service dispatchers
  - 1.3 Airline or flight dispatchers
- 2 Working conditions and environment
- 3 Training and employment
- 4 See also
- 5 External links
- 6 References

## Types of dispatchers

### Public Safety Telecommunicator

*Public safety dispatchers* (also known as emergency dispatchers, Telecommunicators or 9-1-1 dispatchers) receive calls from individuals who need assistance from Firefighters, Police Officers, and Emergency Medical Services. Once information is obtained from the caller, these dispatchers activate the services necessary to respond to the nature of the call for help. Dispatchers are an integral part of the organization's success. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 36% of all dispatchers employed in the United States in 2004 were public safety dispatchers.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Transportation and service dispatchers

A number of other organizations use dispatchers to respond to service calls, coordinate transportation schedules, and to organize the delivery of materials. *Truck dispatchers* are employed by trucking companies to monitor the delivery of freight over long distances and coordinate delivery pickup and drop-off schedules. *Bus and train dispatchers* monitor the schedules of their respective transportation services and address any problems that arise during their operations. *Tow-truck dispatchers* respond to calls for emergency roadside assistance. *Gas and water service dispatchers*



A German dispatcher at work with an accident involving a tram.

monitor their respective utilities and receive calls for emergency assistance that involve gas lines and water mains. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 26% of all dispatchers employed in the United States in 2004 worked for transportation and warehousing industries.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Airline or flight dispatchers

A flight dispatcher is a person responsible for planning and monitoring the progress of an aircraft journey. In airline operations, depending on the type of certification the airline has, and depending on where the airline is based, both the pilot in command and the dispatcher are legally responsible for the safety of a flight. A dispatcher may have the authority to delay, divert or cancel a flight at any time, and a flight might not be able to be released without the signature of both the pilot in command and the dispatcher, again depending on the jurisdiction.

A dispatcher typically must be licensed by the aviation authority of a country. In order to obtain the licence, the candidate must demonstrate extensive knowledge of meteorology and aviation, to a level comparable to the holder of an airline transport pilot license.

The dispatcher uses sophisticated software tools to monitor the flight's progress and advises the flight crew of any circumstances that might affect flight safety. Shared responsibility adds a layer of checks and balances to aircraft operation and greatly improves safety.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the US, licensed flight dispatchers have to demonstrate extensive aviation knowledge equal to that of Airline Transport Pilot License (ATPL) holders (the FAA ATPL written exam and the FAA Dispatcher written exam are identical).

In some jurisdictions of the US, the dispatching duties and responsibilities are designated to flight *followers*. The main difference between a flight dispatcher and a flight follower is that the latter does not share legal responsibility for the operation of a flight. Also, followers are not required to attain a flight dispatcher's license, although they are usually encouraged to do so.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Working conditions and environment

Dispatchers are responsible for monitoring all of the communications within a specific geographic area. Public safety dispatchers are responsible for all emergency communications that occur within the jurisdiction of their department. These workers receive and document incoming calls, transmit messages to appropriate personnel, and keep logs of the daily activities of their personnel. Public safety dispatchers usually work in a police station, a fire station, or a hospital.<sup>[1]</sup> Other dispatchers work in centralized communication centers associated with their specific company or service.

All types of dispatchers work with telephones, radios, ACARS, and computers on a routine basis. They also monitor traffic patterns or other outside activity via video surveillance. As a result of sitting for long periods and using such equipment, dispatchers can develop eye strain and back problems. Many dispatchers must also work irregular hours to provide 24-hour service, which includes night, weekend, and holiday hours.<sup>[1]</sup>

Public safety dispatchers are usually the first point of contact between emergency services and the public. When receiving incoming calls for help, these dispatchers must ascertain the nature, location, and extent of the emergency. The working conditions of a public safety dispatcher may be particularly stressful compared to others because handling a call in an inappropriate manner may delay or misdirect other emergency personnel, which could result in serious injury or even death.<sup>[1]</sup> A dispatcher error in a

San Juan County, New Mexico vehicle crash, for example, may have cost lives in May 2006. The dispatcher in San Juan County was criticized for not using GPS tracking to locate a van that crashed with six people inside. The dispatcher received eleven calls from the trapped crash victims. By the time rescuers located the van four hours later, all six people were dead.<sup>[4]</sup> Callers requesting emergency assistance are often in a state of heightened emotional distress, which makes it difficult to obtain the information needed to handle the call appropriately. In the San Juan County incident, the crash victims did not know where they were.<sup>[4]</sup>

Human error can also produce deadly results for other types of dispatchers. A train dispatcher in Spain was found guilty of negligent homicide for a head-on train collision that occurred in June 2003.<sup>[5]</sup> Nineteen people died and forty-eight were injured in a crash where the dispatcher allowed a passenger train to leave a station when a freight train was approaching the station on the same line.<sup>[5]</sup>

Like very similar controlling jobs, such as air traffic controllers, dispatcher positions can be notoriously stressful and full of non-stop work.

## Training and employment

Employment as a dispatcher does not usually require a level of education higher than a high school diploma. Employers prefer candidates with computer and clerical skills, communication skills, and the ability to work fast under pressure.<sup>[1]</sup>

Candidates for employment as public safety dispatchers may be required to pass written, oral, or performance tests and are governed by state or local regulations. Public safety dispatchers may also have to obtain certifications and attend additional training before they are employed by state or local governments to dispatch for police, fire, or emergency medical services. The level of training required for these dispatchers is typically the most extensive in comparison to other dispatch positions.<sup>[1]</sup>

A standard certification requirement for public safety dispatchers is Terminal Operator certification for access to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database system. Access to this database system often allows additional access to the state-level system comparable to NCIC which allows public safety dispatchers to access motor vehicle registration and drivers license information as well as wants or warrants by various law enforcement agencies both statewide and national.

In addition to certifications, specialized training is also required or appropriated to public safety dispatchers. As public safety dispatchers are the first contact made between the public and emergency services, public safety dispatchers need to be able to extract a vast array of information out of the caller. Such specialized training can include: suicide intervention, hostage negotiation, bomb threats, tactical dispatching (for SWAT teams), domestic violence and domestic and foreign terrorism countermeasures. Many are also trained as Emergency Medical Dispatchers, able to give first aid instructions to victims or families prior to EMS arrival.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 266,000 people were employed as dispatchers in 2004.<sup>[1]</sup> Employment for dispatcher is projected to grow as fast as the average (an increase of 9 to 17 percent) through the year 2014. In addition, it is expected that a number of current dispatchers will either transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force, which will result in an increase of openings.<sup>[1]</sup>

## See also

- ACARS
- Air traffic controller
- Emergency Medical Dispatcher
- Northern 911
- Women in firefighting

## External links

- Complete list of FAA-Approved FAR Part 65 Aircraft Dispatcher Certification Courses ([http://www.faa.gov/about/office\\_org/headquarters\\_offices/avs/offices/afs/afs200/branches/afs220](http://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/avs/offices/afs/afs200/branches/afs220)).

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Categories: Aviation licenses and certifications | Occupations in aviation | Office and administrative support occupations | Transport occupations

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