

THE EMPOWERED TELECOMMUNICATOR

USING DISCRETION WISELY WHEN A CALL DEFIES POLICY, PROTOCOL OR PROCEDURE

BY ROBERT VAWSER, RPL

Many dispatch agencies around the world have a set of policies and procedures in place that addresses what should be done when telecommunicators are faced with a given situation. Some agencies have also adopted a set of dispatching protocols that assist the telecommunicator with gathering information from and offering instruction to the caller prior to arrival of responders. Being well versed in agency policy, procedure and protocol is important for all telecommunicators.

Much attention is given to making sure that every telecommunicator knows their agency's policies and procedures, as well as any dispatching protocols that may be in place. New hires should receive a copy of the policy and procedure manual for their review and use and attend a class on the proper use of protocols. Policies and procedures are commonly seen written as standard operating procedures (SOPs), standard operating guidelines (SOGs), and policies and procedures (P&P).¹ Dispatching protocols, such as the APCO EMD guide cards, are usually adapted and maintained on a set of nationally recognized standards.

Study in policy and procedure can be offered in a formal training class from the agency or through self-study by the staff. Utilization of protocols is normally delivered in a classroom session in which a review of the protocol is offered to promote understanding, as well as an opportunity to role play scenarios utilizing the guide card instructions.

POLICY, PROCEDURE & PROTOCOL: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

It is important to understand the differences between policy, procedure and protocol.

A *policy* is a guide to thinking. It typically states what should happen in very general terms. An example of a

policy is, "The telecommunicator must be courteous to all callers." There are no guidelines, but it is clear from the statement that the telecommunicator must be courteous.¹

A *procedure* is a guide to action. The procedure is a specific guideline designed to achieve the overall purpose of the policy. An example of a procedure is, "The telecommunicator will answer all non-emergency phone calls by the third ring and identify the agency and themselves." This tells the telecommunicator exactly what they must do when taking calls on the non-emergency phone line.¹

A *protocol* is a detailed outline of the steps to be followed in a given situation. Normally the protocol is written in a "what to do next" fashion, typically moving from an easier task to a more complex task or to achieve an outcome through completion of the steps in the protocol. An example of a protocol would be the APCO EMD guide cards. These offer the telecommunicator the ability to follow the guide for a particular medical emergency to offer assistance until help arrives on scene.²

All three of these items are written for an agency to do one thing, minimize risk of litigation. By following the rules as they are written, the telecommunicator is able to help keep themselves and the agency out of a potential lawsuit. We all know it is crucial to follow the rules,

but what happens when a call goes outside of your agency policy, procedure and protocol.

During training new employees are introduced to policies, procedures and protocols. The telecommunicator is responsible for learning and knowing them. The better we know them, the better we will be prepared to handle situations that are *not* covered by a policy, procedure or protocol.¹

Local agencies have the ability to create and control their own policies and procedures. In looking at the APCO EMD protocols, they are written to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and ASTM International standards. It is the responsibility of the agency to control their EMD program, incidentally through policy and procedure.

Policies, procedures and protocols are all great to have in place, but there must be a method set to evaluate and update all three on a regular basis. Some agencies will review policies and procedures on an annual basis, whereas others will update a section in rotating years. Of course, with any change made in the agency, policies and procedures must be updated to reflect the most recent and up-to-date information. The APCO EMD protocols are updated as needed or every couple of years as change dictates. The CPR section is updated

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every five years as the American Heart Association (AHA) completes its updates.

Agencies using the APCO EMD guide card system must meet compliance to be certified and legally backed. Items that are reviewed include making sure EMD certifications are current, guide cards are updated and current, a quality assurance (QA) program is in place, there is a current EMD-I or EMD-M on staff, and an agency self-audit is completed and submitted to APCO every two years.

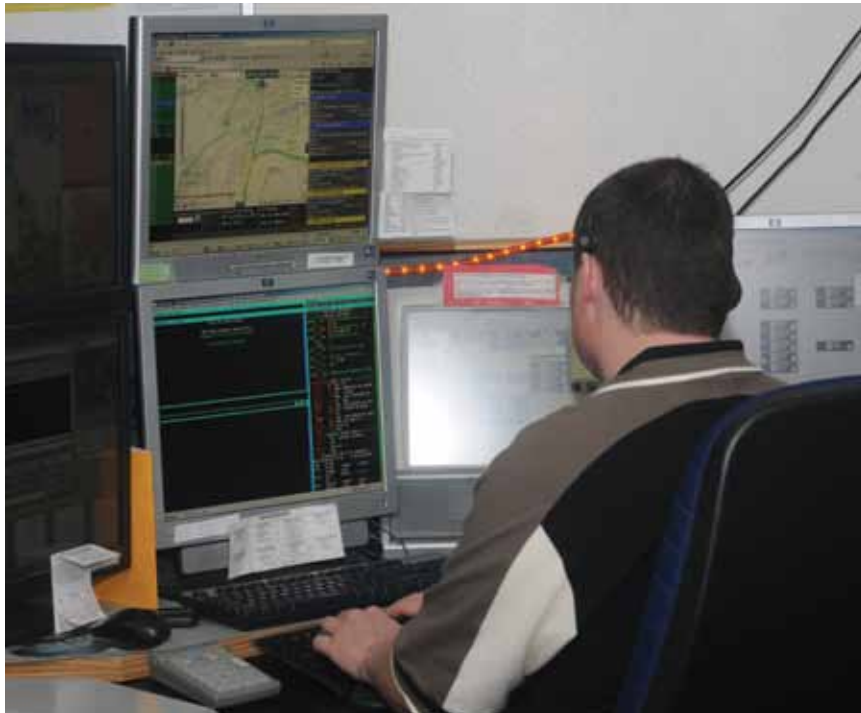
OUTSIDE POLICY, PROCEDURE OR PROTOCOL

You are sitting in your PSAP at your work station when an earthquake occurs in your jurisdiction. Naturally, the next thing that happens is the phone lines light up. Some of those calls will be needs for fire, police and EMS. Then, you have those requests that are in a gray area, uncovered by policy.

Do you follow your feelings on calls at times?

"9-1-1, where is your emergency?" On the other end of the phone, the female caller was able to give only the address, which was then followed by screaming. The line then disconnected. Attempted callbacks yielded a series of busy signals. Something inside was telling me that instead of just sending law enforcement to check the call, which was policy, that I should send fire and EMS as well. When the responding police officer arrived in the area, she reported there was a residential structure fire. The decision to send all assistance was a good one and eliminated a delay in response by the fire department.

Familiarity with policies, procedures and protocols will assist in making decisions in which a policy, procedure or protocol doesn't exist. Having the knowledge and experience is critical when it comes to calltaker, telecommunicator and responder actions on incidents that fall in the gray areas. I knew that I was stepping outside of policy by sending police, fire and EMS to the call I had just taken. My training and knowledge, and relying on a little bit of instinct aided me in making a decision to send an all-out response rather than just the police to check the situation.



Empowered telecommunicators think, make decisions and act on the basis of knowledge and experience.

EMPOWERING OUR STAFF

What does it mean to empower people? Empowering personnel means that we are giving them the opportunity to think, act and make decisions that are based on knowledge and experience. When we empower employees, we aren't restricting them to a rigid set of rules, but instead motivating them and their abilities to expand their potential. In short, knowledge is empowerment.

The best description I have seen is an article written by Dr. Karen Lawson, a consultant for leadership, business and ethics. Lawson says, "When you empower your employees, you create an environment where people are encouraged to explore, discover, take risks and develop trust." She also identifies four keys for empowering people: involve them in decisions, ask them to participate in planning, praise them, and continually provide training and support.³

In an interview on policeone.com, columnist Dick Fairburn talks about how to empower telecommunicators when it comes to critical incidents. Fairburn mentions that it is important that telecommunicators know what responders need during the response. This includes obtaining essential

information from the caller and asking essential questions of the responders. Fairburn also discusses the importance of the flow of information gathering. For responders, the best source of information is what is being relayed from the dispatch center. "Dispatchers are only able to relay the information they are receiving," says Fairburn.⁴ He also states that it is important to empower telecommunicators to relay any information that is known to the responders. When a telecommunicator who has 20 years of experience has information on previous responses to a given location and sends the officer with one year of experience, it is crucial that information be given to the responders. Part of this comes from the respect that is gained through interaction of telecommunicators riding along with police officers and likewise, police officers spending time with telecommunicators in the dispatch center.

Although the short clip included on a site I was reviewing was dealing with developing capable young people, the information was very applicable to the concept of empowering people in everyday life. The presenter H. Stephen Glenn is internationally known for his work in education, mental health

and training. During the viewing of the short video clip, Glenn says, "When you invite and encourage a person's assistance in thinking through or resolving a problem, you empower them and show your respect for them."⁵

There are five things that can help our employees feel empowered:

- Give compliments that are meant. Be open and direct in compliments. People will be able to see through phony compliments.
- Be sincere. When we are sincere, people feel appreciated.
- Nurture others. If we see people who have talent, we should encourage that talent.
- Have suggestions ready. Let everyone's opinion be heard, and be ready to offer feedback when necessary.
- Encourage others. Those who have talent will grow that talent when encouraged and will wither away when criticized.

I asked a college classmate this question, and she said when someone asks in training when a situation isn't covered under policy, procedure or protocol, the most frequent answer is to rely on your training. When the decisions we make are under legal scrutiny, we will be compared to what anyone else in our position would have done.

BECOME BETTER VERSED

There are several ways that you can become more versed in policy, procedure and protocol. One method is driven by the administration of the department making it a requirement of the personnel to perform mandatory reading assignments each quarter. The reading assignment would alternate between all three areas. The reading assignment would be followed with a short quiz to ensure the reading assignment was completed and there is understanding of the policy, procedure or protocol.

One of the agencies that utilized this method would require reading of a particular policy or section of policies one quarter. The next quarter employees would be required to read a section on procedures, which

would be followed by protocols in the next quarter.

As a training coordinator, I developed on-shift training. The staff would participate in developing short training sessions that involved low-frequency, high-liability incidents. This accomplished two things critical to the operations on the floor. First, it gave the telecommunicator delivering the training an opportunity to research and prepare the session based on the policy, procedure or protocol regarding their chosen topic. Normally, the telecommunicator would select a topic they

needed to become stronger in knowing. They would confer with the supervisor or training coordinator to assist in developing the training session.

I developed the on-shift training for our agency to be short in duration with a given time for delivery, discussion, demonstration and time for questions. The normal time frame for an on-shift training session was no more than 30 minutes. If necessary for busy times, we would offer the training at different times during the shift to make sure everyone could participate.






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One other method to use to get staff versed in policy, procedure or protocol is to develop a trivia game with questions from any of the three sections. Someone acting as the moderator could ask the questions and award points or give goodies to those who answer the questions correctly. This can be a fun, friendly competition between telecommunicators.

The important thing to remember when using any of these methods is that there has to be a measurement of understanding following the assignment—a demonstration of competency, a Q&A session or a quiz—which is then kept on file with the employee training record.

Judith Weshinsky-Price, communications manager for the city of Amarillo, Texas, says they tie policies, procedures and protocols back to the mission statement and ethics of the department so the telecommunicator understands the reason why they are written. With that



There can never be a policy or procedure written for every scenario telecommunicators may face.

understanding, the telecommunicator can make a decision when it comes to calls that fall in the gray area. "We don't stress what the policy is but why we have it and what our priorities are as far as our goals and expectations,"

Weshinsky-Price says.

A participant in a leadership class I attended said, "Dispatchers that have the most success when needing to break from protocol are the ones who have a real working knowledge of all

the resources. They don't need to be trained in the field, but they need to be familiar with all the equipment and personnel. If you know what every unit is capable of, you have the tools to make an educated decision on how best to handle the situation."

GRAY AREAS

Will you be the one that answers the call that requires you to step outside of policy, procedure or protocol? What do you say when the call falls in the gray area? Should you stay within the guidelines as they are written? Do you have adequate knowledge, training and experience to make a decision when the call falls in the gray area? Are there tools in place to make sure that you are covered by your decision?

You may have to step outside your agency's policies, procedures or protocols at some point in your career. It is important to remember that a policy or procedure can never be written for everything that we will have to deal with. Telecommunicators may feel

uncomfortable stepping outside of policy, procedure or protocol. It is important to become familiar with your agency's policies, procedures and protocols. All three are intertwined. A policy and a procedure can be written on the use of protocols, which enforce each other.

It is important to have methods in place to inform personnel on policies, procedures and protocols. Having the knowledge of what is contained in the policies, procedures and protocols, as well as your training, education and experience will help you make a decision, even when that decision falls to the gray area. **|PSC|**

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RESOURCES

1. APCO Institute Inc.. "Introduction to Your New Career." *Public Safety Telecommunicator*

1. 6th. Reprint. Daytona Beach, Fla. APCO Institute Inc., 2005.
2. "Clinical Protocol." *Hospital Services, DGHS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2012. www.hsmgdghs-bd.org/clinical_protocol.htm.
3. Lawson K. "Growing greatness: Series of articles to cultivate truly outstanding leaders." *4 Keys to Employee Empowerment*. Lawson Consulting Group Inc., n.d. Web. 27 Dec. 2012. www.growinggreatness.com/gg_articles/Empowering_Employees.pdf.
4. "PoliceOneTV—Empowering dispatchers in a critical incident." Police Officers, Cops & Law Enforcement. PoliceOne. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2012. www.policeone.com/policeonetv/videos/5956382-empowering-dispatchers-in-a-critical-incident.
5. "Empowering people—Resources for developing capable people." N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2012. www.empoweringpeople.com.
6. "What does it really mean to empower your staff? Or do you run a disempowered workplace?" *Anthill Online—Where ideas and business meet*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2012. <http://anthillonline.com/what-does-it-really-mean-to-empower-your-staff-or-do-you-run-a-disempowered-workplace>.

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- High school diploma or equivalent
- Type a minimum of 40 wpm with accuracy
- Prior emergency dispatching or similar work experience preferred
- Previous CCIS, CAD and EMD experience

preferred

- Thorough knowledge of Boulder County and surrounding areas preferred
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Special requirements: Must successfully complete and pass a thorough application and background investigation, polygraph examination, drug screen, audiogram (hearing test) and psychological evaluation.



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Class#	Class Location	Dates	
Active Shooter Incidents for Public Safety Communications \$199			
34746	Malone, N.Y.	April 18	
34820	Fort Smith, Ark.	April 22	
35081	Hopkinton, Mass.	April 22	
34892	Stuart, Fla.	April 26	
35080	Sturtevant, Wis.	April 29	
35009	Abilene, Kan.	May 2	
35006	Bradenton, Fla.	May 9	
35181	Polson, Mont.	May 21	
34228	Online	Starts May 22	
35183	Polson, Mont.	May 23	
34959	Arkansas City, Kan.	May 29	
34960	Arkansas City, Kan.	May 30	
35064	Pueblo, Colo.	May 31	
35070	Cambridge, Mass.	June 12	
35011	Webster City, Iowa	June 21	

CALEA Public Safety Communications Accreditation Manager

34169	Online	Starts Sept. 4
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Communications Center Supervisor, 4th Ed. **\$349**

34239	Online	Starts April 17
34933	Georgetown, Ohio	April 23–25
34240	Online	Starts May 1
35050	Fort Smith, Ark.	May 4–6
34847	Nashville, Tenn.	May 6–8
34241	Online	Starts May 15
34364	Bountiful, Utah	May 20–22
34242	Online	Starts May 29
34567	New Braunfels, Texas	June 5–7

Communications Training Officer 5th Ed. **\$349**

34259	Online	Starts April 17
35016	Chaska, Minn.	April 29–May 1
34261	Online	Starts May 1
34494	Sebastian, Fla.	May 8–10
34263	Online	Starts May 15
34264	Online	Starts May 29
35235	Calumet City, Ill.	June 12–14
34266	Online	Starts June 12
35013	Lake Mary, Fla.	June 18–20
35052	Fort Smith, Ark.	June 22–24

Communications Training Officer 5th Ed., Instructor **\$459**

34784	Effingham, S.C.	May 6–10
34293	Online	Starts May 8
35236	Charlotte, N.C.	June 24–28

Crisis Negotiations for Telecommunicators **\$199**

34280	Online	Starts May 1
34495	Sebastian, Fla.	May 15

Customer Service in Today's Public Safety Communications Center **\$199**

34531	Medford, Mass.	March 21
34276	Online	Starts April 3
35049	Fort Smith, Ark.	May 20
35182	Polson, Mont.	May 22
35068	Cambridge, Mass.	June 10

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Disaster Operations & the Communication Center **\$199**

34819	Fort Smith, Ark.	April 8
34288	Online	Starts May 8
34496	Sebastian, Fla.	May 16
35069	Cambridge, Mass.	June 11

Emergency Medical Dispatcher 5.2 **\$379**

34344	Online	Starts April 24
34345	Online	Starts May 22
34346	Online	Starts June 6

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34354	Online	Starts April 17
34791	Effingham, S.C.	May 6–10
34355	Online	Starts May 15
34356	Online	Starts June 12
35237	Charlotte, N.C.	June 24-28

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34333	Online	Starts May 8
34334	Online	Starts June 5

Fire Service Communications 1st Ed. **\$379**

34760	Online	Starts April 10
34618	Missouri City, Texas	May 13–16
34761	Online	Starts June 12

Fire Service Communications 1st Ed., Instructor **\$459**

34792	Effingham, S.C.	May 6–10
34302	Online	Starts May 8
35238	Charlotte, N.C.	June 24–28

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35240		Starts April 1
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Leadership Certificate Program—Registered Public Safety Leader **\$995****

Public Safety Telecommunicator 1, 6th Ed. **\$309**

34569	West Olive, Mich.	April 8–12
34320	Online	Starts April 10
34321	Online	Starts April 17
35219	Fort Smith, Ark.	April 27–May 1
34322	Online	Starts May 1
34323	Online	Starts May 15
34324	Online	Starts May 29
34325	Online	Starts June 5
34552	Medford, Mass.	Starts June 10

Public Safety Telecommunicator 1, 6th Ed., Canada **\$359**

34549	Online	Starts June 26
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Public Safety Telecommunicator 1, 6th Ed. Instructor **\$459**

34747	Effingham, S.C.	May 6–10
34306	Online	Starts May 8
35234	Charlotte, N.C.	June 24–28

Public Safety Communications Staffing & Employee Retention **\$199**

34285	Online	Starts May 1
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35053	Fort Smith, Ark.	June 17

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CDE EXAM #34049: THE EMPOWERED TELECOMMUNICATOR

1. A policy is a:
a. Guide to action
b. Guide to thinking
c. Standard guideline
d. National standard

2. A procedure is a:
a. Guide to action
b. Guide to thinking
c. Standard guideline
d. A required step in job completion

3. A protocol does not outline the steps to be followed in given situations.
a. True
b. False

4. Newly hired telecommunicators should be introduced to policies, procedures and protocols_____.
a. As incidents occur
b. When a question arises
c. During training
d. There is no need to train new hires on policies, procedures and protocols.

5. The APCO EMD protocols are written to:
a. OSHA standards
b. NHTSA standards
c. ASTM standards
d. NFPA

6. Who is responsible for creating and updating policies and procedures?
a. APCO
b. NENA
c. Each agency
d. None of the above

7. Knowledge and experience should not be considered when it comes to varying from policies and procedures.
a. True
b. False

8. Empowering personnel means giving employees opportunity to_____:
a. Act
b. Think
c. Make decisions
d. Be insubordinate

9. Which of the following is a suggestion for making employees feel empowered?
a. Be sincere and give compliments
b. Be short and curt
c. Be mean and discourteous
d. Do not encourage or nurture employees

10. Which of the following was not a suggestion for becoming better versed in policies, procedures and protocols?
a. Mandatory reading requirements
b. On-shift training
c. Games
d. Group study
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