One is a recent high school graduate, eager to start a career helping people. Another spent four years serving in the military, familiar with how to take direction. A third is embarking on a new journey, shifting from years of hospitality work to a role in public safety. Yet another joined the comm center after five years of service as a telecommunicator in a neighboring state. In a room nearby, veteran telecommunicators manipulate ever-changing technology to implement constantly evolving response plans sending help to increasingly dynamic incidents.

One challenge unites these individuals. It’s a challenge that, in turn, affects the PSAP manager: how will each person become prepared to be successful at the console, to use their unique abilities and talents to direct the right help to the right place at the right time?

APCO Communications Center and 9-1-1 Services Manager Crystal McDuffie knows the solution — APCO’s Agency Training Program (ATP) Certification.

McDuffie says, “ATP certification helps when training new hires and completing continuing education for veteran employees.”

Certification helps with one of the biggest challenges facing many communications centers — employee retention, according to McDuffie. “ATP addresses the problem with retaining new hires, so they can successfully complete the training program and do the job.”

Announced as a project in 1995 at the annual APCO conference in Detroit, Michigan, the ATP program was part of a series of initiatives APCO undertook to address employee retention and staff development. Administrators from PSAPs of all sizes united to standardize how training should be accomplished, despite the methods, format and provider.

The result of these efforts yielded APCO ANSI Standard 3.103.1 — Minimum Training Standards for Public Safety Telecommunicators. In 2004, this standard expanded to a certification that could be earned by PSAPs able to prove compliance with each component. The certification program was announced to APCO members at the association’s annual conference in Montreal. The certification program was revised in 2006 and 2010, ultimately evolving to its most recent moniker — Agency Training Program Certification. Communications centers that achieve ATP certification are recognized at APCO’s annual conference.

The certification program focuses on 11 areas, divided into chapters that include training program administration, definitions, candidate requirements, roles and responsibilities, liability, interpersonal communications, communication center technologies, radio, call processing techniques, call classification, and dispatch techniques. Each chapter features subcategories covering
a range of initial and continuing education topics relevant to new and veteran personnel.

In order to be recognized at the annual conference, agencies must submit completed application packets by December 1 of the previous calendar year, along with a non-refundable application fee of $500. Upon successful completion of the process, agencies receive a plaque, local media releases identifying their achievement and certification valid for three years.

“This certification says your agency stands above the rest,” said Rick Thomas, chair of the Agency Training Program Certification Committee and Director of Emergency Communications at the Apex Police Department in Apex, N.C. “It says your staff performs at a higher level. That you’re going above and beyond, setting the bar high for your agency.”

The committee is composed of PSAP professionals who review applications from emergency communications centers interested in certifying they are operating training programs that meet or exceed the national standard.

Thomas is very familiar with agencies successfully earning certification. As of May 2018 nearly 10 percent of the 79 certified training programs — more than any other state — are North Carolina PSAPs. The total number of certified agencies is certain to rise, because the committee is currently reviewing the largest number of applications submitted in the program’s history — more than 30 since July 1, 2017.

One of those PSAPs already certified is Guilford Metro 9-1-1 in Greensboro, N.C. “We are always looking to up our game,” said Melanie Neal, director at Guilford Metro 9-1-1. “We are never satisfied with where we are. Very few agencies could obtain this or wanted to obtain it.”

Guilford Metro 9-1-1 Training and Quality Assurance Supervisor Mark Shepherd did the bulk of the legwork completing the application packet.

The agency’s two-year process started in June 2014 with Shepherd’s research comparing Guilford’s training program with the standard. In March 2015, Shepherd assembled...
a four-person team to begin gathering official documents showing proof of compliance with the standard. In November 2015, Guilford submitted their completed application packet, then spent the next four months coordinating with a certification assessor to clarify questions and concerns raised about four of the eleven chapters. After they were adequately addressed, in June 2016, APCO announced Guilford Metro 9-1-1 successfully met the standard and would be recognized for their achievement at the 2016 annual conference in Orlando later that year.

“I felt we were doing everything we should, as far as training,” Shepherd said. “Once we got into this, we were meeting the on-the-job portion of our training program well (compliant with APCO ANS 3.103.2), but needed to pay closer attention to it. Certification shed some light — streamlined some of our processes. It keeps our training from becoming mundane, and we have no choice but to maintain it. Things change every day. There’s always something different in this job, and it’s possible to miss it.” Shepherd emphasizes that attaining certification is a commitment of both time and personnel.

“Certification holds your feet to the fire,” he says. “It doesn’t matter if you have one, two, or 100 employees, the standards apply to all employees and you should try to meet them. The time it takes to complete the paperwork isn’t going to be much different. The work involved isn’t more or less based on your PSAP size.”

Guilford Metro assembled a team of four staff members, committing varying amounts of time to complete the project over the two-year period. While researching standards and gathering proofs, the team spent about 15 percent of their weekly work committed to the project. As the deadline for submitting the completed packet approached, the team shifted the work to Shepherd — the project manager — to bring a single voice to the entire application. It’s a method Thomas endorses.

“You should limit the number of people involved in completing the application packet,” Thomas said. “One or two people, or a project manager. Triple-check the packet before submitting.”

Shepherd said the strategy was essential and recommended that others follow their lead.

“During the first part of our effort, we attacked with a team of three or four. If you lose a team member to another project or assignment, you run the risk of derailing the entire schedule,” Shepherd said. “We had periodic meetings to align our efforts to our goals and advance the mission. But to maintain consistency, we assigned completing the final version of the packet to one person. If each person would have built their portion of the packet, each chapter would have looked so different instead of streamlined.”

PSAPs considering certification should consider all aspects of the process before applying.

“Go on the APCO Training Program Certification website (apcointl.org/agencytraining) and look at the guest application. Read the standard, then go through the application,” Thomas said. “Have policies in place and find out what you need. The worst thing you can do is pay the money to start the process only to discover you aren’t ready. Grading is not based on what you write down, but what you have been successfully doing.”

Thomas encouraged APCO members to use the strength of their state chapters or neighboring state chapters for additional resources.

“Find other PSAPs who successfully completed the process,” he said. “Get tips and tricks from them. Why not have a neighboring agency conduct an assessment? Put a different set of eyes on it.”

Shepherd agreed, encouraging future applicants to “reach out to another agency who has gone through it, to get a better idea of what to expect. We didn’t seek that experience and could have gained a better understanding of what assessors are seeking in each chapter.”

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The ATP assessors meet monthly, as part of the committee chaired by Thomas, to ensure they are reviewing applications in a consistent manner. Teams of assessors work in pairs to verify an agency’s claim that their program is meeting the standard. When they have questions or need additional clarification, assessors will send portions of completed application packets back to the agency for additional work. But there are a few things an agency can do to reduce the teeter-totter and ensure certification.

“We enacted online training for applicants to complete prior to applying,” McDuffie said. “(Applicants should) take the time to really look at their training program to make sure it does meet the standard. Then, provide proof! It’s one thing to say, ‘Yes, we do this,’ but to be able to provide proof is sometimes challenging.”

Providing proof is one of the greatest challenges of the process, Thomas said.

“There are several standards requiring the staff to provide testing methodology. Many agencies have a policy in place saying they meet the standard, but they don’t have testing methodologies included so they can prove comprehension by the staff. Don’t just submit a daily observation report (DOR) — submit a completed DOR.

“Do you have an example of a policy? Don’t submit your entire book of general orders. Highlight and submit the relevant portions and reference them.”

Beyond the proofs lie the mechanics, which can also delay the review process.

“When submitting, submit everything in PDF,” Thomas continued. “There are so many various word processing softwares and versions, it can be difficult for reviewers to review submissions.”

And once certification is earned, the work has only just begun, Shepherd reminded.

“Once you do it, and get it done, you immediately start thinking about how this is a three-year certification. You need to start a new folder for the next process; the job’s not done. Keep that in mind. Keep thinking about it, adding to it and building on it.”

Stephen Martini started as a telecommunicator in 2004 in Chattanooga, Tenn. He worked at 3 different PSAPs in Tennessee for the next 14 years as training specialist, center supervisor and director and started as an adjunct instructor for the APCO institute in 2015.
1. ATPC stands for:
   a. Agency Training Program Certification
   b. Absolute Total Program Collapse
   c. Agency Training Program Coordinator
   d. APCO Trains Public Communicators

2. How many agencies held ATP Certifications as of May 2018?
   a. 79
   b. 50
   c. 30
   d. 100

3. Which U.S. state currently hosts the most ATP-certified PSAPs?
   a. Georgia
   b. Virginia
   c. North Carolina
   d. Colorado

4. Agency Training Program Certification is evidence that:
   a. Your agency intends to comply with the APCO training standards
   b. Your agency is trying to comply with the APCO training standards

5. Agency Training Program Certification is a quick and easy process, requiring little time or staff commitment.
   a. True
   b. False

6. Agencies considering applying for agency training program certification are encouraged to:
   a. Seek input and direction from currently certified agencies
   b. Review standards and assess their program prior to submitting an application
   c. Complete online training intended for those interested in applying
   d. All of the above

7. Common pitfalls of agencies applying for certification include:
   a. Submitting applications compiled by more than one person

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**CDE EXAM #47924**

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