

Please read and support Texas HB3174 filed March 10, 2009

“9-1-1 where is your emergency?” “Help, my children are fighting and I need an officer.” “Ma’am what do you want us to do come shoot them?” This statement made national news when aired on the Jay Leno show. The public was outraged as the 9-1-1 operator made light of the callers situation. In 2006, a child called 9-1-1 to report his mother unconscious on the floor. The 9-1-1 operator scolded the child for playing on the phone and sent no help. The child’s mother was dead. Citizens were shocked and wanted answers, blaming 9-1-1 for failing the public. However, 9-1-1 is only a three-digit phone number that gives the public quick access to emergency services. 9-1-1, has no control over the voice who answers the emergency phone. The Texas Occupations Code does. The lack of hiring and education standards (outlined in the Code) not only jeopardizes the safety and security of citizens and responders it also compromises sensitive homeland security information.

Citizens have an expectation and perception of 9-1-1 telecommunicators. Expectation advocated for years, through public education, media, billboards, television, and radio, instructing citizens, “when seconds count call 9-1-1” (C. Williams, personal communication, March 3, 2009). Overwhelming media attention and lawsuits plastered across television and radio depict audio recording of telecommunicators being rude and controlling, has created fear and loss of credibility for 9-1-1 telecommunicators. Citizens would be shocked to find out law enforcement agencies in Texas have no state mandated hiring standards for telecommunicators receiving emergency calls.

Presently a telecommunicator in the state of Texas could be 16 years old, a wanted person, terrorist, or a drug dealer, due to the lack of hiring standards in place today. A person could fill out a one page application and told here is the phone, when it rings, pick it up and say, “9-1-1 where is your emergency”. Is that the person citizens want answering an emergency call? While the Occupations Code outlines mandatory hiring guidelines for peace officers and jailers (who handle the same citizens and law enforcement computer system as telecommunicators) it fails to include (or recognize) telecommunicators in the same manner. This allows law enforcement agencies to hire anyone for the position, regardless of their personal or criminal background.

Hiring standards for telecommunicators in Texas should mirror those of peace officers and jailers to include minimum age requirements and education, criminal history check, drug screen, psychological and polygraph exam (Texas, 1999). Dave Lieber, Star-Telegram Staff Writer, confirmed the lack of hiring standards when he uncovered a report by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (2008). Each year TCLEOSE runs routine criminal history checks on all peace officers and jailers. The Occupations Code does not require criminal background checks for telecommunicators, so they are not included in the annual check. Through a communication error, telecommunicators were (mistakenly) run for criminal histories and warrants. The error produced a distressing discovery. An estimated two dozen law enforcement agencies throughout Texas proved to employ telecommunicators with criminal histories, including theft, driving while intoxicated, and other severe crimes (Lieber, 2008). The Texas Public Information Act allowed Lieber to identify the following agencies as employing telecommunicators with criminal convictions, which include:

Abilene Police Department, Alief School District Police, Austin Police Department, Bosque County Sheriff’s Department, Colorado County Sheriff’s Department, Concho County Sheriff’s Department, Cooke County Sheriff’s Department, Coryell County Sheriff’s Department, Dallas Fire-Rescue, Dallas Police Department, Donna Police

Department, El Paso Police Department, Floyd County Sheriff's Department, Houston Police Department, Limestone County Sheriff's Department, Los Fresnos Police Department, Lynn County Sheriff's Department, McKinney Police Department, Mercedes Police Department, Midland Police Department, Mission Police Department, Polk County Sheriff's Department, San Antonio Police Department, Smithville Police Department, Stonewall County Sheriff's Department, and the Texas Department of Public Safety (TCLEOSE, 2006).

Agency sheriffs and police chiefs argue there are no funds to perform background checks, criminal histories, or psychological tests on telecommunicator applicants. Many law enforcement administrators argue if the legislators vote to increase hiring standards for telecommunicators it would place a financial hardship on the agency.

Looking back, prior to the seventies, law enforcement administrators had the same argument when the legislature set licensing standards for peace officers. The public was stunned to find law enforcement officials giving newly hired employees a gun, badge and patrol car. Telling untrained civilians to go patrol city streets and when an academy class became available the agency would send them to formal licensing training. Citizens spoke out and legislators listened finding the act unacceptable for the safety of citizens and voted peace officer licensing into law. Today peace officers in the state of Texas require training and licensing prior to acting in the capacity of a peace officer. These same citizens believed telecommunicators were part of the licensing family. They are wrong.

Citizens need to know the facts. When a citizen has an emergency and dials 9-1-1, they believe the person on the other end is a professional, someone trained to handle their emergency. 9-1-1 does not guarantee the voice who receives an emergency call is qualified. The knowledge, training, experience or professionalism of the person who answers 9-1-1 could determine who gets help, how fast they get help (if at all) and any pre-arrival instructions needed to assist the caller (if any). Law enforcement is only one public safety entity in a telecommunicator's profession. Many telecommunicators receive and dispatch emergency calls to fire services, emergency medical services, constables, state troopers, game wardens, and security, to name a few. Many of these entities have no input when it comes to the educational needs required to handle the demands of the position. Francis Holt (Fire Engineering Magazine) wrote, "Public safety dispatching (PSD) involves the coordination of so many different agencies and has such significant liability potential that multidisciplinary training should be the norm, not the exception (1997)." Today, the Texas Occupation Code only requires a 40-hour basic telecommunicator course taken within the first year of employment. However, the code provides an exemption to public safety agencies with fewer than 20 employees from taking the basic telecommunicator course. The number of agencies that fall within the twenty or less exemption is an astounding 70% (TCLEOSE, 2008). Whether a public safety agency has two or 200 telecommunicators, the job requires professional skills to handle emergency calls, public safety responders, and life threatening situations. An emergency can occur anywhere, whether rural, suburban, small town, or big city.

Rural and small town public safety sheriff's and police chiefs complain there are no funds to provide training nor is there training available in rural areas that are hundreds of miles away from training facilities. When there is a training opportunity, they cannot afford the training fees, travel expenses, or overtime monies to cover shifts. These same agencies provide training for peace officers and jailers (due to state mandates) but say they cannot afford to include telecommunicators. How can they afford not to include telecommunicators?

Training telecommunicators will not place a hardship on already stretched budgets. Rural areas where distance can create barriers are not obstacles for training telecommunicators. Training opportunities are already in place. The Texas 9-1-1 Trainers (TNT), whose members include telecommunicator training officers from all over the state, already have state approved lesson plans. TNT along with support from Councils of Governments, 9-1-1 districts and TCLEOSE have many courses in development for online training. The North Central Texas Council of Governments 9-1-1 Program has online and on-the-job distance learning to accommodate all Texas telecommunicators. In addition, the Capitol Area Planning Council of Government in Austin just graduated its second telecommunicator academy class in March 2009 (B. Stewart, personal communication, April 1, 2009). The academy, approximately seven weeks in length prepares telecommunicators, through instruction, hands-on exercises, and scenarios. Students train on topics ranging from basic day-to-day operations to disaster preparedness.

Telecommunicators handle sensitive homeland security data every day. They have access to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database for wanted persons, stolen property, terrorist, missing persons, and threats to peace officer information (TCLEOSE, 2000). They are responsible for entering, confirming and maintaining protective orders, AMBER, Blue, and Silver alerts and running vehicle and driver registrations. The lack of standards in place today substantially increases liability for public safety and responders. Telecommunicators have failed to confirm warrants on the correct person, placing innocent citizens in jail, clearing the warrant, where the intended suspect is now free. Moreover, news reports never tire to blast how a telecommunicator was caught selling sensitive security information to the public for personal gain. Yet they fail to include the steps the agency took to assure a thorough background check, security clearance, and if proper training was completed. On a daily basis, Telecommunicators are able to research, retrieve, add, modify, clear and cancel data in the NCIC database. A Telecommunicator with a criminal past whose primary goal is to gain employment to tamper with law enforcement security data has a free pass with today's standards.

Without standards, new technology such as Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG911) remains compromised due to the Telecommunicators roles in chain of evidence procedures. NG911, whose mission is "any device, any where, any time" will allow Telecommunicators the ability to receive text messaging, pictures, and streaming video via the 9-1-1 phone. Telecommunicators need extensive training to understand and translate the hundreds of text-messaging languages used today. The Virginia Tech shooting proves how even parents of endangered students could not understand what was happening when their children text-messaged during the incident. When phone lines were jammed with emergency calls, students tried to text-message for help. Some even tried to text to 9-1-1, not knowing this technology is not yet available.

The chain of evidence expands when pictures and streaming video technology becomes available. The basic geography training to include mapping with x y coordinates, jurisdictional boundaries and local road and landmark information will not be enough. Picture's and images to 9-1-1 are targeted to assist callers who may be lost or need to capture vital evidence information needed that may be destroyed between when the call is placed and when emergency responders arrive at the scene. However, Telecommunicators will be subject to images they are not prepared to deal with. Images seen on television and horror movies can only be imagined today, but NG911 will allow the telecommunicator to be the field units eye's prior to arrival. Today's Crisis Communication (a voluntary course) will not provide tools needed to handle NG911 calls. In-depth preparedness for citizen and officer safety will need to include the emotional needs of the Telecommunicator as well.

Technology will not slow down for hiring and education guidelines to catch up. The time is now; mandatory guidelines for Telecommunicators should include all agencies, large or small. Telecommunicators are a vital link in public safety. Field units could not do their job without telecommunicators taking emergency calls and dispatching responding units. To ignore this important component is like missing the vital piece of the puzzle. They are the first contact between citizens and responding units.

Some law enforcement administrators argue that the word Telecommunicator is too broad. While some Telecommunicators are multi-disciplined, meaning they take 9-1-1 emergency and non-emergency calls, dispatch to field units (fire, police, EMS, etc.) run national and state computer systems and handle walk in customers. Still others claim they should not be included in the definition because they only answer emergency calls, or only dispatch, therefore they should be exempt. The Occupations Code defines a Telecommunicator as:

A person acknowledged by the commission and employed by or serving a law enforcement agency who receives, processes, and transmits public safety information and criminal justice data for the agency using a base radio station on a public safety frequency regulated by the Federal Communications Commission or by teletype or other communications system (1999).

This definition clearly covers all aspects of Telecommunications, not just one or some. In comparison, many peace officers who become licensed work in different areas of law enforcement. Their licensing allows them to work in patrol, traffic, crime scene, investigations, specialty taskforces such as vice and narcotics, tactical, SWAT and internal affairs to name a few. The bottom line is they are still licensed peace officers. According to the Occupations Code definition, Telecommunicators whether single or multiple disciplined are still Telecommunicators.

Not all law enforcement administrators use the letter of the law to side step the safety and security of citizens and field units. Many understand the important role telecommunicators play within their agency and choose strict hiring standards for all employees equally. They support the Telecommunicator profession and strive for excellence in their employees. Unfortunately, these sheriff's and chief's are the minority in Texas. Their citizens feel safe, their officers confident and the telecommunicators proud. Should citizens investigate the public safety system of the town they live? Knowing a city has a qualified law enforcement system (including licensed Telecommunicators) should be priority right along with good schools for their children.

Statistics show a person may only call 9-1-1 twice in their lifetime (C. Williams, personal communication, March 3, 2009). A citizen should not have to question the training of the voice who answers 9-1-1; they should expect them to be a licensed professional capable of handling emergencies. Due to the increasing number of lawsuits against telecommunicators, the horror stories where help never arrived, the incompetency's and criminal background of those answering 9-1-1, it is no wonder citizens are afraid to call during an emergency. Citizens expect telecommunicators to know what they are doing. When a citizens calls 9-1-1 they do not know where else to turn, what else to do, and expect the person who answers the phone to be a professional who can literally put their world back together. If they do not, radio stations, newspapers, and television are quick to inform the public when 9-1-1 telecommunicators failed to ensure the safety and security of citizens and responding units. Telecommunicators make critical life and death decisions each day. Licensing telecommunicators will strengthen hiring and education standards in Texas bringing credibility and assurance when an emergency call is placed to 9-1-1 the voice on the other end knows how to handle the emergency. The hiring and

educations standards set forth in the Texas Occupations Code for telecommunicators should mirror those outlined for peace officers and jailers. As a citizen of Texas, be a voice for telecommunicators, tell local and state legislators to support HB 3174, a life may depend on it.

Sherry Decker
817-637-6699 (cell)

References

- Bacon, J. (2006, June 6). 911 operators who ignored boy charged. *USA Today*, 3A.
- COMCARE: Emergency responder definition should include 911 emergency dispatch. (2007, February). *Fire Engineering*, 160 (12), 42.
- Holt, F. (1997, July). Who should train dispatchers? *Fire Engineering*, 150 (7), 100.
- Lieber, D. (2008, January 13). That 911 operator could have a criminal past. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, p. B1.
- Stewart, B. (2009, April 1). 9-1-1 Program Manager, Capitol Area Planning Council of Government. Interview.
- Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Education (2000). *Basic Telecommunicator Certification Course*. Austin, TX: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Education (2006). *Commission Report*. Austin, TX: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Texas Occupations Code (1999). Peace officers and Jailers. Austin, TX: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Texas Occupations Code (1999). Telecommunicators. Austin, TX: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Williams, C. (2009, March 3). 9-1-1 Program Manager, North Central Texas Council of Governments. Interview.