THE CRITICAL ROLE OF
EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION IN ECC STAFFING

Understanding the causes of short staffing is key to fixing the problem.

By Crystal Lawrence

If you have ever thought to yourself "I really can't remember the last time our emergency communications center (ECC) was fully staffed," you are not alone. In fact, APCO has commissioned three studies and published reports to address this important issue within ECCs.

A Summary of APCO RETAINS Research		
2005	Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Communications Centers: A National Study	This summary report of all Project RETAINS research conducted by Denver Research Institute and includes the results from Part I, which surveyed both managers and employees, and Part II, which surveyed managers, but not employees, of centers with 76 or more employees. APCO also published a technical report, effective practices guide and staffing workbook.
2009	Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Communications Centers: A Follow Up Study	Also known as the Next Generation Study, this report on the second national study sought to extend knowledge of communications center staffing issues not addressed in the first study and to gauge the degree to which Project RETAINS had proven useful.
2009	APCO Project RETAINS Compiled Report	The intent of this report is to synthesize the findings of both reports to assist public safety communications professionals. The main topics covered in this report include the effects of the economy, salary, next generation technology in communications centers, psychological distress, the dispatcher position and consolidation.
2018	Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs): A Supplemental Study	APCO commissioned a follow-up study with George Mason University Center for Social Science Research that builds on both the 2005 and 2009 reports to observe how these conditions have developed over the past nine years, to reassess the perceived utility and utilization of Project RETAINS, and to add a new section detailing the use and knowledge of new technologies in ECCs.

The 2018 study asked ECC directors to evaluate their staffing levels. Fewer than 30% reported their ECC was fully staffed the previous year, and only 28.7% of ECCs were able to maintain staffing levels for the entire year.[1]

Effective management of staffing levels is directly related to the ability of the ECC to handle the emergency and non-emergency workload and provide quality service to its stakeholders. It is the inability to meet those quality expectations that all too often results in negative outcomes and places additional liability on the ECC.

There are many factors to consider when thinking about why your ECC is not fully staffed. Usually, we consider hiring more staff to fix the problem, which is likely a needed step. Hiring more staff leads to other considerations such as attracting qualified applicants and ensuring the hiring process is effective and initial training for public safety telecommunicators (PSTs) is successful. All of these are important factors when evaluating the hiring process in your ECC and gaining more qualified PSTs. But what about maintaining the current staff?

Often overlooked but equally as important as hiring is retaining the qualified staff currently working in the ECC. In the 2018 study, employees reported an average of nine years at their current ECC.[2] These are the people who are probably working overtime and extra shifts to cover the staffing shortage. Their commitment to the ECC, the jurisdiction, the field responders and the public cannot be overstated. According to a 2020 study, "Retention of productive employees is a major concern of human resource professionals and business executives. It is more efficient to retain a quality employee than to recruit, train and orient a replacement employee of the same quality."[3] While pay and benefits are important, it is not the money that keeps good employees. In fact, the majority of respondents to the 2018 survey indicated they would turn down another job for more pay in order to stay with their ECC.

The average retention rate shows the percent of employees retained each year. The 2018 report found an average retention rate of 71%, which is a sharp decline from previous studies. In 2005, the national average retention

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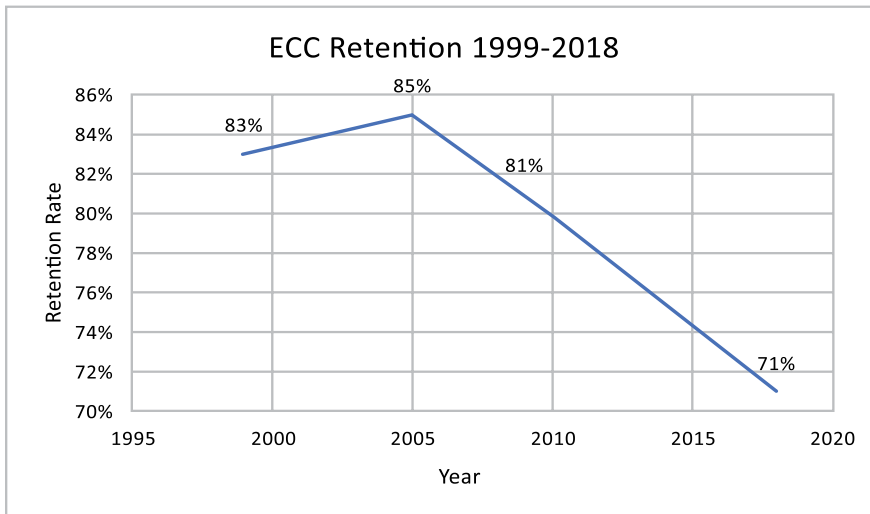
Figure 1: Retention Rates

rate for ECCs was 83%. This study found that larger centers had slightly higher retention rates, with an average of 85%. The 2009 research found an average retention rate of 81%. This decline is shown in Figure 1.

This new research also suggests a possible relationship between ECC size and retention rates. Medium ECCs have the highest retention rate (76.8%), followed by small ECCs (67.3%). Large ECCs have the lowest retention (58.7%).[4]

Overall, employee survey respondents in the 2018 study answered that they are proud of their job and their ECC, and they express an overwhelming interest in maintaining their employment long-term at their ECC.

The 2018 report found the following nine factors can determine an employee's commitment to the organization:

- Supportive supervision
- Co-worker support
- Opportunity for promotion
- Job complexity
- Perceived recognition
- Exposure to emotional strain
- Coping resources
- Flexible work arrangements
- Closeness of supervision

"Supportive supervision, co-worker support and perceived recognition from the public emerged as key factors predicting employee commitment to their ECCs. Proactive supervisors and inter-employee cooperation create a supportive environment that energizes workers and helps lead to the successful operations of ECCs.

Co-worker support is also an important factor in reducing psychological distress at

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ECCs. Given the nature of public safety communications work, ECC employees are particularly likely to be exposed to emotional and traumatic events. While most ECCs provide critical incident stress management (CISM), employee assistance programs (EAP) or both, the interpersonal support from co-workers appears to have a unique effect on employees' ability to effectively cope with difficult workplace situations.

Additionally, opportunities for promotion and flexible work arrangements are found to be valued by employees.

While a majority of ECC employees feel that the public appreciates their work, a strong majority disagree that the media appreciates their work. These findings underline the importance of adequate support and recognition. Management would do well to evaluate its own internal human resource practices (e.g., through supervisor training or through employee recognition programs), but should also explore ways of connecting employees with the public they serve."[5]

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR RETENTION[6]

- **Know your numbers:** If you are not already doing so, start keeping data on the number of recruits who leave during

the probationary period and the number of employees who leave after probation for any reason. It is useful to know whether you are losing employees in the early stages of employment or after they have been with the ECC for a while. If you are losing employees in the probationary period, it may indicate a problem with recruiting, screening and selection, or training. If you are losing them after several years with the ECC, it may be an issue related to pay, benefits, schedules or other workplace issues.

- **Keep the staff you have:** Use effective management practices to provide direction and support for employees. Pay attention to why people leave, gather data on what makes them dissatisfied and respond accordingly. For example, if salaries are not competitive, or not aligned with other public safety personnel, conduct a benchmarking exercise. Collect relevant data and do a comparative analysis based not only on call load but on other factors such as work environment, promotion opportunity and training opportunities. By creating a full picture and using solid evidence as to why your center is not competitive with others on the salary front, you can better prepare a logical and fiscally responsible request. As part of that request, create a sense for decision-makers that this is an important issue not only for your department, but for the safety of the community and first responders.

- **Determine if turnover/retention affects ECC staffing:** Measure ECC performance and Key Performance Indicators (KPI)[7] to determine if the level of service provided by the ECC is adequate. Evaluate staff scheduling to find out if frequent overtime is needed to maintain minimum staffing levels, staff are denied time off or if unscheduled leave (e.g., calling in sick) is abused. APCO recently published a related ANSI Standard to assist in developing KPI, titled Key Performance Indicators for Public Safety Communications Personnel.[8]

- **Consider turnover when calculating staffing needs:** Historical trends in turnover are the best indicator of average turnover in the ECC. Evaluate these trends and include an allowance for turnover in staffing calculations.

- **Establish a plan of action:** When significant issues are found, create a plan and take action to improve the situation.

- **Implement a retention plan:** Identify what motivates your staff. Create a plan that improves overall job satisfaction, recognition, growth or advancement opportunities and positive relationships with peers and managers.
- **Evaluate results:** Is retention improving? Assess the effectiveness of the plan and refine the plan for better results as needed.
- **Conduct "stay" interviews:** In addition to exit interviews for employees that leave, survey current staff to discover what is working well and what is not. Detecting problems before employees leave provides an opportunity to make corrections and retain your staff.
- **Provide a supportive environment:** Establish clear organizational values and foster collaboration and communication between management and staff. Create an inclusive atmosphere where individual differences are welcome and accepted.[9]
- **Consider establishing a career ladder:** Opportunities for promotion in public safety communications are rare. Create advancement options with a career ladder. Different levels of PSTs, such as PST 1, PST 2, and Lead PST give staff something to strive for.
- **Establish a recognition program:** Recognize good work, extra effort, team players and other noteworthy contributions to the workplace. Create programs for employee service awards, employee of the month and/or peer reward systems. Awards do not necessarily need a monetary component. Be creative!
- **Provide resources for coping with emotional strain/stress:** The role of a PST is challenging — providing a comfortable and productive work environment is essential. Offer programs such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing/Management (CISD/M) to help PSTs deal with stress.
- **Offer as much flexibility as possible:** Providing an established procedure for time off requests and "shift swapping" when there is a special occasion is important. Offering legitimate processes for getting time off minimizes surprise absenteeism and makes it easier for managers and employees to plan ahead. Use a schedule, shift staffing structure and create an assignment process that fits the needs of the ECC and its employees.

The RETAINS Toolkit 3.0 (apcointl.org/retains-toolkit) includes three tools: staffing, retention and the employee satisfaction survey. In addition, the Toolkit can create a customized report detailing estimated staffing needs. The Toolkit also includes the dispatcher guidelines functions within the staffing tool. This capability will generate a report based upon information provided by the user and compare it to data collected in the RETAINS study. This tool is intended to help educate and be used as a starting point when considering dispatcher staffing levels and workload.

The employee satisfaction survey within the Toolkit will assist managers in identifying areas that may need further evaluation and/or changes that can be made or implemented to increase satisfaction within the ECC. The survey is completely anonymous and is completed electronically through the Toolkit.

We are in trying times in public safety. From a pandemic to civil unrest, the demands of this profession are more stressful than ever.

Technology, facilities and equipment play an important role in our mission, but it is the people of an ECC that make it successful. Finding and keeping the right personnel is one of the most important things any leader can, and must, do. ●

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6 Effective Practices Guide and Staffing Workbook.

7 Public Safety Communications Center Key Performance Indicators. APCO American National Standard (2019)

8 Key Performance Indicators for Public Safety Communications Personnel. APCO American National Standard (2020)

9 Agarwal, Pragya. How to Create a Positive Workplace Culture. Forbes. August 29, 2018

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1) How many staffing and retention studies has APCO commissioned?
   a. 1
   b. 2
   c. 3
   d. 4

2) According to the 2018 "Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs): A Supplemental Study," most ECCs reported that they are fully staffed.
   a. True
   b. False

3) Trends in retention show that ECC employees retention is:
   a. Increasing
   b. Decreasing
   c. Staying the same

4) The RETAINS Toolkit 3.0 includes these three tools:
   a. Staffing, retention and the employee satisfaction survey
   b. Supportive supervision, co-worker support and opportunity for promotion
   c. Know your numbers, establish a recognition program and provide a supportive environment

   d. Staffing, retention and employee exit interview strategies.

5) It is advised to be as rigid as possible in order to keep existing ECC employees. Do not use a schedule, shift staffing structure, or a shift assignment process that fits the needs of the ECC and its employees.
   a. True
   b. False

6) The _____ within the toolkit will assist managers in identifying areas that may need further evaluation and/or changes.
   a. Staffing tool
   b. Employee satisfaction survey
   c. Dispatcher guidelines
   d. Staffing needs report

7) The 2018 report found _____ factors that can determine an employee's commitment to the organization.
   a. 4
   b. 10
   c. 7
   d. 9

8) _____ ECCs have the highest retention rate according to the 2018 report.
   a. Small
   b. Medium
   c. Large
   d. Consolidated

9) Establishing clear organizational values, fostering collaboration and communication between management and staff, creating an inclusive atmosphere where individual differences are welcome and accepted are examples of which effective practice?
   a. Establish a recognition program
   b. Keep the staff you have
   c. Provide a supportive environment
   d. All of the above
   e. None of the above

10) Factors aimed at reducing psychological distress at ECCs include:
    a. EAP
    b. CISM
    c. Co-Worker Support
    d. All of the above
    e. None of the above

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