

# RECRUITING QUALITY PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATORS

Tips for taking staff recruitment to the next level.

By Stephen Martini

“I think the key (to success) is you hire great people and get them caught up in what their talents are.”<sup>1</sup>

Film Director Dave Filoni shared this thought after working on the Disney+ series “The Mandalorian” with Director Jon Favreau.

The goal of nearly every employer in every profession is to bring great people into your culture and then inspire and empower them to achieve great things. And it is a well-known challenge to accomplish this within public safety emergency communications, experienced by practitioners in the emergency communications center and documented regularly by local and national media. In October 2021, “Good Morning America” broadcast a story<sup>2</sup> citing “30% to 50% vacancies” in ECCs — 88 telecommunicator jobs across 10 agencies in Alabama, and 30% staffing vacancies at one ECC in Virginia. Yet another story<sup>3</sup> published by Firehouse.com in May 2021 attributed errors at an ECC in North Carolina to staffing shortages exceeding 40%.

The need is known and the solution seems simple, but it isn’t. This is evidenced by thousands of hours committed by public safety

communications associations, organizations and professionals. Resources such as APCO’s Project RETAINS toolkit and Adam Timm’s book, *People Driven Leadership*, offer ECCs insights into all aspects of staffing shortages and the many options available to address them.

Filoni described the first step: hire great people. But to hire them, we must find them. And once we find them, how do we let them know of our opportunities and make our opportunity appealing to them? How do we ensure they fit the opportunity we are offering and that we fit the opportunity they’re seeking?

## WHEN TO SEEK NEW TEAM MEMBERS

Adan Timm, author and founder of The Healthy Dispatcher, wrote in his book, *People Driven Leader*, that one indicator that an agency’s hiring or recruitment process is malfunctioning includes “waiting to begin the recruitment process until you really ‘need’ people.”<sup>4</sup>

The search for great team members is ongoing because the need is ongoing, and we never close.

Renowned public safety consultant Gordon Graham consistently applies the concept that predictable incidents can be prevented. In that light, consider for a moment

that our people are like any other resource needed to operate an ECC — like electricity, network connectivity or facilities. Every day, engaged ECC leaders develop, implement and monitor redundancy solutions ensuring computers and radios continue to operate in the event of a disrupting event, such as a power outage. We can predict events that could happen in order to prevent them, and we should work to do so every day.

Similarly, we can predict our most valuable resource — the people working beside us every day — will get married, have children, accept promotions, return to pursue higher education, relocate or pass away. Any of these events can result in a vacancy, and they can happen anytime. We should constantly work to stock our figurative personnel pantry with qualified applicants who are interested in joining our team.

## FINDING A QUALITY CANDIDATE

The first and most apparent resource is within each ECC — your existing team members. Who better to recruit new team members than current ones who know what it takes to work in your ECC each day? Those valued, involved individuals know your culture and understand the reasons that motivate them to go to work under the headset. What’s more, your team members know family members, friends or other public



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safety professionals who may be a good fit for the job.

Provide your team members with a small business card highlighting pay, benefits, hours, training provided, agency mission and a link to complete pre-employment steps online. This helpful and inexpensive resource allows team members to connect people for potential future vacancies.

Next, the agency can seek interested candidates in area vocational schools, technical schools or community colleges offering courses in criminal justice or public health. Emergency communications professionals can engage with these classes to share information about the emergency communications career track — in addition to sharing

how the role of the public safety telecommunicator fits into the broader emergency response system, such as field personnel. It's a win-win — educating students in all emergency response sectors about 9-1-1 while identifying individuals who may want to dive deeper into the emergency communications industry.

Career-minded would-be first responders may not relish the idea of the bloody patient contact common for emergency medical or surgical technicians, or the physical demands placed on law enforcement and firefighters. For these students, a career in public safety communications may fit nicely.

As a first step, consider contacting the dean of students about offering guest

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lecturers for courses relevant to emergency response. Or connect with other public safety training professionals in your region who currently offer these services and can help your team join the conversation.

Seek opportunities to engage with civic career fairs hosted throughout the community. Some may be hosted by your jurisdiction's human resources department, or in partnership with local associations, organizations and clubs. Partnering with Rotary clubs, chambers of commerce or citizen action groups can help spread your message within your community, facilitating diversity and inclusion in your recruiting efforts.

Pursue opportunities to engage with high school students, either by attending career fairs or guest lecturing in criminal justice or other courses related to emergency response. These efforts are investments in the future, and they plant the seeds for applicants you may see once they meet age and education requirements. High school students may also have older siblings or parents seeking new employment. Your message could become interesting conversations at the dinner table.

Share employment opportunities on your social media channels and government website. Be mindful of your target audience. And include your message on platforms frequented by those you want to attract.

### IDENTIFYING A QUALITY CANDIDATE

You've done the work to locate candidates. They followed the links, filled out the application and are ready to interview. But how do you know if they are quality candidates? A lot of time can be spent sifting through piles of applications only to engage with individuals seeking a job rather than a career or those

Identify your flaws, acknowledge that change needs to occur and start working diligently in areas that will make you a better candidate, employee, person and leader.

who are entirely unaware of the demands of our profession.

Timm writes, "New hires resign because they didn't know what they were getting into. The best centers know that every part of the hiring process is an opportunity to inform a candidate about the job. Beginning with the job posting and until the formal job offer, each step must accurately portray the rigors and rewards of a career in 9-1-1. A lot of 9-1-1 job postings are unnaturally rosy, painting a picture of all the pluses and none of the challenges."<sup>5</sup>

To counter this problem, agencies offer opportunities to "sit-along" with a telecommunicator for a few hours in the ECC to see the environment. Avoid assessing the applicant during this time — it's their chance to experience and assess you. Timm mentions one Colorado ECC that invites the applicant's family to attend a meeting with management to understand the impact of the job<sup>6</sup> — the schedule, the impact of cumulative stress and the impact of emergency response on the family.

Beyond the job demands, each applicant must understand your culture — your mission and vision statements. What do you value as an agency? Timm writes, "If kindness and

respect towards people are values that matter to your center's culture, and your recruitment and hiring process doesn't have anything geared towards screening for these qualities, there's an opportunity waiting. One director said to me, 'I can teach someone the job skills; I can't teach them to be nice. We don't have time to teach compassion along with everything else we've got going on. We hire for fit NOW, not for what we hope the person will become during training.'

Remarkably, this center has placed more of an emphasis on hiring people from a customer service background, finding that those with a 9-1-1 background were already steeped in the negativity that this center prides itself on avoiding."<sup>7</sup>

At the Metro Nashville Department of Emergency Communications, Support Division Director Paul McCallister relies on his experience as a recruiter for the National Guard to engage applicants in conversation — via text messaging and phone calls — as part of the process to schedule interviews with qualified applicants. ECC management recognizes the applicants have the skills necessary to apply, having completed a pre-employment skills assessment online. The next relevant step is to understand whether they have the required characteristics to succeed in a culture focused on personal accountability, embracing change and providing kind and compassionate customer service. If they don't fit, managers pass on the candidate. The wrong candidate in the ECC can fuel anxiety and discord among dedicated professionals, which means it may make more sense to continue paying overtime.

Finally, your agency needs to be mindful of creating an environment appealing to the applicant. Consider your pay and benefits package, ensuring it is competitive with your



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neighbors. Stress how you commit resources to your new team members, both in education and employee wellness, and be willing to seek opportunities to adapt the work environment toward the applicant's needs. Local investments in health and wellness programs for the employee — both physical and psychological — are also essential to communicate to your candidates. Then explore out-of-the-box options like remote work, flexible scheduling and autonomy in

how they engage with the specific work they do each day. ●

**Stephen Martini, ENP, RPL, is Director at Metro Nashville Emergency Communications Center.**

#### REFERENCES

1 Favreau, Jon (Producer) (2020). Disney Gallery: Star Wars: The Mandalorian - Directing (Disney+ Streaming). Fairview Entertainment.

2 <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/mother-speaks-urgent-calls-911-childs-medical-emergency/story?id=80827200>

3 [www.firehouse.com/tech-comm/cad-dispatch-systems/news/21224872/staffing-shortage-leads-to-errors-at-nc-911-center](http://www.firehouse.com/tech-comm/cad-dispatch-systems/news/21224872/staffing-shortage-leads-to-errors-at-nc-911-center)

4 Timm, Adam. (2020) People Driven Leader: How the Best 9-1-1 Centers Inspire Positive Change. Self-published. Page 159

5 Timm, Adam. (2020) People Driven Leader: How the Best 9-1-1 Centers Inspire Positive Change. Self-published. Page 161-162

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

## CDE EXAM #61710

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>According to a “Good Morning America” news story, some emergency communications centers report what range of vacant positions?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15-20%</li> <li>30-50%</li> <li>40-60%</li> <li>0-5%</li> </ol> </li> <li>Staffing is not a common concern within the emergency communications profession.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>True</li> <li>False</li> </ol> </li> <li>What is the solution offered by APCO to help agencies combat staffing challenges?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RPL Classes</li> <li>CPE Certification</li> <li>Project RETAINS Toolkit</li> <li>StaffUp!</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>According to Adam Timm, a common mistake made by ECC professionals when recruiting new employees is _____.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recruiting continuously</li> <li>waiting to begin the recruitment process until you really need people</li> <li>limiting recruitment to only high school students</li> <li>involving existing team members in the recruitment process</li> </ol> </li> <li>Gordon Graham often says if an issue is predictable, then it is preventable.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>True</li> <li>False</li> </ol> </li> <li>Existing ECC personnel should be engaged in recruiting people in their social or professional networks.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>True</li> <li>False</li> </ol> </li> <li>Engaging in public education opportunities with local community colleges, vocational or technical schools can yield candidates for employment within the ECC.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>True</li> <li>False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participating in career fairs hosted by local civic associations and clubs can assist with _____.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversity</li> <li>Inclusion</li> <li>Broadening the message to the entire community</li> <li>All of the above</li> <li>None of the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>Which of the following characteristics does Adam Timm say some agencies attempt to identify in applicants?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kindness</li> <li>Respect</li> <li>Compassion</li> <li>All of the above</li> <li>None of the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>Applicants should understand as much about the impacts of the job as possible so they can make an informed decision about accepting the position.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>True</li> <li>False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
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