



9-1-1 Staffing Crisis Summit

WISDOM OF THE STAFFING SUMMIT

Experts bring concrete recommendations to bear on one of the public safety communications industry's most critical problems.

By Jackie Evans, Juana Holmes-Green, Jessica Kay and Tim Martindale

The public safety communications industry is experiencing a nationwide staffing crisis. In every state, emergency communications centers (ECCs) are suffering from staffing shortages.

In May 2023, representatives from multiple ECC agencies across the nation gathered in Herndon, Virginia, for the first 9-1-1 Staffing Crisis Summit hosted by APCO International. The Summit included keynote speakers, panel interviews and tabletop discussions on realities facing our 9-1-1 centers. The agencies represented included those that are consistently fully staffed and those that are at critical staffing levels. They came from various disciplines, sizes and governance structures.

Response to the lessons learned at the summit was overwhelmingly positive. Many agencies indicated that

they would implement at least one of the proposed solutions recommended at the Summit and would share their successes and lessons learned with their peers.

CULTURE AS THE DRIVING FORCE

An underlying theme throughout the Summit was workplace culture, one of the most frequently and passionately discussed topics related to staffing and employment.

According to Kim Turner LLC, a public safety training and consulting writer, culture can be defined as “the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, practices and norms within an organization.” Even centers that reported great cultures said that their culture is a work in progress and they are constantly improving.¹

One goal of the Summit was to answer questions surrounding ECC culture. The inherent problem with culture is that culture rarely has a one-size-fits-all solution. One of the solutions suggested (by multiple speakers) was the



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development of agency mission, vision and values statements specific to communications functions as a starting point for culture change.

While many ECCs are standalone with a distinct governance structure, a high percentage are a division or function of another department such as law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, the office of emergency management, etc. Allowing frontline employees to create statements that resonate with them was described as a critical early step to create a separate brand identity from the umbrella agency. Due to the high turnover in the industry, these values should be periodically revisited.

Along with adopting mission, vision and/or values statements, establishing a set of identifiable behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable (known as “inbounds” and “out of bounds” behavior) within the ECC provides employees firm guidelines for meeting



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and advancing the agency's cultural goals. The key to real change is the intentional and clear empowerment of employees to call attention to other employees engaging in undesirable behaviors to hold them accountable to each other.

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Another way to generate positive culture is through continuous performance management systems that tie into the agency's mission, vision and values statements. Employees, especially the younger generations, want to be recognized for their good work throughout the year so leaders must follow through with ongoing feedback. First-level supervisors should actively look for opportunities to offer informal acknowledgement and, when appropriate, formal recognition of exceptional performance.

RECRUITING AND HIRING FOR EXCELLENCE

A consistent theme throughout discussions about culture was the importance of the hiring process. Centers represented on peer panels and speakers from the private sector discussed the importance of hiring for attitude and cultural fit, and then teaching the specific skills needed to do the job.

To hire quality candidates, recruiting must be an ongoing process, regardless of whether the agency is actively hiring. Panelists discussed a desire among younger working generations to have a more personal relationship with their employers — including leadership staff. The recruiting process could be an opportunity to start that relationship. One suggestion was selecting current employees and assigning them to help applicants navigate the hiring process. This may help establish a sense of belonging and engagement for both the applicant and the current employee. Another recommendation is the opportunity for potential applicants to have coffee with current employees to discuss the career and acknowledge the good, the bad and the ugly of the career.

Agencies may host an open house at the ECC to allow potential applicants an opportunity to glimpse the workplace and meet current employees. Agencies adopting this

recommendation must ensure compliance with departmental and Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS) guidelines.

Several agencies at the Summit also have programs with local school systems that give high school students the opportunity to learn about 9-1-1. In August 2023, the APCO International membership quorum approved the creation of a Student/Educator membership to encourage high school and college students to consider a career in public safety communications. More information about this membership can be obtained here: apcointl.org/membership/join-login/student-educator-membership/

Many agencies have streamlined the hiring process as a way of securing an advantage over other agencies. Consolidating the hiring timeline may include hiring an outside vendor to handle background investigations or eliminating a test that does not reliably predict applicant success or bring some other value to the hiring process. Other options include completing minimal background and fingerprint checks and making a conditional offer, or “pre-hiring” the applicant, while the rest of the process is completed.

Agencies should review hiring practices. Are hiring processes disqualifying potentially viable employees because of tattoos, facial piercings or colorful hair? Do these qualities impact a candidates' ability to do the job? Credit scores are another factor that could be blocking access to employment for otherwise qualified applicants. Agency leaders need to consider to what extent a credit score tells the agency whether the employee would be successful in emergency communications.

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS

The onboarding process is crucial in creating and maintaining a culture of excellence. Leaders need to ask, “Are we teaching and showing new employees those positive behaviors (inbounds behaviors) that we want them to demonstrate?” The inbounds behaviors should be tied into the agency's values. Examples of these could be integrity, accountability, respect or professionalism. If we are not teaching and showing these behaviors to our new employees, then we are setting those employees up for failure and sabotaging our efforts to staff the agency.

One of the keynote speakers at the Summit explained that their employees are “ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen,” which helps connect Ritz

Carlton employees with why they are there — to serve highly valued guests. This leads directly to employee engagement, because, as an employer, Ritz Carlton values their employees as much as they value their guests. This sense of appreciation trickles down from the top of the company to the most junior employee and onto the customer.

As leaders, we must care for our employees so they will reflect that back onto our customers. The environment cultivated by leaders should be one in which employees can believe and must include diversity — not only in race, gender or sexual orientation — but also in thought and belief. And it must be aligned with the goals and values of the organization. The job is not only to answer the phone or radio; it is to care for the person with whom you are speaking.

Ritz Carlton is fully invested in each new employee. The new employee's first year is focused solely on the onboarding process. The company has completely mapped out the journey for the employee. Their orientation is an in-depth dive into what physically makes the Ritz Carlton a luxury brand. This includes addressing all guests by name, feeling the thread count of the bedding and the precise way a table should be set. Ritz Carlton checks in with employees several times during the first year and have a twenty-one-day mark, and six month and nine-month benchmarks. This helps to ensure a good fit with the organization, trainer and new employee.


For an ECC, this onboarding process could involve ride-alongs with public safety partners, formal classroom instruction at each position to be learned (call taker, the various dispatch positions in the room such as fire, police and emergency medical services, or the National Criminal Information System (NCIC) dispatcher, as examples), followed by on-the-job training, completion of specific entry-level training, or sitting with the quality assurance coordinator who can instruct them on the call taking skills on which they will be evaluated.

Another way agencies can map out the employee's first year is by creating a clear training plan, showing each step of the training process for a new hire. As an example, during a conversation with the new employee, outline how long each step in the training process takes (or the total training hours permitted) so that the employee has a basic understanding of where they will be over the course of the year.

For the new employee and the onboarding process, agencies should consider a way to integrate the new employee into the team. Agencies can accomplish this by creating committees that could appeal to the new employee. Inviting newer employees to participate in committees that appeal to them can help establish relationships within the ECC. These committees have an added bonus of engaging current employees on projects, systems or processes that are important to them. Some suggestions are a peer support team, employee recognition team, community outreach, recruiting team, morale

or even untrue, leaders should ask clarifying questions to fully understand the employee's perception without judgment, and then take the time to think through what the employee said. Allowing a day or two to carefully consider the employee's feedback from a holistic perspective can allow the leader to be more responsive to all concerns. The leader should communicate their intention to take the necessary time to reflect on and check into the issues and get back to the employee after a specific time. Then, follow through, even if the contact back to the employee is to say that more time is needed.

Employers must answer the question of how to sway those employees who are not engaged at the workplace to become part of the solution, and this goes back to relationships. As leaders, we must understand the motivations, wants and needs of our employees. Unfortunately, for leaders there is no one size fits all solution — all of our employees are unique. Harvard Business School offers six tools to start down the path of employee engagement.⁴ These include feedback based on observations, showing recognition, transparent communication, delegating work, being respectful, and supporting learning



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committee, awards committees, National Public Safety Telecommunicator Week committee, scheduling committee, emergency medical dispatch (EMD) committee, tech team and a fitness team. These committees and teams should be frontline employee driven to get the maximum engagement by the employees. These should be ground-up initiatives not forced from the top down. Use patience when proposing teams and committees; employees might not currently be willing to take on a collateral duty but a year from now they may be. The agency may not have the diversity needed to have a well-rounded committee currently, but they may have it in the future.

RETENTION

Tenured employees are struggling. Most managers agree that 9-1-1 centers have been at critical staffing since before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the “Great Resignation” certainly didn't help their plight. Many speakers recommended “stay interviews” and using the APCO Project RETAINS (Responsive Efforts to Address Integral Needs in Staffing) employee engagement surveys to assist in retention.

During the stay interview, employees should be encouraged to speak about how they feel about the culture of the center; leaders cannot be afraid to hear hard truths and should never take honest feedback personally. Even if the information presented by the employee initially feels harsh, unreasonable

Leaders must have the courage to confront employees that are bringing down the ECC. Retention is rooted in a center's culture. The profession can't afford to have a toxic person under the headset at the cost of driving out both tenured and new employees. When toxic employees are retained simply to fill a seat, an agency cannot expect good employees, especially new ones, to stay. When 17% of an agency's work force is actively engaged, the impact on the ability of the rest of the employees to excel is crippled.² Ritz Carlton described the disengaged employee as a CAVE employee — constantly against virtually everything. If 17% of your employees are actively disengaged, swaying them to the “engaged” side could be a long-term battle, and one that might not be worth the fight. Interestingly, in the same survey, 32% of employees are actively engaged,³ leaving 52% of the employees in the neutral area.

The challenge for leaders is to keep the actively engaged employees happy, so that they remain focused on the mission and to bring the neutral employees to the actively engaged category.

When Kelle Hall, communications manager of Highland Park Texas Department of Public Safety, took on this personnel challenge, she had a blunt conversation with each CAVE employee, and she set out the vision she had for the center. She invited them to stay and adopt the new culture or pursue opportunities elsewhere.

and development. All of these have their roots in communication.

The other side of the engagement plan is employee development. Where does the employee want to go? During the 2023 APCO conference in Nashville, Tennessee, Robbie McCormick, Deputy Director of Cobb County (Georgia) Department of Emergency Communications, said that her department has interviews with employees and actively helps them attain their professional goals. Whether that is growing within their ECC with a variety of skill sets, gaining leadership experience, or as a starting point for another career such as with police, fire or EMS, the employee is left with the feeling that their center is a partner with them in their goals.

One of the other valuable takeaways from the Summit was patience. The landscape of ECCs is rapidly changing, and the work force is changing with it. All of the initiatives that were started by the leaders took time to plan, implement and show tangible results. Several panelists and speakers advised that once an initiative was implemented with the workforce it took upwards of a year to see the results. They reiterated that change is difficult for many employees, even when they know change is needed, and conformity to the new way takes time. Have patience with the employees and be prepared to fully explain the thought processes behind the initiative and, perhaps most importantly, seek employees' feedback.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the Staffing Summit, attendees had an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas for how to use the information they had learned going forward. Attendees were overwhelming enthusiastic about the idea of repeating the Staffing Summit to share new ideas and to provide participants an opportunity to collaborate and expand on what we as leaders can do for our centers. Many attendees felt this was the single most valuable training they had attended and felt the two-day format allowed a deep dive into the topic. Conference sessions

typically scratch the surface of topics, but this thorough examination of the staffing crisis conveyed valuable information and gave struggling centers hope that, with hard work, they can overcome this critical shortage. ●

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Culture can be defined as "the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, practices and norms of the individual person."<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False2. Culture is an easy fix and one that should not be a focal point of an organization.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False3. In August of 2023 APCO International established what new membership tier?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trades Membershipb. Alumni Membershipc. Student/Educator Membershipd. Public Sector Membership4. Inbounds behavior can be demonstrated as which of the following: (pick all that apply)<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Professionalismb. Civilityc. Eye rollingd. Snapping fingers at a coworkere. Not interrupting when another person is speaking | <ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Onboarding new employees is not important.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False6. What percentage of employees are estimated to be disengaged?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. 32%b. 2%c. 17%d. 50%7. Agencies may use "stay interviews" and the APCO Project RETAINS to assist with retention.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False8. Peer support teams, employee recognition teams, community outreach, recruiting teams and morale committees are all examples of what?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Methods of engagementb. A way for employees to bully othersc. A popularity contestd. A way to get overtime | <ol style="list-style-type: none">9. Performance feedback is meaningless and has no place in the ECC.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False10. All employees know that the industry needs change and are excited about change and will immediately conform to the new way of doing things.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False |
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