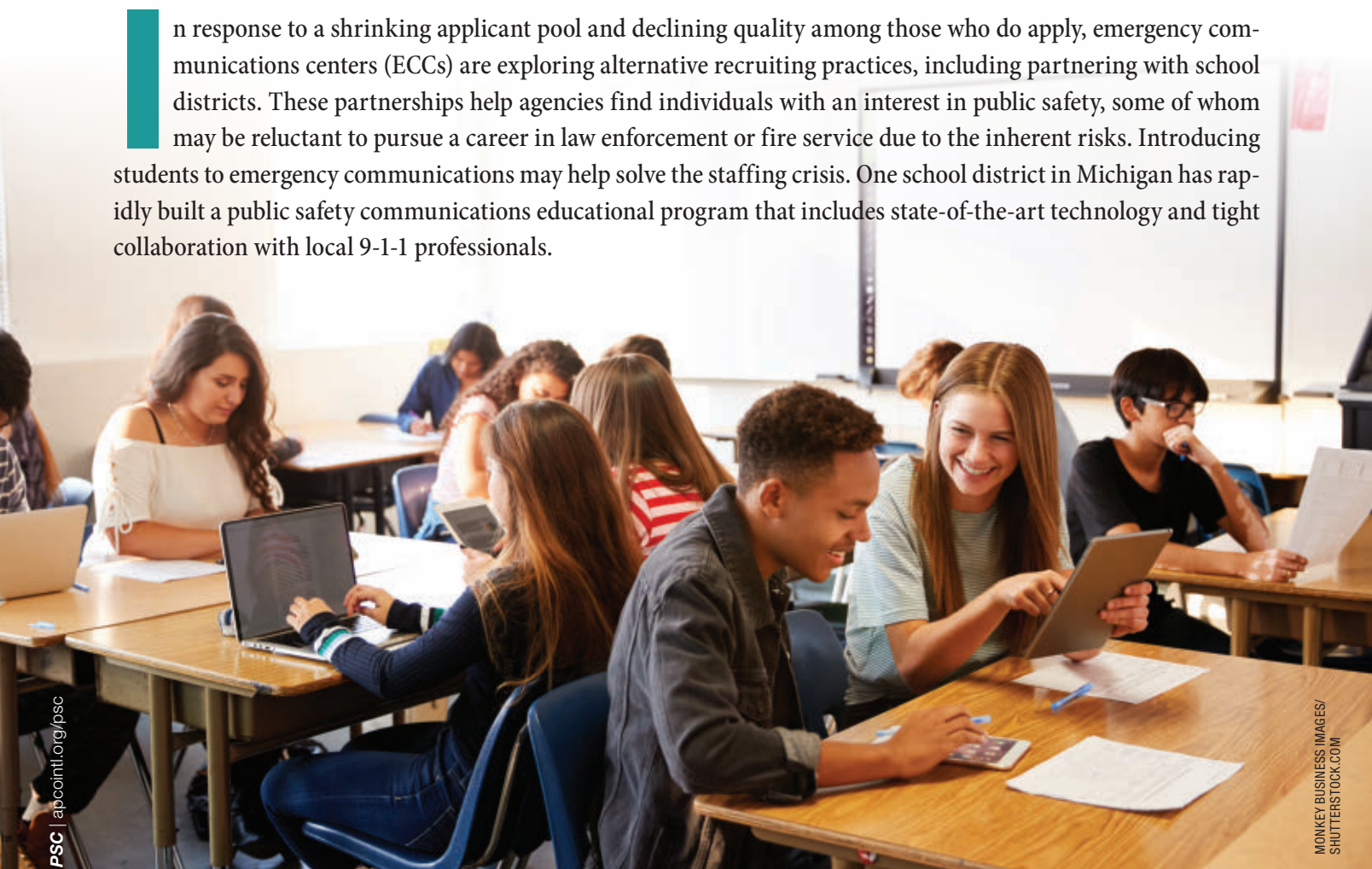


# 9-1-1 GOES TO SCHOOL

In collaboration with the local school district, one Michigan agency is pioneering a new approach to the public safety communications staffing crisis.

By Dave Plumb

In response to a shrinking applicant pool and declining quality among those who do apply, emergency communications centers (ECCs) are exploring alternative recruiting practices, including partnering with school districts. These partnerships help agencies find individuals with an interest in public safety, some of whom may be reluctant to pursue a career in law enforcement or fire service due to the inherent risks. Introducing students to emergency communications may help solve the staffing crisis. One school district in Michigan has rapidly built a public safety communications educational program that includes state-of-the-art technology and tight collaboration with local 9-1-1 professionals.



## CASE STUDY: GENESEE CAREER INSTITUTE


The Genesee Career Institute provides instructions and experiential learning in many career areas that help prepare Genesee County, Michigan, high school students for immediate entry into the workforce upon completion of high school and one of several school programs. Some programs offered include public administration, finance, agriscience and law enforcement. The Institute also offers excellent opportunities for students to gain advanced exposure to knowledge and skill sets in preparation for post-secondary education in their chosen field and can even lead to college credit.

One of the many examples of the school district's commitment to education in the public safety field started in 2021 when the Institute recognized the on-call fire departments staff shortage and began a firefighter training program. Upon graduation and completion of state testing, students graduated as certified state of Michigan firefighters. This program became so successful that it evolved from offering the course for one session a school year with 16 students to three sessions a year with 18 to 25 students per session. Through a grant program, the school built a two-bay, state-of-the-art functioning fire station with classrooms and a training tower. Area fire departments donated equipment, including a fire truck, to allow students to fully train and prepare for testing and training. In addition, the school has a law enforcement program that partners with area law enforcement agencies, allowing students to participate in several ride-alongs.

At the grand opening of the Fire Training Center in August 2023, the Institute set its sights on the next logical piece of the public safety program.

## EDUCATING THE EDUCATORS

Public education is a key component of the recruitment process. We found that many in the community believed the 9-1-1 field was strictly a law enforcement career or a field that could be likened to an operator or secretarial position. In fact, public safety communications is a career option that offers on-the-job training and does not require college education or law enforcement sponsorship. We adjusted our public education and



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recruiting strategy by stressing that the backgrounds of potential candidates — whether fresh out of high school, working as a waitress or a car salesman — are less important than the skills they can bring of listening and multitasking. We will teach them the knowledge required to be telecommunicators.

Impressing these facts about public safety communications on school administration is part of the annual presentation to school administrators delivered by ECC representatives. The main purpose of the annual presentation is to present the agency's career options to county superintendents. But it also includes discussion of the desperate need for public safety telecommunicator recruits.

Over the past several years, many in the public safety services field have witnessed a drastic change in the applicant pool. Twenty years ago, there were 10 to 50 applicants for every open position. Today, most of us experience one quality applicant for every 10 open positions. This pattern appears in all aspects of public safety, whether law enforcement, fire or public safety communications. Many agencies compete for applicants who seek the best hiring bonuses, retirement packages, pay and benefits. Our field also competes with careers offering a better work-life balance, limited overtime with work-from-home options and a more flexible work schedule.

The superintendents concluded that careers in the ECC were viable and sought-after alternatives for students not pursuing college and, as it turns out, some who were. The Institute and Genesee County 9-1-1 moved to align student education with opportunities in the 9-1-1 field.

At the conclusion of the 2023-2024 school year, the Institute sent a survey to

all incoming seniors to gauge interest in the first-year offering of public safety communications. As a new program, the school limited the class to 18 students, which immediately filled up. Upon completion of each semester, students earn three credits toward high school graduation.

In 2024, APCO International launched its Career Instructor Program (CIP). The program allows qualifying educators, through APCO memberships, a pathway to become certified to teach the APCO Public Safety Telecommunicator (PST) 1, 7th Edition course. This program came at a perfect time to allow the school to enroll an educator in the program. After successfully completing the CIP, the educator is now a certified APCO PST 1 instructor. This program greatly benefits students who, upon graduation and APCO membership, gain student certificates valid for four years, aiding their employment search. College-bound students also recognized the ability to gain employment in campus security or public safety ECCs while enrolled.

The ECC provided the Institute with many of the training materials that Genesee County 9-1-1 uses to teach new employees. This material dives into acronyms, mapping, directions of travel and jurisdictional lines. We shared radio etiquette techniques, audio recordings, and radio and agency call signs to allow the student to hear and understand radio operations. ECC employees also shared their experience, letting students know what they should expect in the public safety communications industry — ranging from training to a long-standing career.

The school invested in a customer-premises equipment (CPE) and computer aided dispatch (CAD) system, allowing students to simulate a public safety telecommunicator's experience. The school and the ECC also worked with a NG9-1-1 provider to provide automatic number identification/automatic location identification that linked the CAD, CPE and mapping system. Students also could learn text-to-911 call processing in the classroom and through a dedicated whitelisted number.

The final key to the program was getting the students into the ECC. Over the course of the school year, students leave their home school for three eight-hour shifts working

alongside a telecommunicator gaining real-life exposure and experience. Students learn all aspects of public safety communications from non-emergency and emergency call taking, text-to-911 call processing, as well as law enforcement, fire and emergency medical service dispatching and radio operations. Though students do not directly interact or process calls while in the ECC, they can implement what they have learned back in their secure and controlled classroom.

The school district is already looking to the future. Like its fire program, the school plans to expand its public safety communications program to a multi-session opportunity. As other programs expand and move into new buildings, the school has already eyed an area currently being used for its Certified Nurse Assistant program to be converted into a functioning public safety communications center with additional CAD and CPE positions. With communications being the key to all operations,

all public safety programs including law enforcement, fire and 9-1-1, will be able to work together preparing for a career in their chosen field. ●

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## CDE EXAM #73784

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Genesee Career Institute focuses on fields including:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Public administration</li> <li>b. Finance,</li> <li>c. Agriscience</li> <li>d. Public safety</li> <li>e. All the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Due to the national staffing crisis, emergency communications centers may partner with school districts as a way to recruit.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. The Genesee Career Institute built a state-of-the-art fire station to expand its public safety program.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. As a new program, students were hesitant to sign up for the public safety communications course.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. The school district began their Emergency Communication program in:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 2021-2022 school year</li> <li>b. 2022-2023 school year</li> <li>c. 2023-2024 school year</li> <li>d. 2024-2025 school year</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. The APCO Career Instructor Program (CIP) certifies educators to teach which APCO discipline(s):               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. APCO Public Safety Telecommunicator 1</li> <li>b. APCO Emergency Medical Dispatch</li> <li>c. APCO Fire Service Communications</li> <li>d. All of the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. The Emergency Communications Program partners students with law enforcement agencies to do a ride along to learn about emergency communications.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. As an investment, the Genesee Career Institute purchased what equipment to aid in the learning experience.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. CAD</li> <li>b. CPE</li> <li>c. P25 Radio system</li> <li>d. a and b</li> <li>e. All the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>9. Students work directly in the emergency communications center, answering and dispatching emergency calls.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> <li>10. The school district is preparing to launch its own emergency communications center ran by students.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
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