CDE #73790

STRENGTHENING 9-1-1 THROUGH MUTUAL AID

The Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) brings structure, training and support to safeguard operations when disaster strikes.

By Jason Smith

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Public safety telecommunicators (PSTs) are often called the 'first' first responders. As the nerve center for 9-1-1 services, emergency communications centers (ECCs) must keep operating through everything from natural disasters to prolonged critical incidents. When staffing is stretched thin or call volume spikes, both operations and public safety are put at risk.

The Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) program was created to meet this challenge. As a structured, deployable mutual aid program specifically for 9-1-1 personnel, TERT provides trained telecommunicators who can assist impacted ECCs, ensuring that vital emergency communications services remain uninterrupted.

The TERT program was established in November 2005 following a memorandum of understanding between the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) that aimed to advance the TERT program. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began establishing a credentialing process. NENA met with Homeland Security and FEMA leaders to ensure that telecommunicators were added to this credentialing process. In the spring of 2006, APCO International and NENA collaborated to standardize the profile of a TERT telecommunicator and a standardized tier deployment structure (TDS), resulting in the creation of the National Joint TERT Initiative (NJTI)[1].

The Mission of the NJTI is as follows: "In partnership, NENA and APCO are dedicated to the development of a nationally recognized program for telecommunicator mutual aid response in the aftermath of disasters, providing information as to operational deployment of TERT programs and taking a leadership role in assisting governmental agencies in the development of TERT style programs at the regional, state and local levels[2]."

The NJTI serves as the national oversight body that promotes, supports and standardizes the development of TERT programs nationwide. The primary goal is to provide a structured framework that allows trained and qualified telecommunicators to deploy to other jurisdictions during times of crisis, helping restore and maintain emergency communication services.

The purpose of NJTI extends far beyond coordination. It is a centralized resource for education, planning and operational readiness. By assisting in developing national standards, NJTI ensures that participating states are aligned in training, credentialing and deployment procedures. This alignment enables seamless mutual aid support across state lines in the event of disasters.

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In short, NJTI provides the roadmap and infrastructure necessary for states to establish and maintain their own TERT initiatives. It champions the idea that telecommunicators deserve the same level of support and organized response as field responders — firefighters, emergency medical personnel and law enforcement officers.

To ensure the continuity of 9-1-1 services during large-scale emergencies or prolonged events, TERT supports ECC staff members who may experience burnout, trauma or a significantly increased call volume due to crisis events. It also enables peer-to-peer mutual aid while promoting collaboration and solidarity across jurisdictions and states. Much like how firefighters, emergency medical personnel and law enforcement officers receive reinforcements through mutual aid agreements, TERT enables the same level of support for telecommunicators, whose critical services are often invisible to the public eye.

Telecommunicators are trained to perform under pressure, but no individual or team is immune to the effects of overwhelming call volume, extended shifts or emotional exhaustion. Events like mass shootings, hazardous material incidents or significant public safety events can stretch ECC resources beyond their limits.

TERT ensures that trained professionals can step in to provide relief for fatigued or traumatized staff, maintain operational efficiency during spikes in call volume, bring specialized expertise for complex incidents and support long-term recovery efforts, helping ECCs return to normal operations. By deploying trained and credentialed telecommunicators into affected areas, the TERT program offers not only staff support but also moral support, critical incident stress management (CISM), peer-to-peer support, cultural understanding and resilience.

Why should states consider implementing a TERT program? In an era of increasing emergency complexity, TERT enables states to build redundancy into their emergency communications systems. A TERT program augments an agency's continuity of operations planning (COOP) by providing a human capital reserve. TERT integrates with emergency management frameworks, including emergency management assistance compacts (EMAC) and the incident command system (ICS). TERT assistance reduces burnout and turnover during prolonged emergencies, thereby protecting the integrity of ECC staffing. By investing in a TERT program, states ensure that ECCs are never alone during crisis conditions, whether the disaster is human-made, natural or technological.

By formalizing public safety telecommunicator mutual aid, the TERT program elevates the status of telecommunicators as vital emergency responders. Telecommunicators often operate behind the scenes, yet they carry the weight of the initial emergency response. Participation in TERT recognizes their importance within the emergency

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response ecosystem, opens professional development opportunities through deployment experience, and creates leadership pathways for those who take on roles such as team leaders, coordinators or trainers.

While hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires are the most common catalysts for TERT deployments, the program's value extends far beyond natural disasters. TERT deployments can be crucial for tragic incidents such as a line-of-duty death, suicide or a multi-casualty event involving first responders, where the emotional toll can debilitate an entire center.

In addition to natural disasters, TERT teams can:

- Relieve grieving staff so they can attend memorial services or seek counseling.
- Provide temporary staffing during emotional decompression periods.
- Support mental wellness by simply understanding the unique trauma telecommunicators face.

ECCs dealing with mass shootings, bomb threats or acts of terrorism may experience prolonged surges in call volume, multiple jurisdiction coordination demands and emotional trauma, especially when children or public spaces are involved. TERT staff bring relief and professionalism to these emotionally charged, logistically complex scenes, often assisting in communications recovery while core staff recover or transition to investigative support roles.

Events such as political conventions, major sports tournaments or festivals create temporary spikes in demand. In many cases, ECCs in host cities benefit from pre-planned TERT deployments to handle increased call volumes, support planned protests or civil demonstrations, and relieve local staff working extended hours. This demonstrates that TERT is not only reactive, but it can be proactive and strategic in resource planning.

Implementing a TERT program within each state is more than a policy decision — it is an investment in the resilience, professionalism and well-being of the 9-1-1 community. As threats to public safety continue to evolve, so must the infrastructure that supports our first responders.

How does a state implement a TERT program? Here are some suggestions for successfully establishing and maintaining one.

ESTABLISH STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT AND LEADERSHIP.

- Secure buy-in by engaging a state 9-1-1 coordinator, public safety communications officials and/or emergency management agency to obtain formal support.
- Appoint a state TERT coordinator who will serve as the main point of contact to oversee the development, coordination and activation of the program. The state emergency management agency should recognize state coordinators. Some states may also choose to have regional coordinators to assist the state coordinator.
- Form a TERT steering committee to include representatives from ECCs, APCO/NENA chapters, emergency management and mutual aid coordinators.

ADOPT NATIONAL STANDARDS.

- The APCO/NENA Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) Deployment American National Standard provides the framework for developing, training, equipping, team structure and deployment protocols while ensuring consistency and interoperability across states.

DEVELOP STATE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.

- Consider developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) that outline deployment criteria on when and how TERT teams will be activated.
- Ensure telecommunicators are covered under workers' compensation and liability insurance during deployments.
- Consider resource typing and rostering for defining team structure and maintaining a database of trained, deployable TERT members.

DEVELOP A TRAINING PROGRAM.

- A training program ensures that qualified telecommunicators are taught the approved curriculum on expectations for deployments.
- Conduct regular tabletop or deployment drills to ensure readiness.

PROMOTE THE PROGRAM.

- Outreach is key. Inform ECCs about the benefits of participating in the TERT program.
- Partnership is essential. Work with APCO, NENA, emergency management agencies and public safety mutual aid networks.

For states exploring or establishing a TERT program, navigating the administrative and operational setup can be daunting. Implementation resources are designed to help states establish a sustainable and compliant program. Additionally, NJTI provides direct consultation and mentorship. States can reach out to committee members for individualized support in crafting policies or training programs, making the initiative an invaluable partner in public safety preparedness.

All resources are built upon lessons learned from real-world TERT deployments. This ensures that states are not just preparing in theory but are learning from practical, tested scenarios. Feedback from TERT deployments following hurricanes, wildfires and other large-scale emergencies has helped NJTI refine deployment standards to ensure telecommunicator safety, efficiency and effectiveness.

NJTI does not just provide initial setup support; it also offers ongoing collaboration and networking. Through national conferences, virtual meetings and working groups, NJTI fosters a community of TERT state coordinators and stakeholders who learn from one another and collectively evolve the program. When a state faces a deployment need, NJTI provides support to help identify available resources and telecommunicators in neighboring jurisdictions. During real-time disasters, this support is critical for ensuring timely and practical aid.

In conclusion, a well-developed TERT program supports ECCs during their most critical time of need, demonstrates care and commitment to telecommunicators, and enhances interoperability and mutual aid in public safety communications. Whether responding to a hurricane, helping a grieving ECC or supporting a city hosting a global

event, TERT is a powerful tool that ensures 9-1-1 never stops answering the call. Every state should take steps to build and support a robust TERT program because the strength of our emergency communications system depends on it.

For more information about TERT/NJTI, developing a TERT program or becoming a champion for TERT, visitnjti-tert.org. ●

REFERENCES

1. National Joint TERT Initiative. "History of the Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) Initiative." Retrieved from https://www.njti-tert.org/wp-content/uploads/History-of-the-Telecommunicator-Emergency-Response-Taskforce.pdf
2. National Joint TERT Initiative. "Mission." Retrieved from https://www.njti-tert.org/about/mission/

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1. The National Joint TERT Initiative (NJTI) is a partnership between:
   a. APCO and NFPA
   b. NENA and APCO
   c. NFPA and NENA
   d. NASNA and APCO

2. TERT can assist ECCs during what type of events?
   a. Line of duty death
   b. Wildfires
   c. Flooding
   d. All of the above

3. The first step a state should take to begin a TERT program is:
   a. Establish state level support and leadership
   b. Ask for volunteers to join TERT
   c. Write guidelines for the TERT program
   d. Read the TERT ANS

4. Conducting on-going exercises and drills is important to:
   a. Keep everyone on their toes
   b. Give members something to do
   c. Ensure operational readiness
   d. Provide administrative support

5. TERT stands for:
   a. Telephony Emergency Reroute Terms
   b. Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce
   c. Telecommunicator Emergency Revival Tasks
   d. Telecommunicator Emergency Response Training

6. TERT will only respond during natural disasters.
   a. True
   b. False

7. A TERT program augments an agency's continuity of operations plan (COOP) by:
   a. Providing meals for on-duty telecommunicators
   b. Ensuring that the backup center is operational
   c. Providing human capital (staff)
   d. Creating leadership pathways

8. A TERT coordinator is the main point of contact to:
   a. Oversee development, coordination and activation of the program
   b. Provide the framework for training, team structure and deployment protocols
   c. Serve as the infrastructure that supports first responders

9. States considering a TERT program should ensure telecommunicators are covered under workers' compensation insurance and liability insurance during deployment.
   a. True
   b. False

10. Suggestions for implementing a state TERT program include:
    a. Adopt national standards
    b. Develop policies and procedures
    c. Create a training program
    d. All of the above

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