

VALUE PROPOSITION

A closer look at APCO 2026 reveals real-world impact that's worth the effort.

By Bailey Rademacher

What opportunities does the APCO Annual Conference & Expo provide? How can you make the most of the experience — and how do you secure agency funding to attend?

These are questions many public safety communications professionals ask when they first consider attending the APCO conference. I always wanted to attend a conference, but the possibility wasn't in reach until after I started working for APCO. I began my pre-conference research by reviewing the APCO conference website and contacting past attendees. Those I spoke to described the APCO conference as profoundly impactful, exhilarating and one of the most valuable professional experiences they had ever had.

That feedback immediately caught my attention, and I knew I had to experience it for myself. The more I heard about it, the more I realized this was not just another conference, but something many professionals in our field consider a major milestone. For many telecommunicators and emergency communications professionals, the APCO conference offers a chance to step outside the daily routine and view the profession from a broader perspective.

Attending a larger conference provides a deeper understanding and a broader perspective on the profession as a whole. Many telecommunicators experience the same interactions and procedures for years while working within their emergency communications centers (ECCs). Although this can help to grow knowledge internally within the ECC,

it may also prevent growth and exposure to other ideas or approaches. Conferences such as APCO's provide an opportunity to have a clearer picture of how the profession operates. Learning how other agencies address challenges helps attendees to review their own policies for potential improvements.

UNDERSTANDING THE COST — AND THE VALUE

Like most first-time attendees, cost was my first concern. Expenses vary depending on travel, lodging, registration and meals, and for many agencies, funding is not guaranteed.

For some, attending requires applying for grants, using training funds or building a case for budget approval. Cost is often the biggest barrier — but understanding the return on investment can shift that perspective.

Because it was my first time considering the conference, I began researching to understand what the experience would be like and why it was spoken of so highly. I reviewed the conference schedule and continued speaking with others who had attended in the past. I quickly realized that the APCO conference offers far more than a couple of training sessions. It is an opportunity to learn, connect, collaborate and gain exposure to ideas, technologies and people shaping the future of public safety communications worldwide.



During my research I observed a frequent emphasis on the relationships and educational benefits that past attendees had gained, which positively impacted them and their ECCs. Many described returning home with new ideas for operations, training and technology that their agencies had not previously considered.

The conference features educational sessions for public safety communications professionals. At this year's 2026 conference in San Antonio, Texas, APCO will offer 11 professional development tracks, 132 individual sessions and the opportunity to earn up to 20 continuing education units (CEUs). The topics range from federal partners and frontline telecommunicators to leadership development, radio and wireless communication technologies, and cybersecurity for public safety communications. These sessions offer the opportunity to learn from professionals who have faced and solved many of the same challenges encountered in ECCs.

For a first-time attendee, this level of access to industry knowledge is invaluable.



Attendees can explore topics they may not encounter in their own center or region. APCO training covers topics ranging from radio infrastructure and call taking to cybersecurity threats, helping attendees broaden their perspectives and expand their knowledge.

One thing that really caught my attention when I looked into the professional development opportunities was the diverse range of sessions offered. When working inside an ECC, it can be easy to put on blinders and focus only on your own agency's policies and operations. At the APCO conference, you can sit in on a session highlighting real experiences to understand how other agencies operate and the challenges and solutions they have found.

With the many tracks APCO offers, attendees can select sessions that align with their current role or support their future career goals. No matter your role within an ECC, there are sessions designed for all levels of knowledge and experience. No more sitting in a one-size-fits-most training; you

can focus on what is relevant to you and your goals.

BUILDING A NETWORK THAT LASTS

Networking opportunities at the conference are abundant and unlike those at many other events. Thousands of telecommunications, supervisors, managers, trainers and ECC leaders from across the country and around the world attend, giving you a chance to connect with people who share many of the same challenges and experiences. These conversations lead to new ideas, mentoring opportunities and long-term professional relationships. Attendees often discuss shared concerns such as staffing shortages, complex calls and adapting to new technology, offering fresh solutions you can bring back to your own center.

APCO also hosts special events and speakers — some requiring invitations or additional registration — that provide relaxed, informal networking with peers and leaders. By taking advantage of both the sessions and these networking opportunities, you walk

away not just with knowledge, but with a network of people and ideas that can have a real impact on your work and your agency.

The sense of community I felt at the APCO conference stood out to me the first time I attended. As public safety telecommunications we often work behind the scenes and are rarely seen and mostly heard. As a result, our importance is often overlooked by those outside the field. Attending a conference with other professionals who understand the demands we face and the responsibilities we bear can be very motivating. Hearing stories of others' experiences in their centers and celebrating what we do truly reinforces the importance of our work. The feeling of connection provides restored appreciation and builds enthusiasm to continue growing in the field.

One of my favorite parts of the conference experience was the exhibit hall. For many first-time attendees, this is the highlight. With more than 200 vendors displaying products and services, you can interact with and test new technologies before



ROBERT LEVY PHOTOGRAPHY

considering implementation at your own center. Computer-aided dispatch (CAD) systems, radio equipment, mapping software, data tools and other innovative technologies are all on display, giving you a firsthand look at how they function and how they might improve operations back home. Instead of just reading brochures or emails, you get to see these tools in action.

The exhibit hall also provides the unique opportunity to speak directly with the companies that design and develop these systems. Vendors are often eager to explain how their products support responders and telecommunicators and to share details about upcoming advancements. Experiencing these technologies firsthand helps you understand the direction the profession is heading and

stay up to date with the latest tools and solutions.

Ultimately, attending the APCO conference isn't just about what you gain as an individual; it's about what you can bring back to your agency. The knowledge, connections and exposure to new technologies can be shared with leadership and coworkers, helping to improve training, operations and strategies across your ECC. Attending the conference is an investment not only in your professional growth but in the growth and advancement of your entire ECC.

GETTING AGENCY BUY-IN

This, of course, brings me to the most important question. How do you convince your agency that attending the APCO

conference is worth it? Many agencies' budgets are tight, and sending employees to a conference requires some preplanning and consideration. APCO provides resources that explain the benefits of attending and outline potential costs, which can be helpful when presenting the request to supervisors or administrators. You can find these tools and downloads on the conference website at apco2026.org/registration/gain-approval/. These resources explain the benefits of the conference in a clear, structured manner for you to present to supervisors and administrators so they may better understand how attending would support training, agency improvement and professional development.

Attending the APCO conference was an opportunity to grow in the profession, improve my agency and develop myself. Reflecting back, attending the APCO conference represented much more than simply participating in a professional event. It provided the opportunity to connect with peers, learn from agencies facing similar challenges and return home with ideas that could benefit my entire ECC. ●

Bailey Rademacher is an 8-year public safety communications professional dedicated to improving emergency communications and supporting others' growth in the field. Bailey has a strong interest in training and professional development and actively assists in programs that support the growth and education of telecommunicators. Bailey is currently pursuing her Master's in Instructional Design from the University of Central Florida.

CDE EXAM #77096

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is one of the main reasons public safety communications professionals consider attending the APCO Annual Conference & Expo? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. To earn college degrees b. To gain professional knowledge and connect with others in the field c. To replace agency training programs d. To conduct emergency response drills 2. According to the article, what is often the biggest barrier preventing first-time attendees from going to the conference? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Lack of interest b. Limited training sessions c. Cost of attendance d. Difficulty traveling internationally 3. Which of the following expenses is mentioned as part of attending the conference? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Equipment purchase fees b. Travel, hotel accommodation and registration fees c. Licensing fees d. Uniform costs 4. What stood out most to the author after researching the conference and talking with past attendees? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The conference only offers basic training b. The conference provides opportunities to learn, connect and collaborate c. The conference is only useful for supervisors d. The conference focuses mainly on vendor sales | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. At the 2026 conference in San Antonio, approximately how many professional development tracks are provided? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 5 b. 11 c. 25 d. 50 6. What is one benefit of the educational sessions offered at the conference? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. They focus only on local agency policies b. They provide insight from professionals who have solved similar challenges c. They replace all agency training programs d. They eliminate the need for additional certifications 7. What advantage do attendees gain from networking at the conference? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Guaranteed promotions b. Opportunities to build relationships and share solutions to common challenges c. Free technology upgrades d. Automatic job placement 8. What makes the exhibit hall a highlight for many first-time attendees? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. It offers free training certificates b. It allows attendees to test and explore new public safety technologies c. It replaces classroom sessions d. It focuses only on administrative topics | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Why is attending the APCO conference considered beneficial for an entire emergency communications center? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. It allows attendees to bring back knowledge, ideas and technology insights b. It guarantees new equipment purchases c. It replaces local training requirements d. It eliminates staffing challenges 10. What resource does APCO provide to help attendees request funding from their agency? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Vendor sponsorship forms b. A "Gain Approval" website page with tools explaining the benefits and costs c. A required letter from conference speakers d. A mandatory grant application program |
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