

# HEALTHY CHALLENGES IN THE ECC

Integrating physical and mental activities into the workday can diminish the downside of a telecommunicator's sedentary job.

By Sherry Glick and Mechelle Grant

*“Nothing about the human body is purely physical or mental. What affects you physically can also affect you mentally and vice versa.”*

— Roberto Cruz Barahona, M.D.

In an emergency communications center (ECC) public safety telecommunicators often spend long hours sitting at desks. Being tied to a console for long hours can contribute to physical challenges. Regular physical activity is shown to boost physical and mental productivity and morale.

Understanding that activity benefits the health and well-being of everyone in the ECC should be motive enough to look at ways to implement physical and mental activity in the workday. Building physical and mental well-being assists in the productivity and positive interaction between the telecommunicator, the public and responders. Positive interaction with those the ECC serves is imperative.

Positive games and challenges in the ECC can promote team-building, reduce stress and improve productivity. The challenges and games can also promote employee engagement. This builds mental clarity and helps reduce stress. Physical challenges might include step challenges, fitness, hydration or even sleep. Mental health challenges could include gratitude, giving back/volunteering, even reading or prioritizing self-care time. Competition on the shift or between shifts can be fun and energizing mentally and physically.

Physical challenges such as doing a squat every time a unit checks out on a traffic stop

or stretching your arms over your head each time a unit clears get the body moving and relieve some of the stress. These actions may help fight the negative effects of prolonged sitting, boosting energy levels and improving posture.

Challenges and games can foster collaboration and trust among telecommunicators. The challenges and games can be shift-wide or agency-wide. Competition can feature shift versus shift or a telecommunicator group versus a field responder group to build collaboration across departments.

Boosting mental acuity in the ECC is also important, and puzzles can help. Crossword puzzles, word searches and logic riddles can stimulate the mind and improve focus. Using free sites to create these puzzles and games can personalize them and improve workflow. Most cities and towns are growing, and creating a word search with the new street names in a development brings familiarity to the telecommunicator. People come and

go throughout the public safety community, and crossword puzzles created with new officer names and badge numbers is another fun way to build knowledge. Creating a scavenger hunt or work-based trivia challenge fosters positive interaction and builds knowledge.

Meditation and mindfulness help calm minds and build morale. This may mean reflecting on something positive by creating a gratitude journal and encouraging a goal of 30 days of gratitude. If the shift starts with a briefing, take the first few minutes for a guided breathing exercise or meditation. After the initial group session, encourage everyone to start each day by taking those few minutes for themselves.

Encourage “random acts of kindness” within the ECC. It could be something as simple as a small token or handwritten card left for a co-worker. The recipient then passes something on to another colleague. The possibilities are limitless, much like paying for the person behind you in line at the coffee shop. These random acts can boost confidence, happiness and optimism. According to the Mental Health Foundation, random acts of kindness improve our mood by generating the brain chemicals dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and endorphins.



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Here are some ways to get started generating physical and mental activities, each of which should be customized to your workplace, including:

- A step challenge with teams that encourage friendly competition.
- Bingo using cards customized on free teacher sites. This can be used for both physical and mental well-being.
- Crossword puzzles and word searches using free teacher sites can make it easy to create puzzles personalized for your ECC.

- Scavenger hunts and trivia quizzes personalized for physical or mental challenge.
- Guided meditation followed by a challenge where telecommunicators practice outside of work and/or share progress. Start small and work your way up. Set up a routine as well as a timeframe in terms of days or weeks with a starting date and end date. Rewards can be fun and silly. They can be material (if the budget permits) or certificates created in Microsoft Word. Reach out to agencies you serve. Our Fraternal Order of Police lodge has donated funds for

department-wide challenges. Coins, T-shirts or general office swag from the agencies you serve can serve as incentives. A trip to the dollar store can score a small gift bag with cute pens and goodies.

The challenges and activities can be encouraged by administration, but telecommunicators can implement these as well. Sometimes games and ideas are received with more excitement and buy-in if the ideas come from coworkers instead of supervisors. Reach out to all employees in the center, and allow others to take on some of the work in creating challenges. Every ECC has talented people working at every level; use those talents.

Games and challenges can boost the overall physical and mental health of the ECC. Be proactive and creative and make the ECC a fun place to work. With all of the negative emergencies that telecommunicators deal with daily, look for positive ways to improve each person's well-being. Physical and mental games and challenges implemented in a fun, productive way combats the downside of a sedentary occupation. ●

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## Money-Making Wellness

By Jessica "Jae" Lohr

As emergency communications centers (ECCs) strive to improve mental health and wellness support, my agency, the Charlottesville-UVA-Albemarle County (Virginia) ECC, has developed a wellness stipend that includes all administrative and support staff. The stipend launched in March 2023, and offered \$75 per quarter to employees for improving their personal wellness. It's a flexible program that allows coworkers to use the funds to fit their personal wellness needs.

The sign-up form offers money in return for staff engagement with standard mental health and wellness activities: exercise equipment purchases, wellness classes, gym membership and the like. There's

also the option to select "other," in which staff can write their intended use of the funds. Does fishing help your mental health? Spend it on bait and tackle. How about camping and taking walks in the woods? Use it on a park pass or camping gear. I spend my stipend on fire starters and blankets, as nothing is better for my mental health than stargazing next to a fire.

The stipend, approved by the ECC's governing board and part of the agency's budget, has doubled since its inception and is now worth \$150 per quarter, and more than 90% of all eligible staff take advantage of it. Enrollment happens annually and is completed by a simple emailed form.

Each of us benefits from different things that target our mental health and wellness, and finding ways to address those needs may be as simple as "whatever works for you."