



# '9-1-1, WHAT IS YOUR EMERGENCY?'

# STAFFING

ECC's can take concrete steps to improve recruiting, hiring and retention.

By Jennifer Kirkland

Spend any amount of time in an emergency communications center (ECC), or at a 9-1-1 conference, and before long the conversation will turn to staffing. At conferences, the conversation goes something like this: "How many people are you down?" "Oh, we're down 6 people, what about you?" "We're down three with four in training" and so the conversations go, on and on, across the country. In the center, the conversations sound like this: "This place is a revolving door." "Why should I get to know the new trainees when they might not be here very long?" and the perennial question, "Will we ever be fully staffed?"

Those of us in leadership positions have probably had to explain more than once, to elected officials or partner agency leadership, why staffing is always a challenge in a comm center. We talk about the challenges of the job, how hard it is to train, the statistic that "only 2% of the population can do this job" and culture in the ECC. We say, "this is how it always has been" and "staffing will always be a problem in 9-1-1."

This is a call to action to change that. Today, with our ability to reach people and training innovations, we as 9-1-1 leaders should refuse to accept the notion that we can't do anything about staffing. We can, we should and we need to start now.

## RECRUITING

Let's address some of the common challenges we face when recruiting and hiring. 9-1-1 sometimes struggles because we are behind the scenes; kids don't grow up saying "I want to be a 9-1-1 dispatcher when I grow up." We can work to change that: we can do more outreach in the elementary and middle schools to teach kids not only how to dial 9-1-1 but about all the great aspects of our job (CPR saves, delivering babies, helping someone in their moment of need). We can talk about the exciting technology we use like text-to-911, video, cameras and other great tools. We can proactively visit high school career counselors and educate them about the job,

visit with students, tell them about position requirements and keep 9-1-1 at the forefront of their minds when they consider next steps after high school. We can work with local chambers of commerce to promote our names and job opportunities. Tap into countless recruiting opportunities in your community by casting a wider net. Consider partnering with neighboring agencies to combine hiring and testing activities to share the load and broaden candidate pools. These are just a few things we can do to recruit new hires.

## TRAINING

There are so many innovative ways to train people. If your training program takes a long time, consider using a phased approach, where people are signed off on a phase (e.g. call taking) and then work shifts while others are trained up then go back into training until fully trained. Explore adding more trainers to your CTO team. Look for ways to streamline your training: can you use task lists to be more efficient? Can you use one trainer to train multiple trainees (think classroom or initial material presentation)? What are some other out-of-the-box ways to train your people in a shorter amount of time, or maximize the time you have?



## RETENTION

The next piece of the puzzle is retention, and here is where a lot of leaders get discouraged. A center's culture plays a major part in whether employees stay or go. Think about it: would you want to work 40 (or 50 or 60) hours in a place where people were meant to each other or where the atmosphere is so thick you can cut it with a knife? Of course not. Add that to the pressures of shift work, the challenging callers, and field responders who are sometimes not supportive, and it becomes clear why we lose so many good people. The simple fact is that leaders must cultivate a positive and supportive culture. Leaders must remove barriers in the way of people wanting to come to work and do their best.

Another aspect of retention is job enhancement and satisfaction. Even the most dedicated telecommunicator can tire of doing the same thing every day. Look for ways to involve your people in the center: are there committees they can join or start? Do you have an incident dispatch team? Can you start or invigorate a scheduling committee to help address scheduling challenges? How do you incorporate your team's ideas? Can you involve them in developing and providing continuing education for the team? Find

“**Look for ways to involve your people in the center: are there committees they can join or start? Do you have an incident dispatch team? Can you start or invigorate a scheduling committee to help address scheduling challenges?**”

your people's strengths and give them opportunities to use them at work. Using these techniques to enhance the job and increase satisfaction improves retention.

## COMPENSATION

Pay and benefits are not the only reason people leave public safety communications, but they can play a big role. Funding for centers, like staffing, has always been a problem, but it's one we must address. With more states, counties and municipalities leading the way by recognizing their professionals as first responders, we should leverage this recognition with a commensurate bump in pay. Advertising the specialized skills and training required to successfully perform this job can help to justify pay rates. Telecommunicators deserve pay that acknowledges the responsibility of handling

life-and-death calls every shift. We must work to educate the decisionmakers on the perils of low pay, and the correlation between low pay and high turnover. Paying our 9-1-1 professionals a professional-level wage helps boost the industry and increases retention.

Everything that affects staffing levels is important to the ECC leadership and should be the critical focus of the leader's job. Having the best equipment and technology does not matter if there is no one to run it. Staffing shortages have been the norm for far too long in our industry. It's time for us leaders to take action and say “no more.” We must shape the future and make it better; we must not settle for “this is the way it's always been and always will be.”

If every leader reading this takes steps to address staffing challenges and create real change, we can revolutionize our profession and make it better now, and for those who come after us. We need to reject the status quo and actively work to ensure that our centers have enough of the most precious resource there is: our people. ●

*Jennifer Kirkland, ENP, CPE, RPL, ARM-P, is 9-1-1 Center Manager, Grand Junction (Colorado) Regional Communication Center.*