

Staffing Shortages in 9-1-1

Every week we gather articles that we think will be of interest to eNews readers and every week we see similar articles about emergency communications centers (ECCs) being short staffed. Not only does this negatively impact 9-1-1 services and the communities you serve, but it's impacting your mental health. Telecommunicators are overworked — this was a problem before the pandemic and now illness and quarantine within ECCs have amplified the issue. We see it in the news, we see it in discussions on PSCconnect, and we even changed the theme of this issue to “Staffing and Succession Planning” to address the topic.

The first step is to understand the problem at hand. Where does your center stand? What does full staffing look like? What is causing the shortage and what is it affecting — training, morale, wellness issues or something else?

APCO has resources that can help ECCs get to the bottom of staffing issues so you can begin to form a solution. APCO Project RETAINS (Responsive Efforts to Address Integral Needs in Staffing) is composed of two parts. The most recent report: “Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Answering

Points (PSAPs): A Supplemental Study” is available for free to APCO members and those who purchase the RETAINS 3.0 Toolkit. The RETAINS Toolkit 3.0 is a subscription services that includes three tools: staffing, retention and the employee satisfaction survey. Either is a great place to start in identifying the full scope of your center's staffing problem. For more information, visit apointl.org/retains.

For ECC employees at every level, APCO's eight-hour course “Public Safety Communications Staffing and Employee Retention” provides over 300 tips, guidelines and effective practices on subjects ranging from creating effective shift schedules to candidate recruitment and from maintaining staff to employee recognition. For more information, visit apointl.org/staffing-course.

PSC Magazine is also an important information source, offering articles written by telecommunicators about how they are mitigating the problem. See the articles in this issue, “Recruiting Quality Public Safety Telecommunicators” and “Public Safety Telecommunications Training Goes to High School,” for ideas on creative recruitment sources.

The March/April 2022 issue of PSC Magazine is full of information on how to recognize and appreciate your staff, including the articles “How to Employ Recognition in the ECC” and “Recognition Success Stories.” That issue also featured ideas to help with the mental load of understaffing in the articles “Occupational Identity and Well-being: Ideas From Telecommunicators” and “How to Alleviate Stress in 10 Days.”

In addition, we recently kicked off a webinar series focused on staffing issues — from how to identify your ECC's needs, to retention, recruitment and operational strategies for managing understaffing. These webinars will provide you with insight from other emergency communications professionals experiencing the same issues as you, as well as actionable insights you can bring back to your center.

There is no easy answer, and the issue itself is multifaceted. Does your center have a budget to support high-level solutions like remote call taking? Or are you looking for smaller ways to keep your current staff happy in their positions? No matter the size of your agency or the breadth of your concerns around staffing, APCO is here to support you. ●

Pages From the Past

Maintaining staff coverage for emergency response in the face of staff shortages is a major preoccupation for the public safety telecommunications industry today. To cope, emergency communications sometimes require overtime among staff.

But in sparsely populated reaches of the United States in the 1960s, ECCs took a more mechanical approach. In 1963, rural western states were striving to connect their emergency communications with the rest of the country when Idaho began setting up a statewide system of teletype machines.

In the July 1963 article, “Idaho Law Enforcement Communications Association” by John Massey, communications technician for the City of Boise, Massey explained the value of teletype communications even when no one might be on duty to receive it. “Any office will have all information regarding what took place throughout the area covered by the system while that particular office may have been closed or when an operator was not available to receive the message,” Massey wrote. ●

