



# GROOMING AND APPEARANCE: IS IT TIME FOR A CHANGE?

By Fred Cummings

**A**gency heads often are unwilling to have discussions about relaxing grooming and appearance standards even though staffing is an ever-increasing problem in emergency communications centers (ECCs) nationwide. When some of us started decades ago, a different dynamic held sway when it came to uniform, grooming and appearance standards. Many centers still adhere to these restrictive policies due to “traditions” and “the way it has always been.”

What started many years ago as formal uniforms has evolved. Readers may remember when uniforms consisted of dress slacks, badges, collar brass, ties, etc. Men were clean shaven. This was true not only in the ECC but was also prominent among police and firefighters. Jewelry for men or women was restricted. Today, business casual attire is more common:

- Some places are OK with jeans and shorts.
- Formal uniform shirts have given way to polos and sweatshirts.
- Polished boots have now given way to brown or black shoes, sneakers and, in some cases, sandals.

Because the population and applicants are becoming more diverse and society accepts different appearance standards, it is quite common that agency administrations are asked to revisit grooming and appearance policies. As a profession, we need to adapt to a changing society. This is true with respect to dress and physical appearance.

Acceptance started with tattoos and is now widely moving toward facial hair. Neatly trimmed goatees or even beards don't affect how or the proficiency with which an

employee does their job. The same is true with tattoos, which are now more widely accepted throughout the public safety community.

Some agencies are missing out on good applicants because of strict tattoo or facial hair policies. Many allow facial hair growth for charity during October and November. The argument could be made that if it is allowed for that, it should be allowed year-round. Tattoos and facial hair are no longer detriments to the agency; we now see police officers on the street with facial hair, including beards. Visible tattoos are now allowed in many agencies and there are often photographs on social media of public safety workers with visible tattoos and beards. It seemingly has no negative impact on public perception, and in many cases, the public perceives they are dealing with an ordinary, everyday person. This perception is what we need more of in public safety.

Recognizing this need, many departments are moving away from militaristic looks to better connect with people. In a world where recruiting and retaining employees is getting more difficult, restrictions on facial hair needs to be relaxed as it already has been for

tattoos. While I don't personally want to grow a beard, others do. It's part of who they are. In a new or updated policy, include wording that all facial hair must be kept neat and clean. It is no different than an updated policy on tattoos to include restrictions on anything offensive. As agency heads and leaders, we should promote individuality and personal choice. We shouldn't shame people who want to have tattoos by making them cover up. We also shouldn't tell people that they can't have facial hair if they want to come work for us. We are severely limiting our applicant pool by being so restrictive.

As agency administrators and as a profession, we all need to take a serious look at what effect restrictive policies are having on our agencies. Evolving from the ways of the past to present day and looking to the future is necessary if we want to attract potentially great candidates. Limiting ourselves to the mentality of “that's how we've always done it” isn't going to solve the crisis we are all experiencing with recruiting new people to this profession. We've significantly evolved our technology over the past several years to do our jobs better and give staff the tools they need to be successful. Isn't it time to evolve our thinking and our standards on appearance to recruit the people to do the job? ●

***Fred Cummings, RPL**, is currently the 911 Director for Delaware County in Muncie, Indiana. He has served as call firefighter and fire officer, retiring as the fire chief of his hometown. He has been in the public safety telecommunications field since 2005.*