

# HOW TO EMPLOY RECOGNITION IN THE ECC

A large, realistic hand is shown from the bottom left, cupping a small, purple silhouette of a person. The person is reaching upwards towards a large, glowing yellow star. The background is dark blue with vertical lines and a line graph with several data points (blue and white circles) connected by thin lines. The overall theme is one of support, growth, and achievement.

Public safety telecommunicator job satisfaction may depend on it.

By Jennifer Kirkland

In this era of ‘The Great Resignation,’ employee retention is harder than ever. Many of the factors that affect whether 9-1-1 professionals stay at their organization are complicated such as higher pay, recognition as first responders and shift work. One thing that emergency communications center (ECC) leaders do have control over is how they treat and recognize their telecommunicators.

Numerous studies show that employee recognition matters. According to Quantum Workplace, “organizations with recognition programs had 31% lower voluntary turnover than those without.”<sup>1</sup> Telecommunicators work behind the scenes, and generally their good work goes unnoticed by the public. It should not go unnoticed by leadership.

While some agencies might struggle to set up a recognition program, the good news is that such programs can be as simple or elaborate as you like. Awards can be a great place to start; for example telecommunicator of the month or year. Successful award programs have criteria for eligibility, are consistent and include input from coworkers (although care must be taken to ensure that the awards do not become a popularity contest). Another award could be a longevity award, with pins and/or certificates given at the one, five and 10-year mark.

Other areas for recognition could include a stork pin to commemorate the successful delivery of a baby on the phone, or a lifesaver pin for CPR saves. One such agency, Manatee County Emergency Communications in Bradenton, Florida, took this a step further and created a Tree of Life on their wall. Every CPR save earns a leaf on the tree, a beautiful reminder of the impact that telecommunicators have on citizens’ lives.<sup>2</sup>

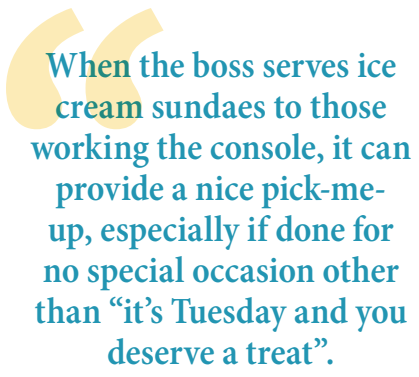
An added, free component to these programs is local media recognition. It costs nothing to highlight these actions on agency social media channels, and to alert local media to the awards to further promote the news and garner attention for the winners.

Employee recognition is closely connected with employee retention. One crucial employee retention factor is the culture within the ECC. The Quantum Workplace article states “4 in 10 respondents (41%) want more recognition from their immediate coworkers.” How line-level employees treat one another has an enormous impact on telecommunicators’ decisions to stay or leave, so why not give employees a way to recognize each other? This can be as easy as a bulletin board for people to post the great things they see happening on a regular basis for all to enjoy. They could also nominate each other for small recognition gifts such as

gift cards, prize drawings, or the award of the month or year programs mentioned earlier.

Another creative idea could be to make up a bingo board for common calls and play among shifts for prizes. If you have competitive folks, have a friendly competition between shifts for the ultimate prizes!

Grand Junction Regional Communication Center in Colorado has an “ultimate teammate covert care (UTCC)” program. At the beginning of the year, those who want to participate fill out a “getting to know you” sheet outlining their favorite things. The coordinator of the program then secretly matches participants, and they provide gifts to their UTCC all year long. At the end of the year, identities are revealed. This program boosts morale in many ways — teammates are caring for fellow teammates, in personalized ways; recipients send “all-center” emails thanking their UTCC (since they don’t know who their giver is), which raises everyone’s spirits; and it is a low-cost way to care for each other. Sometimes the gifts are as simple as a six-pack of the person’s favorite soda and their favorite candy. The purpose is not to spend a lot of money, but to lift each other up throughout the year, not just at holidays or National Public Safety Telecommunicator Week (NPSTW).



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What if your agency is struggling for funding? There are many ways to recognize 9-1-1 professionals that don’t cost a lot of money. Tarrant County Sheriff’s Office of Communications (Texas) described their recognition program in a PSConnect post. They award points for things like no tardies, no sick leave usage (challenging in COVID times, but you can insert your own idea),

compliments received, EMD scores and 9-1-1 answer times, among other things. Rewards include preferential shift bid order, work assignment preference, snacks and prizes.

Agencies can also host spirit days or weeks. These can include all kinds of things such as crazy socks, crazy hats, costumes, ugly ties or face painting. The sky is the limit. Prizes can be snacks, small gift cards, dress-down days or other small things. Spirit days are a great way to boost morale on non-holiday weeks or months; having fun “just because” breaks up the monotony of work.

It can also be highly meaningful for the leader of the ECC to provide a meal or special occasion food. When the boss serves ice cream sundaes to those working the console, it can provide a nice pick-me-up, especially if done for no special occasion other than “it’s Tuesday and you deserve a treat.” Bonus points for coming in to serve the night shift the same way. No matter what food is served, the key point is leadership taking time out of their day to recognize the hardworking line-level teammates.

Other cost-free initiatives include having the supervisor switch a shift with someone, leadership volunteering to work someone’s overtime shift or swapping an on-call to give someone a much-needed break. A simple, sincere thank you from a supervisor, manager or director for something specific also goes a long way. It’s nice to have good work noticed on a regular basis.

The company Great Place to Work says that “employee appreciation is linked to higher job satisfaction.”<sup>3</sup> Supervisors, managers and directors who want to recognize their team can invest in some good old-fashioned thank-you cards. In today’s digital age, a personalized, handwritten note demonstrates time and effort invested. Notes can be written for anything from covering an OT shift, to doing a great job with a difficult caller or helping a teammate with a problem. With this type of recognition, timeliness and sincerity are key. Praise and recognition that follow closely on the heels of good work is more meaningful than recognition that comes much later.

Sending flowers to an employee’s family, especially to those who have been working a

lot of overtime, is a nice way to appreciate the time spent away from those family members. Acknowledging the sacrifices a family makes when their loved one is working long hours is a powerful way to express gratitude.

Finally, be sure to recognize your employees during NPSTW. The second week in April is designated to celebrate 9-1-1 professionals and the amazing work they do every day and night. No matter what budget you have, large or small, it's imperative that leaders find a way to recognize the men and women working in their ECC during this week. One year, Supervisor Rebecca Pacheco at Vail Public Safety Communication Center put together a car safety kit for all the telecommunicators, including a blanket, flares, a car escape tool and a reusable bag to hold it all. In a place that has snow several months a year, this was a thoughtful gift. Michelle Taylor, of Anniston, Alabama, shared on PSCconnect that one year she put together a relaxation pack for each team member with a back scratcher, wire head massager, herbal tea bags, homemade lavender sugar scrub and face masks.

Several websites can help you with recognition ideas and resources. Successories.com,

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Baudville.com, Orientaltrading.com, <https://shop.911cares.com/>, Positivepromotions.com and Etsy are all great places to look for gifts in a variety of price ranges. You can also tap some of the talent you have in your ECC — your telecommunicators might enjoy crafting and be happy to help.

Recognition programs are a great way to partner with vendors who may be happy to help sponsor your recognition program or provide small items to recognize your people. Local businesses can also be good partners in this effort, and they might be willing to donate food or prizes for your recognition program or for NPSTW.

For more ideas and information on the importance of recognition and ways to recognize your teammates, check out GreatPlacetoWork.com, quantumworkplace.com, shrm.org (The Society for Human Resource Management), Harvard Business Review ([www.hbr.com](http://www.hbr.com)) and workstars.com.

Taking time to recognize your people is not something that should be delegated down the chain. It may be the single most important tool a leader has in retaining their people. I encourage you to take time to recognize someone on your team, if not daily, at least weekly. After all, they've earned it! ●

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