Public Safety Telecommunications Training Goes to High School

By Paul Logan

It is no secret that ECCs nationwide are struggling to find, recruit and hire qualified people to do one of the toughest jobs in America. In my own department, we have seen a reduction in applications from several hundred per recruitment cycle to fewer than 50. This past summer, after learning about an amazing program in Nevada that is training high school students in different aspects of public safety, our department explored local options for providing training to high school students in hopes of potentially recruiting them post-graduation.

Our program came together much easier than I anticipated. My son participated in an HVAC apprenticeship program in high school, and several of his friends participated in similar programs in different trades. A Google search led me to a local consortium of high schools designed to create pathways for students to go from high school directly into careers.

It did not take much to convince the high school consortium that providing emergency telecommunicator training to young people had no real downside. All one really had to do was look at the training, including interpersonal communications, stress management and wellness, active listening and customer service to realize that these skills are valuable regardless of career choice.

One meeting later and the school consortium was sold on the idea. Now we had to find a place to hold the course in-person during a pandemic. Fortunately, we have solid relationships with our public safety user agencies. It only took a few emails to secure a training room for an entire school year — albeit one night a week — in a local police/fire/EMS headquarters. This location is excellent given that we will spend a great deal of time discussing those disciplines and how we interact with them.

For our initial course, we settled on one two-hour class per week. The course runs from September through late April and follows the school calendar. In total, students will have approximately 60 hours of classroom time.

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The basis for our program is a 40-hour emergency telecommunicator course leading to a nationally recognized certification. Additionally, we'll spend 10 hours in our training center with instruction from our staff communications training officers on our own systems, including Central Square CAD, Solacom phones and Harris Symphony radio consoles. This slightly modified training program will follow our current on-the-job training program to provide a solid foundation that can be built upon should one of our students eventually apply and be hired.

Finally, we will spend 10 hours on mock interviews, sit-alongs in the ECC, and presentations from current public safety telecommunicators, as well as police, fire and EMS chiefs, about the critical role telecommunicators play every single day and how they can have a positive impact on emergency response.

We currently have six students, four seniors and two juniors. Most of these students want to work in a public safety career field, but had not considered dispatch until they saw our course flyer. The number is lower than we anticipated, but we hope to double enrollment next year. ●

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