



Whitepaper: Workforce Optimization

WHAT'S INSIDE

While staffing struggles have plagued public safety agencies for years, the situation is worsening, driven by favorable economic conditions that bring an abundance of less-stressful, better paying jobs.

Adding to the telecommunicator shortage is high personnel churn and attrition rates, stressful working conditions, and low compensation in many of today's PSAPs.

This whitepaper explores the concept of workforce optimization, a far more holistic approach that requires 911 officials to place equal emphasis on:

- recruitment
- hiring
- training
- and retention

Workforce Optimization: A Smarter Approach to Resolving 911's Staffing Struggle

Introduction

Several years ago, with much fanfare, the National 911 Program released the Recommended Minimum Training Guidelines for the 911 Telecommunicator. The fanfare was well-justified, as the document was the culmination of a multiyear, industry-wide collaborative effort to establish a baseline for training telecommunicators from coast to coast. The baseline was intended to ensure that a more consistent standard of care was provided by 911 call-takers and dispatchers to callers requesting emergency services, regardless of their location at the time of the call.

A corollary benefit of the training guidelines is that they might help reduce the amount of personnel churn that public safety answering points (PSAPs) experience. The idea is that the better trained a telecommunicator is, the less likely they will pursue other employment.

That is a critically important goal as staffing has become a huge concern in the 911 community. In this whitepaper we explore the concept of workforce optimization, of which training is one of four key pillars, with recruitment, hiring and retention being the others.

Fewer Telecommunicators Mean Big Problems

These are challenging times for PSAPs across the United States. Many are dealing with funding shortfalls that are having a detrimental effect on their ability provide basic life-saving emergency response services to the public. Others are wondering where they will find the money to implement Next Generation 911 (NG911) technology and, perhaps more important, how they will migrate from an environment that has been voice-centric for a half century to one that will be driven by data going forward.

Still others are weighing the potential advantages and disadvantages of the nationwide public safety broadband network (NPSBN) being implemented by the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet), with their short- and long-term decisions promising to have profound implications.

All of these are enough to keep PSAP officials awake at night. But staffing is the challenge that arguably is the most worrisome. Staffing always has been an issue for the 911 community. Telecommunicators typically are on the lower end of the pay scale—they don't get paid anywhere near what they are worth—and the job is incredibly stressful.

According to an article published by *USA Today* in September 2018, citing statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), the median annual salary for a 911 telecommunicator in 2017 was \$39,640; in that year those telecommunicators handled about 240 million emergency calls. So, it is no surprise that churn traditionally has been a problem for PSAP officials.

Unfortunately, the situation is worsening, driven by an economy that continues to pick up steam. Less-stressful, better-paying jobs are in abundance, and telecommunicators are flocking to them. We know of one PSAP located in the same area as a call center operated by a major automotive manufacturer, which not only pays better than the PSAP but also offers an incentive of a new car at a very low lease rate of \$200 per month. Is it any surprise that the PSAP currently is operating with a staff that is roughly one-half of what it should be based on industry best practice?

Last year, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that the city's PSAP was authorized to have 180 telecommunicators (call-takers and dispatchers), but only 105 were on staff. The NENA standard states that 911 calls are to be answered within 10 seconds 90 percent of the time during the "busy hour," i.e., the hour with the greatest call volume; due to the staffing shortage, San Francisco's PSAP reportedly met this standard only 74 percent of the time. More egregious is what happened—more accurately, what didn't happen—in the aftermath of a massive power outage in April 2017, when about 500 emergency calls reportedly were abandoned because no one answered them.

When a 911 call goes unanswered, the results can be devastating. In one PSAP, according to the *USA Today* article, 20 positions were vacant of the 134 that were authorized due to a hiring freeze. The staffing shortage was cited as a significant factor in a three-day-old child's death. The child had been bitten by the family's dog. The parents called 911 and were placed on hold for 28 seconds. They hung up and tried again. This time they were placed on hold for 34 seconds. They reportedly then gave up on an ambulance being dispatched and in desperation drove their baby to the hospital—where it was pronounced dead.

At yet another PSAP, the attrition rate—which is based on new hires that fail to complete the probationary/training period and the number of experienced employees who leave for any reason—is about 19 percent, well above the industry average of 13 percent. Compensation is a key contributing factor. Telecommunicators were forced to accept a 5.25 percent pay cut in 2010, and salaries have been frozen for the last six years. But other less tangible factors are having an equally big impact. One is the increased stress felt by telecommunicators due to the acute shortage that has existed over the last seven years. Another, cited often in exit interviews, is the inability to take vacation when wanted due to the lack of coverage. Each factor contributed to flagging morale, which in turn contributed to the PSAP's high employee churn.

More Than Filling the Seats

While the terms "staffing" and "workforce optimization" might seem synonymous, the latter represents a far more holistic approach, and PSAP officials should place equal emphasis on each pillar to resolve the staffing struggle. Where staffing is about putting people in the seats, workforce optimization is about putting the right people in the seats and keeping them there for the long haul. It is the difference between checkers and chess.

Let's examine each of the workforce optimization pillars and their potential impact on PSAPs going forward.

Recruitment: Traditionally, recruiters looked for verbal, typing and task-switching (formerly referred to as multi-tasking) skills. Next-generation telecommunicators will need entirely new skills. Much of this will be driven by new types of data that may begin to flow into PSAPs

When trying to resolve staffing struggles, many PSAP leaders tend to focus on what needs to be to "put people in seat." In contrast, the focus should be about putting the right people in the seats and them keeping there for the long haul.



when 5G networks and NG911 systems—and perhaps FirstNet’s network—are in place. Videos and images sent by citizens often will be graphic and telecommunicators will need advanced stress management skills.

Meanwhile, those tasked with data triage will need to be highly analytical. For instance, telecommunicators will need to be more observant to pick up on subtleties in videos and images that could enhance situational awareness. Soon, the ability to respond to visual cues and real-time data streams such as social media (e.g., Facebook Live) likely will become vitally important.

Accordingly, new screening tactics also will be needed. For instance, an enhanced psychological profile that assesses an applicant’s ability to deal with horrific images from the scene of an auto crash. Or whether the candidate will be able to deal with the onslaught of personal attacks that are splashed across the 24/7 news cycle and social media after an incident has a negative outcome, even when procedures were followed.

Even where recruiters look for prospective telecommunicators needs to change—new recruits are more familiar with the internet and social media, so recruiters need to figure out a way to leverage those channels.

All of this will change how PSAP managers think about recruiting personnel.

Hiring: The current robust economy is generating a bounty of better-paying, less-stressful jobs, and current telecommunicators and prospective applicants are flocking to them. In addition, the candidate pool has shrunk because less people are seeking jobs right now. As businesses expand, the growth of private industry call centers and the increased availability of remote employment opportunities further reduces the candidate pool. If that isn’t challenging enough, it can be difficult for a variety of reasons to raise salaries, so PSAP officials need to offer more and better incentives and perks, e.g., enhanced retirement packages and improved medical/dental benefits to attract qualified candidates. It’s time to get creative.

Training: An already stressful and challenging job is about to get a lot more stressful and challenging. Consequently, training regimens will need to evolve to align with the new realities—the training regimens of the future assuredly will look very different than today’s regimens.

Similarly, assessing PSAPs based solely on whether calls are answered, or incidents dispatched within time-defined industry standards will be insufficient in measuring processing efficiency going forward. PSAPs will need to modify their quality assurance/quality improvement (QA/QI) programs to ensure the inclusion of data-driven performance metrics, e.g., how effectively video is processed and analyzed.

Where QA/QI programs don’t exist, they will need to be created. Such programs provide the following benefits:

- They ensure that call-processing guidelines are being followed correctly
- They provide evidence needed to establish that services provided by the PSAP are of the highest quality and are being performed effectively
- They ensure consistency of operations, identify problems, and develop corrective actions to resolve the issues
- They identify gaps in personnel knowledge, consistency or procedures, ultimately providing opportunities for improvement

The profile of the ideal telecommunicator is evolving. The next generation telecommunicator should possess skills like:



Verbal, typing and multi-tasking



Advanced stress management



Analytical



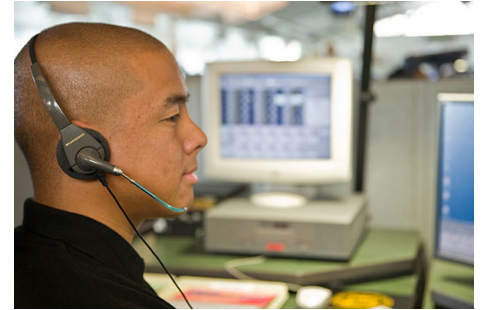
Social and digital media

Taken together, advanced training and QA/QI regimens make telecommunicators more proficient and confident in the handling of their duties, which helps to reduce stress—and less stressed telecommunicators are far less likely to flee for less-stressful jobs.

Retention: This is the pillar that typically is given the least attention, but it arguably is the most important of the four. What good is it for a PSAP to recruit, hire and invest in training the right person for the job only to be unable to retain them? Executing on the three other pillars will lead to greater success regarding retention.

Conclusion

Staffing challenges in general are a nationwide epidemic that is affecting even the best lead cutting-edge PSAPs in the country. External and internal factors need new and creative approaches to overcome these challenges.



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