RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Emergency Communications Center Staffing: Are you ready for the call?

Emergency Communications Centers are the "first" emergency responders and play a critical role in answering any call for assistance. No matter what discipline of emergency services is needed, the telecommunicator must be efficient and professional to ensure the proper resources are sent to an appropriate location and that the responding field agencies receive the correct information. Technology has changed drastically from the days of pencil and paper, however one constant still remains; the telecommunicator. Beginning in the 1990's with the proliferation of E-911, communication centers have evolved to providing pre-arrival instructions to callers and information to responding agencies that save lives. Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems now route responders by GPS coordinates, aerial maps and Automatic Vehicle Locators. It is not uncommon for Communications Centers to experience jurisdictional concerns such as rapid growth, mergers, additional administrative duties or budget constraints that call into question the appropriate staffing levels. Proper staffing is key for timely and accurate delivery of emergency services. This Communique discusses some available options to help determine appropriate staffing levels.

Staffing level requirements for emergency communications centers vary greatly across the nation. This is in part because so many different configurations exist. The center can be inclusive of an entire county or geographic area or only serve a particular jurisdiction within that same area. Some centers facilitate calls for all disciplines of emergency services while others are agency specific. Management responsibility for these centers range from elected officials like county/city administrators, the chairman of an established board for emergency communications, or Fire/EMS directors. A communication center infrastructure can become very complex when expanding its capabilities to accommodate an increased call volume, geographic coverage area or the type and number of agencies served. While staffing levels are heavily dependent on these factors, the needs and financial commitment of the community must also be considered.

In considering these variables, there are several regulatory and support agencies to "guide" or "suggest" staffing levels for all sizes of communications centers. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) and The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) have developed guidelines that address specific goals related to the answering and dispatching of calls which in turn leaves each agency to determine what staffing level is needed to accomplish the goals. VFIS recommends each Emergency Communications Center evaluate current staffing using one or more of these industry recognized standards. Completing an assessment will allow the ESO to develop a plan of action to address areas of concern in concert with budget options and other long term goals for the center.

NFPA references this topic in Standard 1221, 2016 ed. The Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Emergency Services Communications Systems. Chapter 7.4.1 Operating Procedures indicates: "Ninety-five percent of alarms received on emergency lines shall be answered within 15 seconds, and 99 percent of alarms shall be

answered within 40 seconds." Conceptually, each center would require a staffing model based on the performance standards, equipment available and other duties tele-communicators are asked to perform.[1]

APCO, NENA and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) have collaborated to form and endorse APCO Project 33. To satisfy the requirements of Project 33, agencies must meet or exceed APCO ANSI 3.103.1-2010: Minimum Training Standards for Public Safety Telecommunicators[2] and NENA-REF-001-2003 PSAP Staffing Guidelines Report.[3] The NENA PSAP Staffing Guidelines Report is a staffing tool kit or self-evaluation that considers every aspect of daily operations in the individual center and produces a recommended staffing level.

Emergency Communications Centers are diverse ESOs and face challenges similar to Fire and EMS agencies. Each Communications Center should be cognizant of the public's needs and expectations for service in the jurisdiction they serve, with adequate staffing to meet those needs. The standards and models discussed may not be appropriate for every center; however, an assessment of needs versus capabilities is appropriate and responsible. Identifying gaps will allow the ESO to address areas of concern using a planned approach that can be used to justify needed staffing levels to the citizens, community leaders, service agencies/responders and governing boards.

Additional information and resources can be found by visiting:

National Fire Protection Association
www.NFPA.org

Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials
www.APCO.org

National Emergency Number Association
www.NENA.org

VFIS – A Division of Glatfelter Insurance Group
www.VFIS.com

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[1] National Fire Protection Association (2016). NFPA 1221: The Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Emergency Services Communications Systems. Retrieved from http://www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/all-codes-and-standards/list-of-codes-and-standards?mode=code&code=1221

[2] Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (2010). Project 33: Minimum Training Standards for Telecommunicators. Retrieved from https://www.apcointl.org/training-and-certification/comm-center-training-programs/apco-training-program-certification.html

[3] National Emergency Number Association (2003). PSAP Staffing Guidelines Report - National Emergency Number Association. (2003). Retrieved from https://www.nena.org/?PSAP_StaffingGuide.