

“Stress” is Killing 911 Recruitment and Retention (but not how you think)

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Most people who work as 911 dispatchers or operators would unequivocally say that their job is stressful, the one common thread in communications that everyone can agree upon. A recent report published by The Occupational Information Network, or O*NET, which is part of the U.S. Department of Labor, recently ranked the job of public safety telecommunicator at # 8 on their list of most stressful jobs [out of 873 jobs] (Alund, n.d.). 911 dispatchers and operators have finally been validated; their voices are being heard as they continue to post on social media their recognition on this nationally publicized list.

Workplace stress contributes to 120,000 deaths per year and is also responsible for 5%-8% of annual healthcare costs, which amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars (Goh et al., 2015). Stress is a major contributor to anxiety, fatigue, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, as well as heart disease, digestive disorders, and other health issues (*Is Stress The Number One Killer?*, 2022). Stress severely impacts our mental health and our lives at work, and overflows to our home life and family, or vice versa.

A result of the COVID-19 pandemic was that mental health awareness and treatment has finally made its way to the forefront of the American consciousness within households, workplaces, the media, and the healthcare industry. 911 agencies have embraced mental health awareness and are providing enhanced services to their employees. Some centers have hired fulltime clinicians or have contracted with private agencies to provide mental health services to their employees. Most important, 911 leaders are recognizing the impact of stress on their employees and are open-minded when it comes to their personal issues.

But when we say that being a 911 telecommunicator is a stressful job, what does that mean exactly? Does it mean that when you walk through the door, sit at your console, and plug your head set in, the stress starts bombarding you, like trying to come up for air after getting hit by one tidal wave after another. There are very stressful moments working as a 911 dispatcher/operator, without question, but in reality, most people would not take a job if you're completely stressed out 100% of the time, for an 8–16-hour shift, while earning a salary that is not commensurate with the value of this position.

911 recruitment and retention crisis, you're making it worse

Stress plays a huge role in recruitment and retention at 911 call centers. The recognition from the above article will further exasperate the 911 recruitment and retention crisis, since 911 employees now have bragging rights. Let's start with recruitment. Far too often, when 911 dispatchers and operators describe their line of work, the word "stress" always seems to creep in. Dispatchers, operators, and management focus on the word "stress" as do 911 agency leaders and recruiters. The common line: "Being a 911 dispatcher/operator is so stressful, but we need to hire more people." Dispatchers/operators love to say this, they love to use this word as if it is a badge of honor. As 911 agencies struggle to hire dispatchers/operators, some PSAPs experiencing 20% or greater vacancy rates even go as far as writing in job posts that candidates will have to work under stressful conditions, or that the job itself is stressful. Additionally, recruiters tell potential candidates that the position is loaded with stress. Hence the 20% vacancy rate, let's connect the dots. When leaders and "recruiters" say that working in 911 is stressful, what you're really saying is that you represent an organization that is chaotic and disorganized, lacks leadership and direction, and leaves their employees hanging out to dry. If stress kills 120,000 per year, causes heart disease, fatigue, addiction, and all sorts of other problems, why wouldn't someone want this job. Sign me up! This is contrary to the idea of 911 leadership combating stress by giving specific direction and support, enhancing the role of managers and the team concept, and providing resources (mental health or work related).

The constant sound of 911 leaders and their employees saying that a career as a 911 dispatcher/operator is stressful, is so counterintuitive. "Stress" is so negative. A recruiter's job is to establish trust with a candidate, and to present a positive portrait of their agency and explain how they [the candidate] are joining a winning team. It overshadows all of the positive aspects of working at 911, including having a rewarding career that is personally fulfilling, exciting, impacts your community and people's lives when they are most in need, while also

giving employees opportunities for career and personal growth. The constant drumbeat of stress and 911 continues to emphasize the narrative of the notorious 911 toxic culture and negative attitudes that we're all familiar with.

I once read the line "If you don't have stress, you don't have a job" (unknown author). No truer phrase can be spoken. Many jobs are stressful, and jobs are stressful for many reasons, whether it's the actual work, an overbearing manager, a toxic group of co-workers, or dealing with angry customers. Think about a flight attendant who has to board more than a hundred impatient people (half of which have a bad attitude) and has to close the doors to a plane on time to maintain a flight schedule, then think about the airline pilot who is responsible for hundreds of people's lives while flying in a harsh rainstorm. Think about working as a receptionist in a busy doctor's office, trying to sort out insurance payments and pre-approvals and life-saving prescription drugs, while talking with an inattentive doctor, angry patients, pharmacies, and insurance company bureaucrats. These are all stressful occupations, 911 is not unique in that respect. Yet we constantly focus on that negative, as if we're posturing.

According to Ashley Valenzuela, host of *Let's Talk Dispatch* ([Ashley Valenzuela](#)), "80% of your time as a dispatcher is business as usual, while 20% of the time there might be a high priority, like an officer involved shooting, or something major" (The Raspy Dispatcher, 2022). Let's break this down: if a dispatcher works a 12-hour shift, during this shift between breaks and a having a meal, let's say they sit for 10 hours. During this 10-hour time period, 2 hours would be stressful, that's about 17% of their total time at work. If someone is working a 12-hour shift, they will more than likely have personal time off 3-4 days per week. That means that for a one-week period of time, 168 hours, an employee is facing 6-8 hours of stress per week while working as a 911 dispatcher/operator. Of course, there will be fluctuations to this statistic, and there will be varied reasons as to why there is stress at 911, which will be discussed later. Having a family and managing a home probably equals more stress than 6-8 hours a week, it's a never-ending cycle. Does anyone have a 15-year-old child who struggles to do homework every night, can't get motivated in school, and argues with every word that comes out of their parents' mouth. What about having the responsibility of taking care of a baby or an elderly parent. Stress is everywhere in our lives.

Job postings that state that 911 dispatcher/operator jobs are stressful are a huge mistake. It probably is not a true representation of your agency. This would definitely be categorized as one of many reasons why your agency is failing to recruit. This is a reason that your agency is failing to retain employees too, because it brings so much negativity to the workplace. As the leader, our role is to be positive. If you were reading an ad for a corrections officer, would the ad read "you will have bodily fluids thrown at you," or "you will work in an enclosed space where you will be greatly outnumbered 100:1 by people who are extremely violent and have nothing to lose." Referring to the Occupational Information Network's list of most stressful job, other job titles that were included were: first-line supervisors of retail sales workers, phone operators, and acute care nurses, (Alund, n.d.). These jobs have some overlaps to 911 telecommunicator; respectively, the worker is dealing with the public who is in need of services and might be dissatisfied, people work in a call center, and they are providing life-saving

resources. If you were reading a job posting for any of these positions, would they print the word “stressful,” probably not. This word is just raising that big red flag higher and higher that tells people they shouldn’t work for your agency.

How to address “stress” in the recruitment process

911 recruiters should never say that the job is stressful, verbally or in print. However, candidates have to realize what the job actually entails: helping the public during their worst moments, monitoring and prioritizing multiple police and/or fire/EMS units while speaking on a radio, giving first aid over the phone, working on weekends, holidays, etc. Get your superhero cape! Instead of stressful, we can say that the job requires that you are detail oriented, a problem solver, team player, who can multi-task and is able to work in a fast-paced environment where you are empowered to make decisions independently, and that you must be compassionate, have the ability to communicate with people, and must possess a great sense of humor and positive attitude. Envision these words instead of “stressful” and “must have a high tolerance for pain.” Candidates must visit the emergency call center they are applying to, to eliminate the idea of the unknown and the mystery of this “stressful” job. They must see how others perform this job, but more important, how people interact with one another, in terms of working in a friendly environment where co-workers have positive interactions, like talking about their favorite show on Netflix, or the best thing they ever ate. They must sit in the chair to feel comfortable (physically and emotionally), type on the computer keyboard to feel the stroke of the keys and wear a headset. If a candidate asks the question “I heard that being a dispatcher is extremely stressful,” there are many ways to respond to this comment, all of which are true, so that you will maintain their trust:

- Every job has stressful moments, and being a 911 dispatcher is no different
- We have a great management and leadership team that will support you every step of the way, along with your co-workers
- You will have an exciting career in law enforcement and public safety while working in a safe environment, when the adrenaline gets going, you’ll do things you never thought you were capable of doing
- Working at a busy restaurant during the dinner shift, where you are relying on tips to pay your bills is stressful, by the way, we get a steady paycheck every two weeks
- It’s a learning process, everything you do will become second nature
- You will have excellent training, and you will learn this job through a training program that is tried & true, and you will quickly experience the ease of excelling to the next level
- We have lots of resources to help you deal with stress and any other issues you might have as a result of work or home
- You will have adequate breaks and lots of time off to unplug from work
- The rewards of being a 911 operator or dispatcher are much greater than anything this job can throw at you
- You will have a full health insurance package, there is no dollar value on that, and that relieves a lot of stress

How does “stress” play a role in retention

Over the last three years, many 911 agencies have seen a 20% or greater drop in their staffing levels. That is a tremendous number. The impact from low staffing levels is felt across the entire agency: low morale, extended work hours, more time away from home, and unpredictability. 911 Managers and directors tend to say that their staff left because of “stress.” “Stress” as a reason for employee turnover requires greater analysis. This word seems to have morphed into a monster that swallows every problem in every PSAP. Stress needs to be more specific, and more data driven. Stress from what, stress from:

- dealing with the public and first responders
- speaking on the radio
- multi-tasking
- incompetent manager (who has never received guidance or training)
- nasty co-worker (that everyone overlooks)
- lack of direction and leadership
- schedule and overtime
- technology
- talking to the public
- entering data into CAD

This information must be specifically documented on exit interviews, no one-liners. 911 directors should do exit interviews themselves or have someone who is a great communicator and listener, who is highly trusted and respected by the rank and file, conduct the interview so that people who are leaving will be more open, and more likely to share the specific reasons why they are leaving. Directors must put themselves out there to learn about what is actually going on in their center, to hear about things that they wouldn't normally see; those day-to-day interactions and the nuances that reveal no matter how much you think you know about your PSAP, your inner-circle, and the people on the front lines, in actuality you know very little. Information from exit interviews needs to be investigated further. For example, if people are leaving because of stress, what type of stress, oh, stress because of a manager. According to a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 84% of respondents said that poorly trained managers created unnecessary work and stress (*Survey, 2020*). There will be a high probability that people are leaving because of poor management. Continue to ask questions: “What exactly did your manager do to you that created stress, does this happen with everyone or just you, what is the frequency, did you ever discuss this matter with someone, why didn't you seek further assistance, etc.”

Stress needs to be narrowed down, so that the causes can be addressed immediately to prevent the loss of more employees. Everything that is said needs to be investigated further. This will give you an overview of issues within your agency, and you will be able to draw some type of conclusion as to what's driving people out. Then discuss these issues with your staff and implement solutions to solve these problems. An unbiased third party is a great resource too (TEN-4Consulting, LLC).

If your agency has an on-staff or contracted clinician, then you need to ask even more questions. How has the clinician been involved with people who are leaving, is the clinician engaging your staff, are they accessible, how is the clinician being proactive? How does the clinician use information that is gathered and relay this info to upper management so that positive changes can be made? A leader needs to anticipate.

Leadership's role in 911 stress reduction

Directors must create a plan to combat any stressors within their agency, there is always a way. When stressors are identified, engage your employees and develop a plan to ameliorate things ASAP. If people are stressed about a busy radio frequency, how about easing them into working such a busy channel, possibly assigning two dispatchers, or realigning radio zones, instead of that old school method of throwing people into the fire on day one. Use coaches and mentors, SMEs, assigning staff to supervisors who have that "special touch" with people. Another plus, this is a great way to enhance other people's careers (coach, mentor, or SME) and increase employee engagement and career growth, therefore increasing retention among your current staff. Also consider re-creating break schedules, or a rotation in which people work busy radio zones followed by a slower zone. Consider the dispatch console; can the layout of the computer screen be changed, adding colors, enhancing visuals, or sometimes less is more. I'm not a fan of always throwing technology at every problem, but sometimes we can use technology to make things better. Speaking of technology, how about having our dispatchers and training coordinators more involved in choosing technology and implementing rollouts. Finally, consider implementing "odd" work tours in your PSAP. While there are many factors to consider, staffing levels should be based on data, specifically call volume and the appropriate number of people needed to answer those calls within a certain amount of time. There can be more than two shifts of workers (besides am & pm), having people start work at different hours of the day. Consider too, that a 12-hour shift might not be for everyone, consider implementing different work shifts. Engage employees, experiment, and be bold. If something doesn't work, evaluate and make changes, then try again.

Managers and frontline supervisors play a major role in stress and the workplace, and therefore employee retention. Managers must be influenced to follow a positive, structured, and yet nurturing ideology when it comes to their role within a PSAP. Directors must communicate one-on-one with their managers, and they [managers] must have a complete understanding of the director's goals and values. There must always be a line of communication open with them. They must all receive leadership training and understand their role within the PSAP. Directors, listen to their ideas. When it comes to the overall operation, they know more about what happens on a daily basis than you do. Part of having effective managers requires that directors and their higher leadership team practice a relentless follow-up of all policies and SOPs to ensure compliance.

911 ECC directors are the leaders of employee retention, they set the tone and they make the rules and the policies that impact their staff, and they have a responsibility to monitor and control people's behavior, from the top down. Therein lies the question, what's your role in employee retention and people leaving because of stress? What are you doing about it, and what are you doing different now than before these people left? As a director, your role is to provide resources to help your employees. Engage with employees and management to identify problems. Directors must conduct weekly staff meetings that are meaningful and to the point, with multiple objectives: eliminating silos, getting a pulse on the entire operation, and discovering your employees' concerns and then giving specific directions to move forward. All sub-units, managers, and assistants need to communicate with one another so that everyone is in lockstep, and they need to keep their frontline workers in the loop too with facts and evidence instead of rumors and assumptions (another contributor to stress). Communication is key. People will tell you what's going on, and you will need to listen. When all of your employees are on the same page and they clearly understand policies and procedures, that will be one of your greatest stress reduction strategies. Far from the mantra, "Come and work at our agency, where it's so stressful."

Stress doesn't have to be a contributing factor when it comes to low recruitment and retention rates within your agency. 911 recruitment and retention is about leadership and requires a team effort. "Stress" is a word that is hurting your agency in ways you have never thought of. And when there are problems and there is stress that is impacting people's (don't forget 911 dispatchers & operators are people) lives at work or at home, leaders owe it to their employees to be sensitive to their needs and provide help and guidance when feasible. There are no problems, only solutions. Tell that to your staff and mean it!

Resources:

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About the author

Christian Gulotta is the owner and founder of TEN-4 Consulting, LLC. He recently retired from a 25 year career as a Captain with the NYPD, where he spent the last decade in the public safety communications space; first as an executive in New York City's 911 Communications Division, and then tasked with leading the NYPD's radio communications division. He has supervised and led hundreds of people, providing positive changes as a leader through employee engagement, process improvement, and professional development. His goal is to continue to improve outcomes within the national 911 community.

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