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Training and Evaluating the Police Communications Dispatcher



Officer Weaver conducts a performance evaluation with a dispatcher handling a hot pursuit involving several units.

Training and Evaluating the Police Communications Dispatcher

"The key to ensuring optimal performance of all dispatch personnel is intensive training."

By
WILLIAM C. WEAVER, JR.
Training Coordinator
Dispatch Division
Police Department
Houston, TX

Throughout the police profession, there are important choices to make among competing demands. With limited resources and personnel, any department is hard pressed to maximize its efforts in all areas of operation. It is difficult, however, to think of any function in a police department that is more critical than the dispatch function.

Several studies conducted by different research institutions have de-

termined that approximately 95 percent of all police work performed by a department's patrol force is first received, screened, and assigned over police communications systems.¹ Additionally, it has also been stated that of the total number of calls for service, approximately one-third to one-half result in the dispatch of at least one patrol unit.² The remaining service requests are handled either by dispatch personnel themselves, diverted



Officer Weaver (left) with Lee P. Brown, Chief of Police

to alternative response operations, or referred to other departments or government agencies that can respond to complainants' requests more effectively.

Although some departments integrate calls received and dispatch functions into one position, these are, in fact, two distinct tasks. Operator performance in screening the initial call for service and meeting the needs of the complainant (based upon the information obtained from the requestor) will impact directly two critical areas of daily operation—image perception and credibility and safety of responding units.

The key to ensuring optimal performance of all dispatch personnel is intensive training. However, prior to establishing a training program for police communications personnel, several values should be identified. These values express the basic philosophy of service delivery and the police department's commitment to operational professionalism, its employees, and the community.

A department must be committed to maintaining the highest levels of integrity and professionalism in all its operations. By doing so, a department

can ensure that these principles will be the cornerstones which form the basis of personnel selection, training, and advancement.

A department must also be committed to managing its resources in the most effective manner possible. The primary objective is maximizing service delivery functions with minimal "costs" to the citizen. Rapid response to citizens' requests for emergency assistance *must* be the foundation on which this value is predicated. Issues such as training, employee productivity and performance evaluations, and resource allocation must be carefully studied and procedurally addressed.

Training and Evaluation

Many departments have wasted valuable resources (time, manpower, and money) in an attempt to enhance their patrol operations, while neglecting to establish a firm structure on which all service requests are built. In designing a progressive training program for dispatch personnel, several key training tools must be discussed. These include, but are not limited to: 1) Standardized training guidelines, 2) realistic performance expectations, and 3) incremental training.

Standardized Training Guidelines

Each trainee should be furnished a copy of all training guidelines, since this document will be the vehicle by which their performance will be observed and appraised. These guidelines would, of course, contain all policies and procedures relevant to the dispatcher's job description and function. In addition, trainees should be encouraged to supply feedback to instructors or supervisors. No portion of training should be conducted and no decisions made concerning issues related to a trainee's performance without his/her knowledge and input. Trainees should be allowed to review their *daily* training report in the presence of the supervisor, trainer, or evaluator.

Realistic Performance Expectations

In using the daily training report as described above, the performance expectations of the trainee should be identified by using behavioral anchor points or values. These are nothing more than descriptions of desired (or undesired) behavior for each of the categories identified in the training process. An example of such is displayed in figure 1. A sample grading

sheet is displayed in figure 2.

Incremental Training

The purpose of any training program is to provide the trainee with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve maximum proficiency. This can be accomplished most effectively by using incremental training strategies which are designed to expose the trainee to the various factors involved in receiving calls for service and dispatching field units. These factors include, but again are not limited to, the following:

Talk Time—The amount of time the dispatcher is involved in bi-directional communication with complainants and/or field units.

Calls Received—The number of calls dispatched for field unit service and disposition, as well as the number received by intake (complaint) personnel.

Manpower Allocation—The number of police units assigned to the dispatcher's area of responsibility. This would also include fire, EMS, and other support personnel (in cases of smaller departments that serve as originating point for all services).

Call Load Distribution—The number of calls dispatched with respect to the percentage of the day's workload (usually associated with agencies that have more than one frequency from which calls for service are assigned).

Peculiarities of the Position— Oftentimes, departments have a frequency from which assignments are handled in a manner completely different than the primary patrol channel(s). This period of training can be quite disruptive to the overall objective. The trainee is required to learn different dispatch

Figure 1: Behavioral Anchors

Subject: Safety Mindedness

<p>Purpose: To measure the trainee's awareness of the safety needs of the field officer and the ability to dispatch field units with a measurable degree of confidence.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-1-</p> <p>Clearly Unacceptable Performance Projects nervousness, insecurity and/or lack of confidence and concern by unnecessarily pausing, hesitating, and/or repeating call information or by using a tone of voice or a voice inflection demonstrating these traits. Gives erroneous or incomplete information when transmitting a call. Transmits incomplete descriptions and/or fails to advise responding units when weapons are involved in an incident. Demonstrates a lack of recognition of potentially dangerous calls by not assigning appropriate backup response units or checking with the assigned units after they remain out of service for extended periods of time. Fails to record locations and license numbers for field units while on traffic stops. Demonstrates great difficulty in tracking and recording locations of field units.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-3-</p> <p>Minimum Acceptable Performance Projects inconsistent confidence when dispatching field units on calls for service.</p>	<p>Occasionally fails to speak in a clear and even voice. Occasionally repeats or transmits unnecessary information. Occasionally gives incomplete information regarding dispatched calls for service to assigned field unit(s). Occasionally becomes emotional when dispatching calls for service or when responding to emergency requests for assistance from field units. Seldom fails to record license number and location of field units while on traffic stops. Occasionally fails to recognize potentially hazardous situations for responding field units.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-5-</p> <p>Superior Performance Projects complete self-confidence and total concern by dispatching field units in a calm, clear voice, without hesitation or repetition. Consistently gives complete and accurate information to responding and assigned field units. Always recognizes potentially hazardous calls by assigning one or more backup units. Consistently checks with field units who are on traffic stops or other out-of-service activities. Always records license number and locations of field units when on traffic stops. Never becomes emotional when dispatching calls for service or when responding to emergency requests for assistance.</p>
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procedures. As such, these positions should be "mastered" at the end of the training cycle, after the trainee has acquired a measurable degree of confidence.

Having instituted a progressive training program using standardized training guidelines, realistic performance expectations, and incremental training steps, the department informs each employee exactly what is expected in the entry-level and post-training periods. Also, the employee's

evaluation should be conducted on two levels of training—"proximate" and "distal." Proximate evaluations are conducted at the time of entry, during the training process, or after the employee has received the required level of instruction. Distal evaluations are conducted at predetermined periods of service tenure (semi-annual, annual, etc). The end result will be employees who are more effective in handling the multitude of requests and job tasks associated with

“... although ‘the patrol force is the backbone of the department,’ the communications division and its personnel compose ‘the nerve center.’”

Figure 2: Dispatcher Performance and Training Report Grading Sheet

Employee: _____ Employee No. _____
 Day: _____ Date: _____ Trainer: _____

X1	Category 1:	Demonstrates Attitude	1	2	3	4	5
X3	Category 2:	Voice Control and Response	1	2	3	4	5
X2	Category 3:	Use of Dispatching Aids	1	2	3	4	5
X2	Category 4:	Stress Response	1	2	3	4	5
X1	Category 5:	Routine Calls for Service	1	2	3	4	5
X2	Category 6:	Priority/Emergency Calls for Service	1	2	3	4	5
X2	Category 7:	Listens/Understands Information	1	2	3	4	5
X1	Category 8:	Knowledge of Dispatch Service Area(s)	1	2	3	4	5
X4	Category 9:	Safety Mindedness	1	2	3	4	5
X2	Category 10:	Language Skills	1	2	3	4	5
							Total

Strong Points: _____
 Weak Points: _____
 Comments: _____

Reviewing Supervisor: _____ Rank: _____
 Employee's Signature: _____

X=Weight value of category performance
 Maximum Score: 100
 Minimum Score: 70

police communications.

Finally, departments must come to realize that although "the patrol force is the backbone of the department," the communications division and its personnel compose "the nerve center." Without effective communications support, management of the patrol, investigative, and planning functions of a department would be, at best, difficult, if not impossible. Response time reports, call activity, incident frequencies, crime analysis data,

investigative operations (both covert and overt), Uniform Crime Reports, and other management reports depend heavily on information derived from the same source—calls for service.

The "Unseen" Person

Field officers are obliged to adhere to the instructions of the "unseen" person, the police communications dispatcher. It is the dispatcher who services the patrol officer's re-

quests, processes information, and lends guidance in performing duties and responsibilities. It is the dispatcher who is the second or third set of eyes for patrol units. It is the dispatcher from whom the patrol officer will request assistance in times of urgency. And it is the dispatcher who stands ready to mobilize whatever resources are necessary to remove the officer from harm's way.

Conclusion

With the increasing number of calls for service and implementation of calls-for-service management programs (alternative response strategies, e.g., tele-serve, call prioritization, and stacking procedures, etc.), the responsibilities of the police intake operator and radio dispatcher have risen substantially. Therefore, by establishing a comprehensive training program for police communications personnel, the department and its administration will have a mechanism whereby it may reward dispatch personnel who perform well, identify those individuals who require remedial or additional training, and identify personnel, both present and prospective, who do not possess the skills necessary to perform effectively. Only then will a department have recognized its share of responsibility to the employee, the community, and itself by taking steps to meet the challenge of the ever-changing environment in the police communications field.

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Footnotes

¹ 1978 Response Time Analysis, Kansas City, MO, Police Department, authorized by Board of Police Commissioners.

² Eric Scott, *Calls for Service: Citizen Demand and Initial Police Response*, National Institute of Justice project, 1977.

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