

THE COMMVERSE

MAGAZINE

COVER STORY:

LIFE WITH A SERVICE DOG



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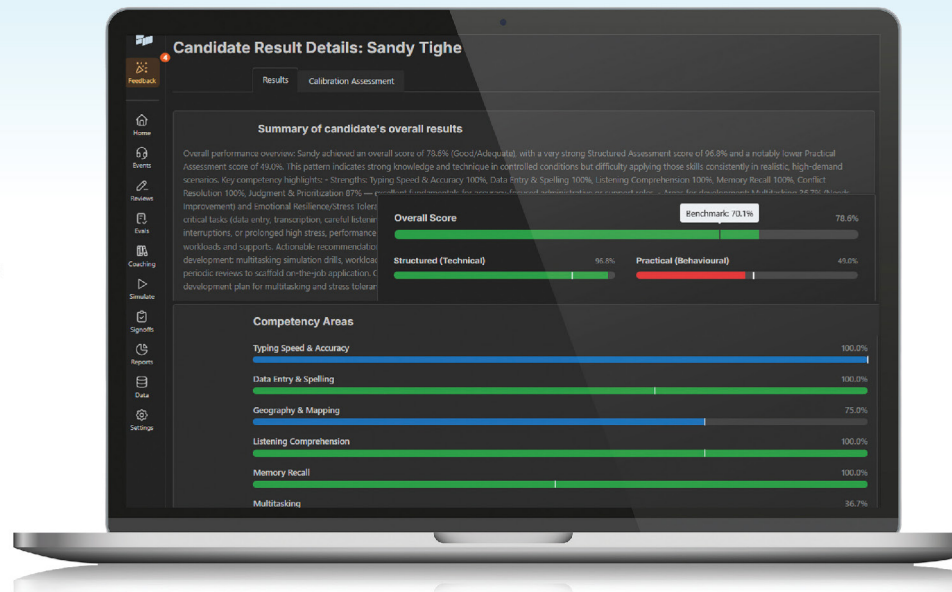
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DON'T LET YOUR CAREER HAPPEN TO YOU.



Photo courtesy of Scott L. Brillman.

Every day in a 9-1-1 center, we spend our time planning for someone else's emergency, but how often do we plan for our own future? One of the greatest lessons I've learned during more than 30 years in public safety is that successful careers rarely happen by accident. They happen because someone decided where they wanted to be, and then started preparing long before the opportunity arrived. When I began my career in Baltimore, I wasn't thinking about becoming the director of a 9-1-1 center in Baltimore or Fairfax, or an emergency manager, or

being activated to deploy to Hurricane Katrina and Irma. I started as a paramedic.

Like many people entering public safety, I was focused on helping people, learning my job, having fun with my work friends, and making it through every shift. But early in my career, I realized something that changed my life. If I didn't make a plan, ten years would pass before I knew it. At the time, post-9/11, I wanted to work in emergency management. Nobody told me I had to earn a degree. Nobody offered to pay for college. Nobody promised me a promotion

when I graduated. I simply decided that if I wanted a different future, I had to start building it, so I enrolled in school. I worked overtime to pay the tuition. I took advantage of the city's tuition reimbursement program. Many nights I went from work to class and back to work again. I missed out on parties and happy hours. It wasn't easy, but every class, every assignment, and every sacrifice moved me one step closer to the person I hoped to become.

Life has a funny way of rewarding preparation. Not every opportunity came exactly as I expected. Some doors closed. Others that I never imagined were opened. Because I had prepared myself, I was ready when those opportunities appeared. That lesson has stayed with me throughout my career. Every few years I ask myself three questions: Where do I want to be in three years? Where do I want to be in five years? Where do I want to be in ten years? Then I build a plan to get there. Sometimes that meant taking another class. Sometimes it meant volunteering for a difficult project. Sometimes it meant accepting assignments that were outside my comfort zone. Sometimes it meant simply raising my hand when nobody else would.

One piece of advice I would give every call taker and dispatcher is this: Don't wait for someone to ask you to lead. Leadership isn't a title or a promotion—leadership is a choice. Volunteer to train a new employee. Serve on a committee. Help solve problems. Offer ideas. Raise your hand for projects that nobody else wants. The people who stand out aren't always the ones with the most seniority. They're the people who consistently say, "I'll help."

Every project teaches you something. Every committee introduces you to new people. One of

the greatest benefits of saying "yes" wasn't just the experience I gained; it was the people I met. Every challenge develops skills you'll use later in your career. With every new project, committee, assignment, and opportunity, I learned something about another agency, another discipline, or another part of public safety that I hadn't understood before. I had the privilege of working alongside police officers, firefighters, emergency managers, public works professionals, health professionals, elected officials, technology experts, and countless others who all shared the same mission of serving their communities.

Along the way, I built relationships. Those relationships became trusted partnerships. They became mentors, colleagues, and lifelong friends. They opened doors I never knew existed and provided opportunities that no job posting ever could. Looking back, I realize my career wasn't built by one promotion or one major decision. It was built one relationship at a time, one project at a time, and one opportunity at a time. Every time I said yes, my world became a little bigger. Those experiences, the knowledge I gained, and the relationships I developed ultimately led me to where I am today.

Your next opportunity may not look like the job you've always wanted. It may simply be a committee meeting, a regional workgroup, a training class, or a special project. Don't underestimate where that opportunity could lead. You never know which relationship, experience, or lesson will shape the next chapter of your career.

Another lesson I've learned is to stop focusing on everything that could go wrong. Too many people let opportunities pass because they're afraid. What if I

What if this changes my life?

fail? What if I'm not ready? What if I make a mistake? Instead, ask yourself a different question.

What if this changes my life?

Some of the greatest opportunities I've ever had started with one simple word. Yes. Yes, I'll take that assignment. Yes, I'll serve on that committee. Yes, I'll learn something new. Yes, I'll help. Not every opportunity resulted in a promotion, but every opportunity made me better. Every experience added another tool to my toolbox. Every challenge prepared me for something bigger that I couldn't yet see. If I had spent my career worrying about everything that could go wrong, I never would have earned my degree. I never would have worked overtime to pay for school. I never would have accepted many of the opportunities that ultimately shaped my career. Growth begins when you become more excited about what could go right than afraid of what could go wrong. Time moves faster than you think. Three years becomes five. Five becomes ten. No one else can build your future for you. Set goals. Write them down. Invest in yourself. Say yes to opportunities. Lead before you're asked. Keep learning. Keep growing.

I could never have predicted that a young paramedic in Baltimore, working overtime to pay for college and pursuing a degree in emergency management, would one day have the privilege of leading one of the nation's largest and most innovative 9-1-1 centers. It didn't happen because I had a perfect plan. It happened because I always had a next goal. I kept investing in myself. I kept saying yes to

opportunities. I kept building relationships. I kept learning. And I never stopped believing that the next opportunity could change my life. Your journey won't look exactly like mine, and that's the way it should be. But whether your dream is to become a trainer, supervisor, quality-assurance lead, emergency manager, technology leader, director, or simply the very best dispatcher you can be, your future starts with the choices you make today. Five years from now, you'll arrive somewhere. The question isn't whether time will pass. The question is whether you'll arrive there by design or by default. The choice is yours. Start today. If you ever need someone to talk to about it, I'm here - please reach out.

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Scott Brillman is Director of the Fairfax County Department of Public Safety Communications, leading Virginia's largest 9-1-1 center. With more than 30 years of public safety experience, he is a nationally recognized leader in emergency communications, advancing innovation, interoperability, artificial intelligence, responder wellness, and the modernization of Next Generation 9-1-1.

BUILD THE PORTFOLIO BEFORE YOU NEED IT

In public-safety communications, we document almost everything. We document calls, training, quality assurance reviews, policy acknowledgments, system issues, and operational changes, but many 9-1-1 professionals do not document their own professional growth with the same attention. Then an opportunity comes along, a promotion opens, a committee needs members. A conference is accepting speakers, a job interview asks for specific examples, or a consulting opportunity requires a professional bio. Suddenly, we struggle to remember what we did, when we did it, what our role was, and why it mattered. That is why building a professional portfolio before you need it is one of the most practical things a 9-1-1 professional can do.

A professional portfolio does not have to be complicated. It can be a document, spreadsheet, notebook, or folder. At its simplest, it is a running record of your projects, training, presentations, committee work, publications, certifications, and professional involvement. It is not about bragging. It is about keeping track of the work that shows your growth, your experience, and your value.

Experience Is More Than a Job Title

In 9-1-1, experience is often measured by years of service or current position. Those things matter, but they do not tell the whole story. A frontline telecommunicator may be helping train new employees, participating in peer support, assisting with public education, reviewing procedures, or becoming the person others go to during technology

changes. A trainer may be building lesson plans, mentoring employees, preparing staff for protocol updates, or helping leadership identify training gaps. A supervisor may be managing staffing issues, coordinating shift communication, supporting quality assurance, handling conflict, or helping implement new procedures. A manager may be involved in accreditation, CAD changes, continuity planning, cybersecurity readiness, NG911 preparation, recruitment, retention, or interagency coordination. All of that is experience. The problem is that many of those contributions are not captured unless someone makes the effort to track them. They become part of the daily workload, but not part of the professional story. A portfolio helps you recognize the value of the work you are already doing.

Projects Are Career-Building Work

Many 9-1-1 professionals are doing project management long before they ever carry the title of project manager. Think about what happens inside an emergency communications center. Someone has to coordinate training rollouts, CAD updates, quality-assurance initiatives, accreditation tasks, policy changes, technology testing, public-education efforts, staffing projects, continuity plans, and operational improvements. Those are projects. They usually involve a problem to solve, a goal to reach, people to coordinate, deadlines to meet, risks to manage, and results to evaluate. That is project work. If you are involved in those efforts, track them. For each project, write down:

- What was the project?
- What problem were you trying to solve?
- What was your role?
- Who else was involved?
- What steps did you take?
- What challenges came up?
- What changed because of the project?
- What did you learn?

Over time, this becomes more than a list of tasks. It becomes evidence of leadership, communication, planning, adaptability, and follow-through. It can also help you see a future career path. You may realize that the training project, technology rollout, or policy update you helped manage gave you real experience in project coordination. That experience may support a future role in leadership, consulting, operations, training, technology, or formal project management. Sometimes we do not recognize the path we are building until we start writing it down.

Committee Work, Presentations, and Publications Count

Professional involvement outside your agency can also help you grow. Committee work exposes you to different perspectives, agency structures, and challenges. You may learn how standards are developed, how legislation affects operations, how technology decisions are made, or how other centers handle similar problems. Presentations and publications also matter. Not everyone starts as a conference speaker or published author. Many people start by teaching an in-service class, writing a training bulletin, creating a shift briefing, joining a panel, contributing to a newsletter, or presenting at a local meeting. Those efforts show that you can take knowledge and share it with others. Public-safety

communications needs professionals who can explain complex issues clearly. If you serve on a committee, present, publish, or contribute to a workgroup, document it. Write down the organization, topic, date, audience, and your role. If you co-presented or contributed as part of a team, include that too. You may need that information later for a promotion, award nomination, conference proposal, board application, expert role, consulting opportunity, or professional biography. Do not wait until then to build the list.

Build a Story Bank for Interviews

A professional portfolio is not just for resumes. It is also one of the best ways to prepare for interviews. Many interviewers use behavioral questions. These questions ask you to describe a time when you handled conflict, showed leadership, solved a problem, worked as part of a team, managed change, or dealt with a difficult situation. A common format is the STAR method:

Situation: What was happening?

Task: What were you responsible for?

Action: What did you do?

Result: What changed because of your actions?

This sounds simple, but many candidates still answer with general statements.

They may say teamwork is important. Leadership is important. Communication is important. Accountability is important. All of that is true, but it does not give the interview panel a specific example. A stronger answer tells a story. Instead of saying, "I believe communication is important during change," try: "During a CAD update, I helped coordinate communication between operations, training, IT, and supervisors. My task was to make sure frontline staff understood the workflow change before it went live.

I helped create a quick reference guide, answered questions during shift briefings, and collected feedback after implementation. As a result, staff had a consistent message, supervisors had fewer repeat questions, and we identified one issue early enough to correct it.” That answer shows communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and project involvement without simply naming those qualities. The goal is not to memorize perfect interview answers, but to keep enough detail that you can tell clearly when the opportunity comes.

What to Track

Your portfolio can be simple. Start with these categories:

Projects: Technology changes, QA initiatives, accreditation work, training rollouts, policy updates, staffing projects, public education, recruitment, retention, or operational improvements.

Professional involvement: Committees, workgroups, association roles, mentorship programs, standards development, peer support, or interagency projects.

Presentations and publications: Conference sessions, panels, webinars, internal training, newsletter articles, research posters, professional articles, podcasts, or public education material.

Certifications and training: Certifications earned, instructor credentials, leadership programs, technical training, emergency management courses, and continuing education.

STAR examples: Specific stories that show leadership, communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, project management, decision-making, change management, and accountability.

The result does not always have to be dramatic. Sometimes the outcome is clearer communication, fewer errors, better documentation, improved readiness, or stronger collaboration. Those things count.

Start Before You Need It

One of the biggest mistakes we make is waiting until we need a resume before we start thinking about what belongs on it. By then, we may forget dates, details, titles, and outcomes. We may also undersell ourselves because we are trying to remember years of work under pressure. Start now. After a project, write a few notes. After a committee meeting where you contributed to something meaningful, document it. After a training class, presentation, article, or public education event, add it to your list. You do not have to include everything on a resume. You do not have to talk about every project in an interview. But having the information available gives you options. It also helps you see your own growth. In 9-1-1, we spend a lot of time preparing for other people’s emergencies. It is also worth preparing for our own opportunities. Build the portfolio before you need it. Your future self will be glad you did.

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Erika Lakey, ENP, RPL, CMCP, is a public safety communications leader with over 17 years of experience in 9-1-1 operations, training, quality assurance, technology, and policy. She serves as Florida NENA Second Vice President and contributes to national committees focused on cybersecurity, standards, interoperability, and emergency communications leadership.

I GOT HIRED! NOW THAT?



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You have now been hired and are on your way to becoming a public-safety telecommunicator. This is just the beginning. You completed your background check, your drug test, and your psych evaluation, if required. Yes, I said if required; not all agencies require one. You have a start date; you are receiving your work shirt and full uniform--this is always exciting! OK, you passed the entry, and now you look the part, but what's next? Training is what's next. Many agencies are adopting the academy concept. This is where they teach about SOPs, Policies & Procedures, and the dos and don'ts.

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These are just a few of the tasks you will complete. Now, let's talk about what happens once you are in the chair, with the headset on, with your CTO, and eventually released to work on your own. This is where you really become a telecommunicator. It's not just dispatching or answering phones. One of the biggest tasks you will encounter is becoming part of the team, working well in the big sandbox, becoming part of a family. This does not always happen immediately. There are several things you can do to help yourself become part of that family. The first thing is that you should not play in the 'reindeer games,' meaning you

should stay in your own business and not talk about others' business.

The biggest point is, everyone you work with is human. I know that sounds like a ridiculous statement, but think about it: there are times when you work with or deal with someone who is overbearing or a 'know-it-all.' We, humans, tend to adopt a pack mentality. We attack those who are either very overbearing or those who are perceived as weak. What happens if we are the ones perceived as overbearing or weak? Take a hard look in the mirror and see which one you think you may be, or if you run with the pack.

Most brand-new telecommunicators don't think about the future. Where will I go with this career? Do I want to move up the leadership ladder? Do I want to become a communications training officer (CTO), assistant shift leader (ASL), shift leader, training coordinator, or even a director? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you have to maintain your independence from the groups or packs. It really is easy to do; just say no. No, I will not talk about this person because they are bigger than everyone else. No, I will not badger this person because they learn differently and take a little more time in training. No, I will not use disparaging remarks about that person because they believe differently than I do.

The question is, why should anyone care about these things? Once you get past the pack mentality and get to know a person who is a little different, you may find that you have an incredible friend or asset. By the time you are released from training, you should have realized that telecommunicators are a breed of their own. We are marvelously created. We hear and

say things the general public would faint at hearing. We have a very dark sense of humor. (Be careful where you use it!) In addition, we have compassion for our callers, love for our responders, and love and respect for our fellow telecommunicators. You are now part of this big, crazy, sometimes dysfunctional, and compassionate group of people across the world. Love what you do, and you will never work a day in your life, even in the hard times.

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Dorothy Cave has been in public safety for 20+ years, she started as a call taker and promoted her way up to the Training Coordinator for a large Southeast ECC. She served as the EMD Program Manager until she was promoted to Education & Training Manager for the APCO Institute. She is very passionate about telecommunicators, their training, and their growth.

THE FORWARD-DEPLOYED ENGINEER: A ROLE OUR PROFESSION SHOULD HELP DEFINE



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I have been spending a lot of time thinking about a role that is gaining attention in the technology world: the Forward-Deployed Engineer, or FDE. It is not yet a familiar title across the 9-1-1 profession, but I believe it could become an important part of how increasingly complex technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), are introduced into our Emergency Communications Centers (ECC). Having spent much of my career inside ECC operations and now working alongside technology, product, and engineering teams, I have developed an even greater

appreciation for the value each perspective brings to the process. Industry partners invest significant time in understanding their customers and the environments they serve, but there is still tremendous value in creating an even closer connection between the people building a solution and the people using it every day. Both groups are working toward the same goal, and the Forward-Deployed Engineer can help strengthen that collaboration by bringing operational experience and technical expertise together in real time. The Forward-Deployed Engineer model has the potential to help close that gap.

How this role develops could significantly influence whether AI tools are shaped around the realities of emergency communications or whether ECCs are left trying to adapt their operations around the technology. That is why I believe the 9-1-1 community should become part of the conversation now, while the role is still being defined.

What Is a Forward-Deployed Engineer?

Although the role may look different from one company or deployment to another, the basic concept is relatively straightforward. A Forward-Deployed Engineer is a technical professional who works closely within the customer's operational environment instead of remaining separated from it in a distant development or engineering office. The model grew out of the commercial software world, where companies learned that complex technology does not always succeed simply because it has been designed, purchased, and installed. Someone must understand how the product performs inside the customer's actual environment and create a direct connection between the people using the technology and the people continuing to build it.

An FDE is not simply another salesperson or a repackaged technical support resource. At its best, the role provides translation in both directions. The engineer brings the realities of the customer's operation back to the product and development teams. At the same time, the engineer helps configure, adapt, and improve the technology so that it fits the environment as it actually exists, not only as it appeared in a requirements document or demonstration. Implementation milestones still matter, but the real value of the role should be measured by what happens after deployment. Does the technology fit the workflow? Do users trust it? Does it solve a real operational problem? Does it make the work easier, more effective, or more consistent? Those are very different questions from whether the system was technically installed on schedule.

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The need for this type of role becomes even more important with Artificial Intelligence. AI tools are not always static systems that behave exactly the same way in every environment. Their performance may be affected by the data they encounter, the workflows they are placed within, the configurations surrounding them, and the people interacting with them. Deploying AI successfully requires someone who is close enough to the operation to recognize what is actually happening and technically capable enough to help address what is not working.

Look for more on this topic from D. Jeremy DeMar in issue 5 of The Commverse.

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D. Jeremy DeMar, MA, CPE, ENP, is a futurist, thought leader, and subject matter expert with more than 30 years of public safety experience. A former Dispatcher, Supervisor, and Director of two PSAPs/ECCs, Jeremy now focuses on emerging and disruptive technologies affecting the 9-1-1 profession, including Next Generation 9-1-1, artificial intelligence, incident-related imagery, and connected vehicle and V2X integration. He currently serves as Senior Manager of Government and Regulatory Affairs for Intrado.



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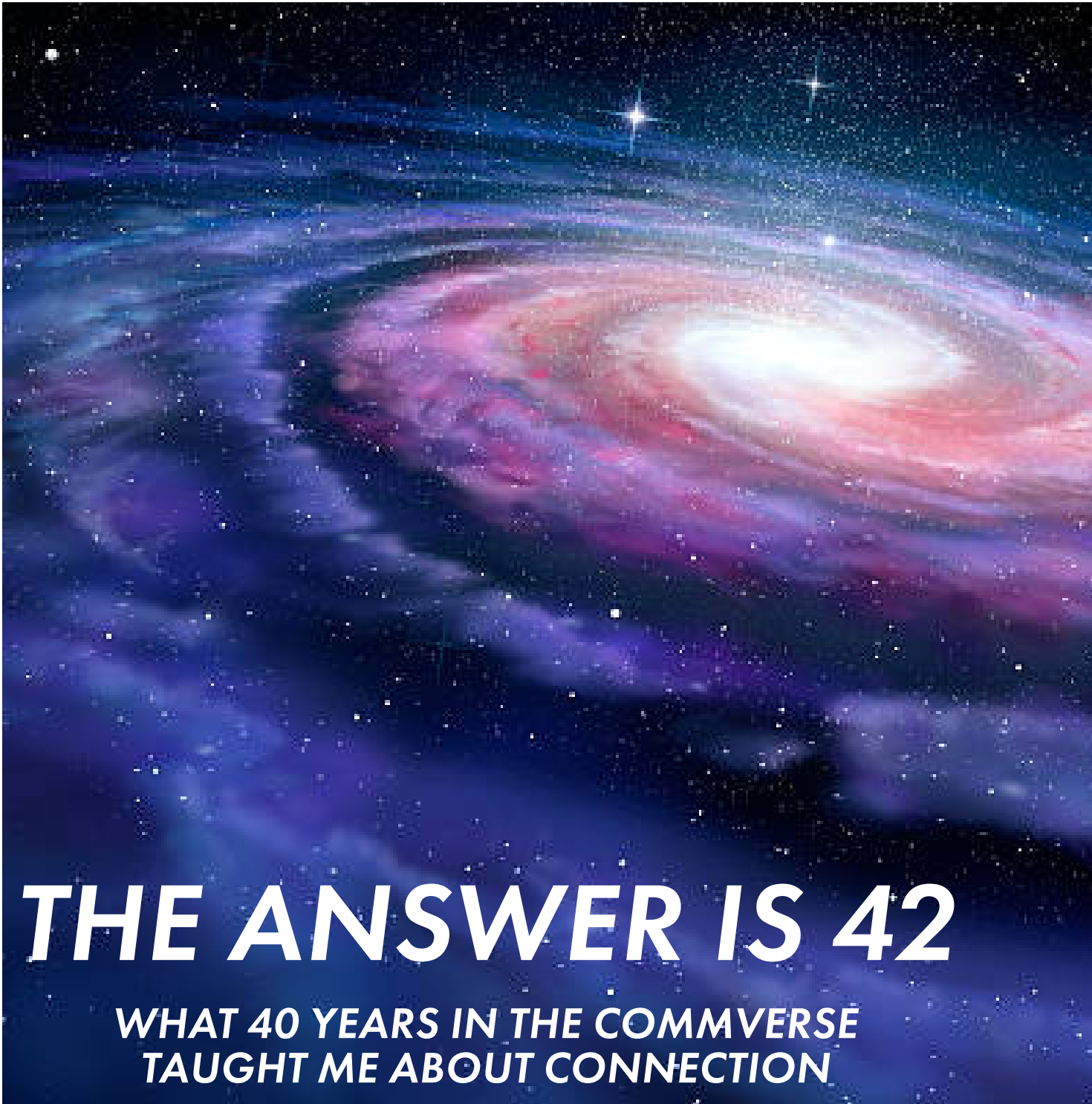
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THE ANSWER IS 42

**WHAT 40 YEARS IN THE COMMVERSE
TAUGHT ME ABOUT CONNECTION**

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If you have read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, you already know that the answer to life, the universe, and everything is 42. The problem, of course, is that nobody seems to know the question. Public-safety communications can feel a little like that. We spend years looking for answers. We build new networks, purchase new systems, write new standards, develop new policies, and invent an entirely new generation of acronyms. Every few years, something arrives that promises to transform emergency communications forever. Sometimes it actually does, but more often, it partially solves one problem and introduces three new ones wearing updated software licenses. After more than forty years in telecommunications and public safety, I have watched us move from analog to digital, from circuits to packets, from selective routers to ESI-nets, and from paper maps to GIS. I have watched the telephone become a computer, the entire building become a sensor network, and the automobile become a mobile emergency-data generator. Smartphones, connected vehicles, Artificial Intelligence, Text to 9-1-1, video, wearables, alarm data, indoor location, and more situational information than most of us could have imagined at the beginning of our careers is now commonplace. While the technology has changed dramatically, since my first day in a single-seat PSAP in 1980, the mission really has not.

A human being somewhere needs help, and another human being has to understand what is happening and connect that person with the right response. Everything else exists to make that connection faster, clearer, safer, and more reliable. So, if you ask me what I have learned after forty years in the Commverse, my answer is not a product, protocol, or platform. It is connection. Yes, forty-two may be the answer, but connection is the meaning.

Technology Changes—Responsibility Does Not

Every generation of public-safety tech arrives with optimism. This will be the system that finally fixes interoperability. This will be the network that eliminates uncertainty. This will be the application that gives everyone the complete incident picture. This will be the Artificial Intelligence that sorts everything out before the human even knows there is a problem. I like optimism. You can't spend a career working in emergency communications without believing that better tech can create better outcomes. But I have also learned to separate optimism from surrender. A network can transport a call. GIS can identify a location. A sensor can detect an event, and AI can recognize a pattern and recommend a response. However, none of those things owns the mission. The people do. The caller trusts that someone will listen. The responder trusts that the information being sent is accurate. The community trusts that the system will work precisely when everything else is going wrong. You cannot assign that responsibility to an algorithm. You cannot hand it to a vendor. You cannot bury it in a contract or leave it with a project team that disappears two

weeks after go-live. While technology can support responsibility, it cannot eliminate it.

The command deck still belongs to humans. That was the point of our Quarter 2 journey through the Tech Nebula. Ensign AI may be fast. It may hear things we miss, organize information, translate languages, recognize patterns, and help reduce cognitive workload. That makes it a potentially valuable member of the crew, but it does not make it the captain. And it certainly does not mean we should hand it the keys to the starship and go get coffee.

Confidence Is Not Competence

One of the more dangerous things about modern technology is how confident it can sound, and be totally wrong. The address appears on the screen. The map places the dot. The algorithm recommends a priority. The dashboard turns green. Everything looks official. But a confident answer is not necessarily a correct answer. The address may be outdated. The map may be wrong. The recommendation may be based on incomplete information. And that green dashboard may simply mean the dashboard itself is functioning beautifully while everything behind it is on fire. It is only experience that teaches you to ask another question: How do we know? Where did this information come from? When was it created? What assumptions produced it? Has anything else confirmed it? What happens if it is wrong? That is not resistance to innovation. It is not cynicism. It is prepared skepticism.

Public-safety professionals often become complacent when operating in uncertainty, because that is where emergencies form. The caller does not always know the address. The initial report is not always correct. The situation changes while the call is still being processed. Our technology **MUST** understand that uncertainty. It **MUST NOT** disguise uncertainty by presenting estimates, predictions, and assumptions as established facts. There is no shame in uncertainty; there is enormous danger in false certainty.

Interoperability Is a Relationship

We usually talk about interoperability as a technical objective—compatible networks. Shared standards. Common interfaces. Exchangeable data. All of that matters, but I have seen technically-compatible systems fail because the organizations behind them did not trust one another. I have also seen imperfect systems work remarkably well because the people involved had built relationships before the emergency occurred. Interoperability begins long before anyone connects a cable. It begins when neighboring agencies sit down together. It begins when GIS teams reconcile boundaries instead of defending their individual versions of reality. It begins when operations personnel participate in technical planning. It begins when vendors are treated as partners but are still expected to answer difficult questions. It begins when everyone agrees who owns the information, who has authority, and what happens when two systems provide different answers. Technology creates the channel. Relationships determine whether we can use it effectively. Sometimes the most important interface

in public safety is still the one between two people who know they can call each other when the diagram stops matching reality.

We Did Not Get Everything Right

Forty years provides plenty of opportunities to be wrong. We treated interoperability like a product that could be purchased. We built proprietary islands and then acted surprised when they could not communicate. We treated GIS as a project instead of living public-safety infrastructure. We celebrated go-live as though the work had ended instead of recognizing that operations had just begun. We designed workflows without adequately involving the people expected to use them. We added information without asking who would evaluate it. We automated processes before fully understanding them. And occasionally, we allowed a sufficiently polished demonstration to temporarily suspend the laws of physics. None of this happened because people wanted public safety to fail.

Complex projects create pressure to simplify difficult problems. A box is easier to purchase than governance. A network is easier to diagram than a relationship. A feature is easier to demonstrate than a sustainable operational workflow, and a project deadline is easier to measure than long-term value. The important thing is not pretending we avoided every mistake. The important thing is learning from them. Because progress is rarely a straight flight through clear space. Sometimes it is circling the same planet until someone finally admits the coordinates may be wrong.

We Got Some Important Things Right

Fortunately, we began treating standards more like operational infrastructure rather than technical paperwork. We recognized that NG911 is not one product, one network, or one vendor. It is an ecosystem. We learned that GIS is foundational. If the map is wrong, the routing can be wrong. If the routing is wrong, the call can arrive in the wrong universe with remarkable technical efficiency. We started thinking about location as more than an address. We developed better methods for preserving and exchanging incident information. We began talking seriously about provenance, authentication, timestamps, auditability, and confidence. We acknowledged that Artificial Intelligence should support human judgment rather than quietly replace it. Most importantly, we are now recognizing telecommunicators for what they actually are: skilled decision-makers. The modern emergency-communications professional is a navigator, translator, analyst, coordinator, investigator, and stabilizing human presence. They take fragmented information and construct an operational picture. They move between technology and humanity in seconds. They manage uncertainty while everyone around them demands certainty. They begin shaping the trajectory of an incident before most responders even know it exists. Technology did not make that role important. It just revealed how important it had been all along.

The Next Crew

Every experienced captain eventually has to turn over the command deck. That is not an ending, though—it is how the mission continues. The next generation

will inherit capabilities we spent entire careers trying to create and perfect. But they will also inherit all of the problems we failed to solve, and several not yet discovered. My advice to them is simple: Learn the technology, but study the people. Understand the network. Learn the standards. Know what the systems can do. But also understand how frightened callers communicate, how dispatchers build mental pictures, and how responders use information under pressure. Ask why the workflow exists. Some procedures are essential. Others exist because somebody made a temporary decision fifteen years ago and no one ever returned to remove it. Question automation respectfully. Use AI. Learn from it. Let it reduce repetitive work, organize information, and identify patterns. But never stop asking what it knows, how it knows it, and what happens when it is wrong. Protect your curiosity. Cynicism can feel like armor, but curiosity is usually more useful. Why did the system behave that way? What was the caller trying to communicate? What did the dispatcher notice? What can we learn before the near miss becomes an incident? Find a mentor. Nobody learns this universe alone. Find people who will explain the history, challenge your assumptions, and tell you when you are confidently traveling toward the wrong galaxy. Listen to their stories. Ask about the failures as well as the victories. Prepare yourself to become that person for someone else. Remember that knowledge becomes legacy only when it is shared forward.

The Answer Is Connection. When I look back across forty years, the most important function is connection.

The headset connects the caller with the call taker. The network connects the call with the appropriate center. GIS connects location with jurisdiction. CAD connects information with resources. Radio connects dispatchers with responders. Standards connect systems built by different organizations. Leadership connects policy with culture, and mentorship connects experience with the future. In the end, it is trust that connects all of it together. Without trust, the caller hesitates. The telecommunicator questions the data. The responder doubts the dispatch. Agencies protect their information. Vendor relationships become defensive. Interoperability becomes another diagram hanging on a conference-room wall. Connection is not merely technical. It is operational, institutional, professional, and deeply human. That is why the answer cannot be found in one product, platform, protocol, or procurement. The answer lives in the relationships between them.

Our trip through the first year of the Commverse is coming to an end. We traveled through the Tech Nebula, decoded alien acronyms, survived first contact with vendor species, and eventually returned to the console floor to listen for the human signal beneath all the noise. The technology will continue to change. The acronyms will continue multiplying, and new systems will promise to transform everything. If we are lucky, some of them actually will. But the mission remains remarkably simple: Connect one human being who needs help with another human being who can provide it. Everything else exists to make that connection faster, clearer, safer, and more reliable. So, what is the answer to life, the universe,

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and everything in emergency communications? Forty-two is still a perfectly good response. But after four decades in the Commverse, I would add one word: CONNECTION. Connection is how information becomes understanding. Connection is how technology becomes useful. Connection is how experience becomes wisdom. And connection is how the mission continues after we leave the command deck. Until the next transmission, keep asking questions, keep challenging the coordinates, and keep preparing the next crew. And, as always: Don't panic. Just answer the call.

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Mark "Fletch" Fletcher, ENP, is the founding principal at Fletch 911, LLC Consulting, and the author of Kari's Law, and the Dispatchable Location Definitions in the RAY BAUMS ACT. He has a popular blog series on Fletch.TV, and hosts the TiPS: Today in Public Safety Podcast at 911TiPS.com



By: Fletch@Fletch911.com



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Federal 911 Compliance Consulting

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BUILDING WORKPLACES WORTHY OF THE PEOPLE WHO SERVE



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Over the past several months, I have spent a great deal of time thinking and writing about what many have called the staffing crisis in emergency communications. We have examined vacancies, mandatory overtime, lengthy hiring processes, training attrition, and the continued loss of experienced professionals. These are not new challenges, but they remain among the most pressing issues facing our profession.

Those conversations have been important. They have encouraged us to rethink recruitment, hiring, retention, and the changing expectations of today's workforce. But as I have reflected on those discussions, I often return to a different question.

What if staffing is not the problem we are trying to solve? More accurately, what if staffing is the outcome of something much larger? For years, we

have invested tremendous effort into preparing people for emergency communications. We recruit them, train them, certify them, and teach them how to make life-saving decisions under extraordinary pressure. Every one of those investments matters. But eventually, every new employee walks through the door and begins experiencing the organization we have built. That experience becomes part of the job. Perhaps that is the conversation our profession is now ready to have.

Looking Beyond the Staffing Crisis

No one enters emergency communications expecting easy work. People understand they will answer calls from individuals experiencing the worst moments of their lives. They know they will work nights, weekends, and holidays. They expect emotionally difficult calls, rapidly changing priorities, and the weight of making decisions that carry real consequences. Those demands have always been part of the profession. What many do not anticipate are the organizational conditions surrounding the work: the consistency of leadership, the quality of communication, the support they receive after difficult incidents. Will they feel comfortable asking questions? Will mistakes become opportunities for learning or reasons for embarrassment? Will trust be something they experience, or something they are simply told exists? Over time, those experiences become inseparable from the work itself.

We often describe burnout, disengagement, or turnover as workforce problems. Yet many of those outcomes are shaped long before someone submits a resignation. They develop through thousands of everyday interactions that either strengthen or weaken an employee's relationship with the organization. Perhaps the staffing conversation has never been only

about staffing. Perhaps it has always been about the conditions in which people are asked to serve.

The Workplace Becomes Part of the Job

One lesson I have learned throughout my career is that people do not simply work in an organization. Gradually, the organization begins to work on them. It shapes confidence and self-doubt. It influences whether people feel psychologically safe enough to contribute ideas, ask for help, or admit mistakes. It determines whether difficult days become manageable challenges or cumulative burdens. Operational stress is an unavoidable part of emergency communications—organizational stress should not be. A difficult call may last minutes. A difficult organizational culture can last years.

That distinction matters because, while leaders cannot eliminate the demands of emergency communications, they can influence how those demands are experienced. Leadership does not remove pressure- it determines whether people face that pressure alone.

Preparing the Workplace for the People

We often talk about preparing people for the profession. Perhaps it is time to devote equal attention to preparing the profession for its people. That preparation has very little to do with lowering standards or making the work easier. Emergency communications will always require accountability, professionalism, and high performance. Those expectations should never change. What can change is the environment in which people are expected to meet them. Organizations prepare workplaces through intentional leadership. They prepare supervisors to coach rather than simply correct. They create onboarding experiences that foster belonging

rather than survival. They establish cultures where feedback is welcomed, communication is transparent, and asking for support is viewed as professional rather than personal weakness. They recognize that trust is built long before it is needed.

These decisions may appear small in isolation, but together they become the daily experience of working in an organization. They become the culture employees describe to new hires. They influence whether people look forward to coming to work or quietly begin searching for somewhere else to contribute their talents. The workplace is not simply where the work happens. It becomes part of the work itself.

A Workplace Worth Staying For

When someone leaves an emergency communications center, we often ask why they left. Perhaps we should spend equal time asking why others stay. Rarely is the answer that the work became easier.

Instead, people describe leaders who remained present during difficult moments. They remember supervisors who believed in them before they believed in themselves. They recall teammates who created a sense of belonging and organizations that invested in their growth rather than simply measuring their productivity. Those experiences do not eliminate stress. They create meaning alongside it. They remind people that while the work is demanding, they are not expected to carry it alone. That may be one of the greatest organizational resources we can provide.

Where We Go From Here

Emergency communications is entering a period of extraordinary change. Artificial intelligence, multimedia communications, new technologies, and evolving public expectations will continue

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transforming how we perform our work. These innovations have tremendous potential to improve service delivery and operational effectiveness, but no technology can replace healthy leadership. No software can create trust. No new platform can compensate for an organizational culture that people perceive as unsupportive or disconnected.

The future of our profession will certainly depend on attracting talented people. It will also depend on whether those talented people discover organizations where they can build meaningful, sustainable careers. Perhaps that is the next evolution of the staffing conversation—not simply asking how we recruit more people, but asking what kind of workplace those people will discover when they arrive. The strongest workforce strategy may not begin with hiring. It may begin with building workplaces worthy of the people who have already answered the call.

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Dr. Andre V. Jones, PhD, ENP, CPE, is an international leader in emergency communications and organizational psychology. With 20+ years in 9-1-1 operations, he specializes in workforce resilience, culture, and leadership. He speaks globally on shaping healthier, more adaptive ECCs in times of rapid technological and organizational change.

HERE'S THE THING:

TURNING COMPLAINERS INTO COLLABORATORS

Comm centers across the country seem to be filled with complaining. Indeed, there are many negative, toxic PSAPs, and complaining is definitely part of that dynamic. It's easy to make that our conclusion, throw up our hands, and declare that change is impossible, especially when people are complaining all the time. But when we think about change, it's critical to determine what exactly is happening so we can know what needs changing. Let's talk about complaining.

Example scenario: Dispatcher Sue said to me during a training class, "I wish John wouldn't come to my console and tell me his ridiculous stories and silly jokes." "What did you say to John?" I asked. "Well, I didn't say anything. I didn't want to hurt his feelings." "Have you told others about your dissatisfaction with John?" Sheepishly, she responded, "Yes." "So, how do you think the situation can ever change if you didn't tell John himself?" In this scenario, Sue is, in fact, complaining. She has told everyone on the floor except the person she's upset with that she doesn't like his chatting at her console. Responsibility for the continuing situation sits squarely on Sue's shoulders, not John's.

Second scenario: Dispatcher Vicky goes into Supervisor Becky's office and whines about the schedules, which are Becky's responsibility. "You know, these schedules are all screwed up!"

Becky responds, "Don't you come into my office whining about the schedules. Close the door on your way out." In this scenario, the dispatcher is not complaining. She is taking her concerns directly to

the person responsible for them. It might seem like complaining because of Vicky's whining. But whining is not necessarily a characteristic of a complaint, it's just annoying. Rather than complaining, Vicky is expressing a request for accountability. She is, in effect, saying, "Hey, Becky. You need to do your job." Responsibility for addressing the scheduling issue is on Becky's shoulders. (Yes, Vicky needed to approach Becky differently.)

Here's the thing: Complaining is expressing grief, pain, or discontent to anyone except the person who is responsible for the situation and who can do something about it. When you bring an issue to the attention of the person who can do something about it, it's not complaining. It's a request for accountability. So what's wrong with complaining?

First of all, complaining costs you money. It increases dissatisfaction throughout an organization and spreads from person to person, killing an organization from within. Studies have found that organizations with a lot of complaining lose people regularly and have to replace them, which is expensive. Here's the worst part: Oftentimes, it's your best people who leave. Second, complaining keeps your focus on the problem instead of looking for solutions. Organizations that remain focused on problems can't move forward. It's up to each person in the comm center to be solution-oriented. You may say you don't have that kind of power, but you do. The thoughts you have and the words that come out of your mouth are either positive or negative. Are you contributing to the negativity of your comm center by complaining a lot?

Third, complaining damages your health. People who chronically complain have excessive levels of cortisol, which causes obesity, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and much more. In addition, regular complaining makes the hippocampus shrink. The hippocampus is responsible for learning and creative thinking. Complaining literally limits your brain activity. One thing worth thinking about: Is there chronic complaining in your center, and does it have an impact on your training success rate?

Perhaps most important, complaining destroys relationships. Do you know a person who's a chronic complainer? Do you find being around that person to be an energy drain? Complaining to someone lowers the energy in the relationship and makes people feel less happy. How many people have you had to invite out of your life because of their negativity? Chronic complaining takes a toll on not just the complainer, but everyone around them.

Probably the most profound cost of complaining is that it costs you your dreams. Time spent complaining, alienating other people, damaging your health, and costing you money take you away from your dreams. Chronic complaining takes a lot of time and energy that could be spent on much more meaningful undertakings.

G.R.I.P.E.

G Get Attention
R Remove Responsibility
I Inspire Envy
P Power
E Excuse Poor Performance

My friend, Will Bowen, started a global phenomenon called the Complaint Free Movement. Together with a university professor, he came up with the acronym G.R.I.P.E. to explain why people complain, and what to do about it. The G in G.R.I.P.E. stands for Get attention. People complain because they want attention. There's nothing inherently wrong with attention; it's a human want and need. But when people don't know how to get it in a healthy way, they act out, including by complaining. What can you do if you've got somebody constantly complaining in order to get attention? Ask them, "So, what's going well with _____?" Fill in the blank with what the person is grateful for, what they're happy about, what the best meal they've eaten this week was, what they love about their kids, etc. And when you know someone will definitely complain about something, don't wait for them to start complaining. Ask them proactively what's going well.

The R in G.R.I.P.E. stands for Remove responsibility. People complain in order to have responsibility removed from themselves. Imagine you give someone a task. If the person really doesn't want to do it or doesn't want to do it to the level you would like, they're not going to look you in the face and say no. They'll complain about all the circumstances that keep them from doing the task. You ask them, "If it were possible, how might you do it?" And don't let them off the hook. As soon as you take their responsibility on yourself, they will find other ways to get out of doing their work.

The I in G.R.I.P.E. stands for Inspire envy (brag). People complain to make themselves seem superior to others. For example, everybody's at the morning meeting except Julie, who is chronically late. Tom, says, "Well, we could start, but I see that Julie is late as usual." Tom is not really telling you Julie is late; he's telling you that he's on time. He's making a negative

comparison with someone else to elevate his own status. The way to handle this is to compliment the opposite. You say to Tom, "You know what I appreciate about you, Tom. You're always on time."

The P in G.R.I.P.E. stands for Power. People who complain are often trying to get others to agree with them, and it is often one person complaining about another. What are they doing? They're building alliances. They're complaining for power, and they want to buy your allegiance, your power, for the price of a complaint. Best advice: Steer clear of all that drama. You can say, "It sounds like the two of you have a lot to talk about." Leave it at that. The drama of each of those people will not be beneficial to you in any healthy way.

And the E in G.R.I.P.E. stands for Excuse poor performance. This is similar to removing responsibility, only after the fact. A person has failed at a task you gave them. They want you not to blame them; they want you to blame the circumstances. They complain about the circumstances so you won't hold them accountable. When someone complains in order to excuse poor performance, say to them, "How do you plan to improve next time?" Say "next time" because nobody gets defensive about next time. If you lay into them with a barrage of questions about "this time," like, "Why didn't you think about this? Why didn't you plan for that? Didn't you know that was a possibility?" They will get defensive and react with fight or flight. Think about the difference between complaining and requesting accountability. Are you talking about people behind their backs instead of raising the issue directly with the person involved? Are you misunderstanding someone's attempt to request accountability from you because of the way they've communicated the message. Complaining is a highly manageable aspect of organizations. Dispatchers, supervisors, and directors do not have to stay stuck

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in behaviors that are sabotaging their own chances of success.

To learn more about the Complaint Free World Movement and the 21-day Complaint Free Challenge, visit complaintfreestore.com.

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Joe Serio, Ph.D., is co-author of the forthcoming book, Dispatch Culture: 50 Lessons on Inspiring Excellence, and co-author of the forthcoming book, Dispatch Trainer: 50 Lessons on Being a Great Teacher. He is co-author of Dispatcher Stress 50 Lessons on Beating the Burnout and Dispatch Supervisor: 50 Lessons on Being a Great Leader. He is the founder, host, and instructor of the six-month 9-1-1 Supervisor Leadership Academy, the year-long 9-1-1 High Performance Academy, as well as the 9-1-1 Leadership Training Event and the 9-1-1 Mental Health Workshop, both held at the Mayan Ranch in Bandera, TX. Joe is the author of a children's personal development book series, including The Secret of the Gold Dust and The Secret Code in the Zoo Walls. For trainings and wholesale book purchases, visit joeserio.com.



HIRE BETTER. TRAIN FASTER. QA SMARTER.



PREHIRE

Job preview & candidate screening



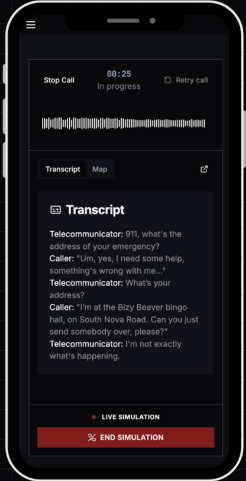
TRAINING

Realistic call taking & radio simulation



QA

Automated review & coaching for live ops



Stop Call 00:25 In progress Retry call

Transcript Map

Transcript

Telecommunicator: 911, what's the address of your emergency?
Caller: Um, yes, I need some help, something's wrong with me...
Telecommunicator: What's your address?
Caller: I'm at the Bliz Beaver bingo hall, on South Nova Road. Can you just send somebody over, please?
Telecommunicator: I'm not exactly what's happening.

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LIFE WITH A SERVICE DOG:

LEADERSHIP, CUMULATIVE TRAUMA, INVISIBLE STRUGGLES,
AND REDEFINING STRENGTH IN PUBLIC SAFETY



Photo provided by Melissa Alterio.

The first time I walked into a crowded room with my service dog, I was not worried about her.

I was worried about me.

Not because I doubted her training.

Not because I doubted her ability to do her job.

I was worried about what everyone else would think.

Would they stare?

Would they question me?

Would they wonder why someone like me needed a service dog?

Would they assume I was no longer capable of doing the work I had spent decades building a career around?

The irony is that after 35 years in public safety, I have spent most of my life helping other people through their worst moments.

But standing beside a service dog forced me to confront something much more personal:

What happens when you are the one who needs support?

The truth is that there was never one single incident that led me here.

No singular moment.

No defining event.

No clear dividing line between “before” and “after.”

Instead, it was a lifetime.

A career spent carrying the weight of other people’s emergencies.

Personal losses that changed me.

Grief.

Disappointment.

Experiences that quietly reshaped my sense of safety, trust, and self.

And like many people, I carried those things far longer than anyone realized.

Some Background:

I spent much of my career in New York during a time that forever changed public safety professionals across this country. Like so many others, I remember September 11th with extraordinary clarity. I remember the sounds, the fear, the uncertainty, the shift in everyone’s sense of safety and normalcy. Even outside of New York City itself, the impact was profound and lasting.

For some of us, it never really leaves.

I have what many people describe as a photographic memory. For years, I considered that a gift in leadership and emergency communications. It allowed me to remember details, conversations, incidents, and information with precision.

What I eventually realized is that memory does not discriminate.

The difficult moments stay too.

Calls. Images. Fear. Grief. Stress. The things you saw, heard, and carried while continuing to show up every single day because that is what this profession requires of you.

And public safety professionals become exceptionally skilled at carrying things.

We compartmentalize.

We push through.

We care for others first.

We lead.

We respond.

We survive.

Until one day you realize surviving and healing are not always the same thing.

For me, the effects surfaced in ways that many people around me probably never fully realized. Anxiety in large crowds. Hypervigilance while traveling. Constant situational awareness. Difficulty quieting my mind. An overwhelming sense of responsibility for everyone around me.

And layered into that were deeply personal experiences with grief, loss, disappointment, and private emotional wounds that reshaped my sense of safety, trust, and self - things I do not often speak about publicly. Not because I am ashamed of them, but because I have learned that you do not have to tell every detail of your story for your truth to matter.

That is something I want others to understand too.

There is strength in vulnerability, but there is also strength in boundaries.

This article is me sharing my story, without fully sharing it.

And maybe that is enough.

The Part Nobody Talks About:

There is another part of having a service dog that people do not often talk about openly: the loss of privacy.

Most people love dogs, and I genuinely understand the curiosity. But when a service dog vest goes on a dog — particularly when the handler has no visible disability — the experience changes dramatically.

People look at you differently.

Sometimes it is curiosity.

Sometimes skepticism.

Sometimes judgment.

And often, the first question becomes:

“Why do you have a service dog?”

What many people do not realize is that this question can place someone in an incredibly uncomfortable position. Service dog handlers are not required to disclose their medical history, trauma, diagnosis, or deeply personal experiences in order to justify the presence of their service dog to strangers.

Yet many handlers feel pressured to explain themselves anyway.

For me personally, the anxiety surrounding those moments can be overwhelming. Internally, there is an immediate calculation taking place:

Do I answer?

How much do I say?

Will this person understand?

Will they judge me?

Will they assume I am weak, dramatic, or undeserving because my disability is not visible?

That internal dialogue can be exhausting.

When People Mistake Support for Weakness

I think it is important for people to understand that not all disabilities can be seen. Public safety professionals, veterans, survivors of trauma, and many others often carry invisible burdens while continuing to function at exceptionally high levels professionally and personally.

A person's ability to lead, succeed, or appear composed does not mean they are unaffected by what they have experienced.

I also believe education matters when it comes to proper service dog etiquette.

A working service dog should not be distracted, touched, called to, photographed without permission, or separated from their handler's focus while actively working. What may appear to others as a friendly interaction can interrupt important trained tasks and alerts.

Sera is not simply a well-behaved pet accompanying me in public spaces. She is a professionally trained service dog who has completed extensive task and public access training through a reputable organization. She has received appropriate public access certifications and is specifically trained to assist during periods of elevated stress and anxiety.

And while I may not always owe the world an explanation for why I have her, I do hope sharing part of my story helps create greater understanding for others who quietly navigate similar journeys every day.

What I Can Tell You is This:

Sera changed my life.

She brings me focus, clarity, grounding, and calm. She is trained to recognize periods of elevated anxiety and stress, often before I consciously recognize them myself. In many ways, she interrupts the cycle that years of trauma, stress, and hypervigilance created.

What is interesting is that people often have an image in their mind of what someone with a service dog looks like.

I am the Executive Director of the second-largest 9-1-1 center in the State of Georgia — with a service dog.

I am an independent 9-1-1 consultant — with a service dog.

I am an adjunct instructor for APCO — with a service dog.

I am a Board Member for the Denise Amber Lee Foundation — with a service dog.

I am a leader.

A daughter.

A sister.

A friend.

With a service dog.

And none of those things diminish the others.

For years, I have advocated for wellness, resilience, and mental health awareness in public safety. I have encouraged others to seek support, prioritize healing, and acknowledge the invisible weight this profession carries.

At some point, I had to learn to extend that same grace to myself.

One of the most important lessons I have learned is this:

Being affected by trauma does not make someone weak.

Being victimized does not make someone weak.

Being human does not make someone weak.

In fact, I believe some of the strongest people are the ones who continue leading, loving, serving, and showing up despite the things they carry internally every day.

Sera:

People often ask me what it is like to have a service dog.

The truth is, I do not know that there are words big enough to explain it.

Most people see a highly trained dog.

They see the vest.

The obedience.

The public access skills.

The tasks.

What they do not see is what she means to me.

For much of my life, I have been the person others turn to.

The person who figures things out.

The person who shows up.

The person who carries the burden when someone else cannot.

Whether in my career, my family, my friendships, or the organizations I care deeply about, I have always found purpose in helping others navigate difficult moments.

It is who I am.

What I never expected was that a black Labrador named Sera would come into my life and teach me that it is okay to need help too.

Not because she made me weak.

Because she reminded me that I am human.

People often talk about the tasks a service dog performs.

The alerts.

The grounding.

The interruptions.

The support.

And those things matter.

But what means the most to me cannot be measured by a task list.

What means the most is that she is there.

Always.

No matter what kind of day I am having.

When I am overwhelmed.

When I am exhausted.

When old memories unexpectedly surface.

When I am carrying things I do not talk about very often.

She is there.

Without judgment.

Without conditions.

Without ever asking me to explain.

There are moments when I look down and realize she has been watching me long before I realized I needed her.

A change in my breathing.

A shift in my posture.

A tension I have become so accustomed to carrying that I no longer recognize it.

She notices.

She always notices.

And somehow, she knows exactly what to do.

But what has surprised me most is that Sera has given me so much more than support.

She has given me community.

Before Sera, I never imagined I would become part of a service dog program.

I never imagined that I would meet so many incredible handlers, trainers, volunteers, veterans, first responders, and families whose lives have also been changed by these remarkable dogs.

Because of Sera, I found Warrior Paws.

What began as receiving a service dog eventually became something much bigger.

Today, we volunteer together. We help support the program. We mentor other service dog teams. We celebrate victories, navigate challenges, and walk alongside people who are beginning journeys much like the one I began myself.

Sera did not simply change my life.

She expanded it.

She introduced me to friendships, opportunities, and a sense of purpose that I never could have anticipated when she first entered my world.

And then there are the moments that no one else sees.

The moments that mean the most.

Every evening, almost without fail, around 8:30 p.m., something changes.

The service dog clock apparently ends its shift.

The vest is long gone.

The training is done.

The workday is over.

And Sera decides it is time to stop being a professional and start being my dog.

She curls up beside me.

Presses herself close.

Resting her head against me as if she is making up for every moment we spent focused on work that day.

It has become our routine.

Our quiet little tradition.

And no matter how stressful the day has been, no matter how much weight I am carrying, those moments remind me that I am not carrying it alone.

I think that is what people misunderstand about service dog partnerships.

Yes, there is training.

Yes, there are tasks.

Yes, there is extraordinary skill involved.

But at the heart of it all is a relationship.

A bond built through trust, consistency, and unconditional love.

People often tell me how lucky I am to have Sera.

And they are right.

Because somewhere between the training sessions, the public outings, the laughter, the setbacks, the milestones, the snuggles, and the thousands of ordinary moments we have shared together, she became so much more than my service dog.

She became my safe place.

And this journey—one that eventually led me to Warrior Paws, to new friendships, to a new community,

and to helping others—would never have happened without her.

I thought I was getting a service dog.

What I received was a partner, a purpose, and a life that became bigger and richer than I ever imagined.

Redefining Strength:

Public safety has taught me many things over the course of 35 years.

But perhaps one of the most important is this:

Strength is not pretending nothing affected you.

Strength is having the courage to keep moving forward anyway.

For much of my life and career, I believed strength meant being the one who carried everything quietly.

Like many in public safety, I learned how to function under pressure, lead through crisis, protect others, and continue moving forward no matter what I was carrying internally. In many ways, that mindset helped shape the leader I became.

But somewhere along the way, I also learned something equally important:

Strength is not measured by how much suffering you can hide from the world.

Real strength is self-awareness.

It is honesty.

It is resilience with humility.

It is having the courage to acknowledge when something has affected you — and refusing to allow shame to define what healing looks like.

For me, part of that healing came in the form of a service dog named Sera.

Not because I am incapable.

Not because I am broken.

Not because I am weak.

But because after decades of carrying the weight of this profession and life itself, I finally understood that support and strength can exist together.

I know there will still be people who do not understand invisible disabilities. Some may question service dogs.

Some may quietly judge what they cannot see or fully comprehend.

That is okay.

This article was never written to convince everyone.

It was written for the dispatcher silently carrying cumulative trauma.

For the first responder who has normalized hypervigilance.

For the leader who spends their life taking care of everyone else while quietly falling exhausted into bed each night.

For the person who believes they must choose between being respected and being human.

You do not.

I am still a leader.

I am still trusted.

I am still capable.

I am still the Executive Director of a major 911 center, an instructor, a consultant, a mentor, a daughter, a sister, and a friend.

And I am also someone who needed support.

Those truths can coexist.

If there is one thing I hope people take away from my story, it is this:

Trauma does not always announce itself loudly.

Sometimes it accumulates quietly over years of service, sacrifice, grief, responsibility, and survival.

And healing does not always look the way people expect it to.

Sometimes healing walks beside you quietly, wearing four paws and a vest, reminding you to breathe.

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Melissa Alterio is Executive Director of the Cobb County Department of Emergency Communications and a nationally recognized public safety leader, consultant, and instructor. She volunteers with Warrior Paws, advocating for mental health awareness for veterans and first responders through the life-changing partnership between handlers and professionally trained service dogs.

One Dog. Many Lives.

While my article shares what it's like to live with a service dog, another remarkable journey has just begun, one that will impact an entire community.

Warrior Paws recently launched its Community Canine Program (CCP), an initiative that partners with public safety agencies, hospitals, victim advocacy programs, and other service organizations by placing specially selected and highly trained Community Canines where compassion and connection are needed most.

Unlike a service dog, which is individually trained to perform specific tasks for one person with a disability, a Community Canine serves an organization. These dogs are prepared to provide comfort, reassurance, and a calming presence for people experiencing trauma, grief, crisis, or some of life's most difficult moments.

This week, that vision became reality.

A beautiful young Labrador Retriever named Skye was welcomed by the Sandy Springs, GA Police Department as the inaugural Community Canine assigned to its Victim Advocacy Program. Watching Skye meet her new family, the Victim Advocacy Unit, officers, and Chief of Police was something I won't soon forget. As people gathered around this sweet puppy, smiles spread across the room, conversations softened, and there was an unmistakable sense that everyone understood they were witnessing the beginning of something special.

Skye is still a puppy. She has plenty of growing, learning, and training ahead of her with Rucker Dog Training before she begins serving in her official role. But even on her very first visit, it was easy to see the impact she will one day have on victims searching for comfort, children needing reassurance, and first responders who witness trauma every day.

Being part of this inaugural partnership between Warrior Paws, the Sandy Springs Police Department, and Rucker Dog Training was a tremendous honor. It served as a reminder that healing doesn't always begin with words. Sometimes, it begins with four paws, a wagging tail, and the quiet presence of a dog whose purpose is simply to be there.

Sometimes one dog changes one life. And sometimes, one dog helps an entire community heal.



Photos provided by Melissa Alterio.

WILDLAND FIRE COMMUNICATIONS

When a wildfire hits, the call volume goes up. The cries for help increase. The confusion takes hold of the public. And at the front of it all is the Public-Safety Telecommunicator. However, when the initial attack does not stop the fire, and more resources are called in, an Incident Management Team is often called in to manage the larger-scale incident. This is when the radio communications will move from the Emergency Communications Center to adapt within the Incident Command System (ICS) structure and be taken over by firefighters trained in radio communications, or tactical dispatchers.

Training

Under the ICS structure, positions are named to allow for easy understanding of the job and give a common naming that anyone can understand. Much like a Public-Safety Telecommunicator, a Radio Operator, or RADO, handles radio traffic coming in and out of the command post. Much of this includes tracking resources, passing messages and resource orders from the field, and assisting with any incident-within-an-incident (IWI) that arises. The Incident Communications Center Manager (INCM) is responsible for supervising RADOs, tracking communications inventories, and handling many administrative duties. Incident Communications Technicians (COMT) build and maintain the radio system, often through equipment ordered from the National Interagency Incident Communications Division (NIICD) in Boise, ID. The Communications Unit Leader (COML) oversees the Communications

Unit, reports to the Logistics Section Chief (LOGS), and is responsible for all aspects of incident communications, from staffing and equipment to the design of the radio system.

Each position requires the completion of a Position Task Book (PTB) from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). These PTBs are like a sign-off guide—a list of tasks that must be performed satisfactorily in front of someone fully qualified in the position who then signs off that you are competent to perform those duties. Much of this work is done on an actual incident through on-the-job training, and simulations (when operational tempo and staffing allow).

Once all tasks are complete and enough experience has been gathered and documented (usually 3-5 fires), the book is signed off and passed to a qualification review board for review before a formal qualification or credential, is issued. In essence, you can expect to work several fires before being sent out fully qualified. Once the PTB is assigned, or “opened”, you will have three years to complete it.

From Mobilization to Demob

Calls to mobilize can give you anywhere from a couple of hours to 24 hours to get moving, depending on the need and what team you are assigned to. Assignments typically last 14 days and sometimes can extend longer. You arrive, check in, and find your way through this “city” made of yurts, tents, and trailers to find the communications unit. A lot of times, the

camp and command post are co-located, and the locations vary from schools to fairgrounds to some random farmer's field in the middle of nowhere.

Daily life begins with an early-morning briefing. Breakfast comes from the field kitchen, and people rotate through as work allows. Somewhere along the line you grab a brown-bag lunch. If radio programming is needed for crews, the COMTs will have set up near briefing to "clone" programming from one radio into another. Crews including heavy equipment, Hot Shots, hand crews and more head out for the line, checking in by radio as they leave camp and when they arrive. COMTs might head out to the field to perform coverage checks, set up equipment like repeaters to expand radio coverage, or stay at the command post to work on equipment that has come in, assist new crews as they arrive, or handle any other tasks that may be needed. INCMs document all this movement, assist RADOs in their work, and keep the COML informed of what is going on as the COML works to form the plan for the next day or operational period and attends various meetings.

Crews start to come in late in the evening. Shower trailers are brought in so folks can clean up, and the field kitchen serves dinner. Again, those in the communications unit rotate in and out, as we are always monitoring the radio. After a 16-hour shift, we all camp out in tents in a field nearby alongside everyone else working on the fire. The next day we get up and do it all again.

Working in the communications unit for the lifespan of a wildfire generally comes in one of three ways: start-up, maintenance mode, and tear-down. In startup, the camp and command post are being built. We work to transition radio communications from the local network to the one we build in the field and work out procedures for handling radio traffic. During maintenance mode, COMTs go out every couple

of days and check equipment, replace batteries as needed, and provide general assistance to anyone with a radio issue. Life starts to feel more like a day job than an evolving incident. Tear-down comes when the fire is being handed off to a local team, and the current amount of equipment and people is no longer needed. Equipment will be brought back in from the field and sent back to where it came from. RADOs will stand watch until the last repeater comes down off the hill.

Amazing Opportunity

The work of fighting wildland fire is exhausting, hot, sweaty, and dirty work that some days seems to never end. On the other hand, you get to meet some of the neatest people, feel what working in a team truly feels like, and do some very rewarding work. If communications do not work, firefighters cannot do their jobs. The fight of a wildland fire is truly a team sport. I have had the chance to work with hot shots, fly in helicopters, be on the fire line, and spend many weeks away from home, hot, tired, and sweaty, but in the end I know that each time I went out, I did my part to create a positive and effective outcome.

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George Long, RPL, currently serves as the Public Safety Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC) for the state of Washington. Prior to that, I served nearly two successful decades in the 9-1-1 center, starting as a call taker and working my way up to Director, after which I spent a couple of years in higher education and the summer months on wildland fires, working in various communications units.

As a volunteer since the age of 12, I have been involved with CERT, Civil Air Patrol, the Washington State Guard, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, and the Kittitas County Auxiliary Communications Service, serving in roles related to emergency management and emergency communications.

WHEN THE SH*T HITS THE FAN: **SURVIVING THE DISPATCHER'S "GOLDEN HOUR"**

Our friends in the Emergency Medical Services have a term known as “The Golden Hour,” which describes the first sixty minutes immediately following a traumatic injury. The general consensus is that effective treatment provided during this time can significantly impact patient survival.

While perhaps absent from some of our everyday routines, telecommunicators can also face their own forms of golden hour challenges, which increase in severity based upon the nature of the call and the timely availability of viable resources. The number and training of firefighters, police officers, and paramedics immediately available to respond, the equipment they possess, as well as the distance needed to travel to the scene, become a critical factor.

Inside the PSAP itself (Public Safety Answering Point), the challenges are magnified by the critical lack of dispatch resources. Aging equipment, outdated devices, and poor training all add to the litany of challenges faced by the PSAPs (Poor Sumvitches Answering Phones). In some cases, the challenges can be somewhat controlled by larger organizations with robust infrastructure, but Tiny Town USA has neither internal resources or unlimited help just around the corner. And, regardless of where you hang your headset, you are somewhat affected by budget and staffing realities.

The fire in the urban paint factory leaves a nasty scar. The fire in the rural paint factory leaves half the town unemployed, as well. So, not only are there immediate impacts from a singular event, but long-

lasting consequences with which to deal. For our purposes here, let’s take a look at what hits the local TC (telecommunicator) when the phone first rings in Tiny Town 9-1-1. It’s been a quiet Thanksgiving Eve, and Mary disposes of her Swanson’s Turkey dinner and brushes the crumbs from the console as she connects the call. It’s from a passerby near the World-Wide Wallet factory reporting an active fire. Since they are closed for the holiday weekend and traffic is light in that rural area normally, it seems as if the blaze has gained significant headway even before being reported. Mary tones out the fire department and sends one of the two patrol cars on duty and rues that dessert tonight is not to be.

While the officer is still enroute, he reports a series of explosions followed by a visible cloud drifting towards town, and requests the second on-duty unit to start blocking off traffic. A call is quickly made to the Emergency Management Manager, who, as it turns out, is out of town for the holiday, but must immediately be put on hold as 9-1-1 begins to ring again. This call is reporting an accident on the complete other side of town, so the fire department ambulance must be rerouted from the fire to the wreck, and off-duty police officers must be called in to handle this event. Some cannot be contacted, and others have finished a number of off-duty brewskis while watching the game.

The fire department is calling for mutual aid, the mayor is calling for an evacuation, the media is calling for a story, and Mary is desperately attempting to reach

any of the few town dispatchers that are off duty and available. It is still several hours until her relief is due, the fire is getting bigger, the car accident has blocked the highway delaying the mutual aid, and the phones have not stopped ringing. Sound preposterous? A scant few days after we first activated our 9-1-1 number in a center that I managed in Illinois, our region experienced an ice storm that resulted in a federal disaster declaration. Our TC's literally could not put a handset down without the phone immediately ringing again.

So where do we start? We won't even add things like her kids are home alone, and the toxic cloud is headed to both their house and the dispatch center. Time for Mary to start the treasure hunt to find and dust off the aptly named disaster manual, since nobody ever used it or kept it or the procedures up to date. Oh... and she has to pee. A disaster, indeed!

Witness the request by an IC (Incident Commander) of a northeastern conflagration to sound the recall siren to summon off-duty firefighters when such a device had been disconnected years ago. Often the most productive use of the operational tome is to use it to prop the door open so as not to further delay incoming help. While it is too late now to change the dynamics of this engagement, how can disaster manuals be transformed into operational guidelines that work when needed, and not dusty documents of disinformation and decay?

1. For starters, have one. There are still agencies that don't see the need to focus on such guidelines because "that'll never happen here!"
2. Make sure that everybody on staff knows that you have one. Surprisingly in my travels I have found that knowledge is not universally distributed. Everyone on staff needs to know that one exists and where it can be found when needed.

3. Make sure that the document is current. Inclusion of names and equipment long retired will be especially unhelpful during disasters and wastes precious time.

4. Do you have a backup site? Does it work? I inherited an agency that had a plan that had never been exercised by staff. To function, the backup required support from the primary site. Neither of these conditions were anywhere near acceptable.

5. Let the kids drive the car! Exercise the facility enough times during the year so as to ensure that all employees work a full shift in the backup and experience first-hand all the operational duties normally encountered during a 24-hour day.

6. Completely review your backup plans at least twice a year, and immediately upon changes in technology, policies, and leadership. At no time other than disasters is it more important to have every member of the choir singing from the same page.

7. Operate by the rule of Murphy's Law. If you think you've got everything covered, think again. Remember the tale of Goldilocks? It took more than one shot to get everything "just right". If you think that every aspect of your plan will work perfectly at first sight, then you're the one living in the fairy tale.

8. Mid-course corrections are acceptable. While you have to start and stay with your plan as long as it is working, and freelancing should never be encouraged, there may be occasions where alterations to your response can be acceptable. During a fatal tornadic outbreak, my center staff, along with first responders, made slight alterations to plans in order to more efficiently address the scope of response. Since the existing plan wasn't working as well as was needed, a slight modification was made and agreed upon by everyone involved.

9. Design and exercise a plan that works 24 x 7 x 365. I've seen too many "plans" that were rolled out and tested on Wednesday day shifts when all the major players were present and accounted for. Hopefully, your disasters will recognize the need to maintain a cooperative schedule! If not, what are your resources like at 0135 hours on a Sunday morning? How long does it take to ramp up when most of the agencies involved are working with minimal staffing? Who is in charge when the 9-1-1 director, department heads, police and fire chief, sheriff, EMS director, and mayor and/or city manager are home in bed or out of town?

10. Sharing is caring! Design a plan that accounts for regional involvement and impact. Since weather tends to have a widespread effect, consider what happens when the blizzard or flood doesn't just visit your isolated area. Where are the anticipated resources coming from when others are knee-deep in managing their own problems? While it looks good on paper and can be a tremendous help, federal assistance and services take some time to mobilize, so what do you do in the first few days to keep information flowing?

No jurisdiction is immune from dealing with dilemmas that outpace their ability to immediately cover all their bases. New York City has one of the largest emergency response networks in the world. Then came 9/11. It won't take anything as dramatic to test yours.

In this short article, we have hardly scratched the surface of providing services during a disaster, and what constitutes a true disaster can vary greatly from town to town. Are you ready? Before you answer, please consider the ability of your most important resource to respond. And that resource is your people.

For how long can your PSAP operate in disaster mode? How many telecommunicators will be present? Where can you get more? How quickly can you get them? Who gets them? How? If you're in a blizzard/flood or

other natural disaster, will local agencies assist with transport? Where does the authorization to call for help come from? Where does this "help" come from? Neighboring towns? Other city/county departments?

How do you provide expanded 24 x 7 coverage? How do you feed, bathe, and house a number of people who may be on-site for days? How do staff ensure for prolonged elder, child, and pet care? All of these co-called "personal problems" are far from that, and require thoughtful input to address these and other stressful issues that are guaranteed to appear.

While your location, size, and service will have a great impact upon your survivability during a disaster, your failure to plan undoubtedly has the most critical. The time taken to commit your response to writing now will save countless hours when the real emergency occurs. And, more importantly, it will save lives.

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Barry Furey is a fifty-five-year veteran of public safety, having served as a fire officer in three states and a 9-1-1 Director in four. An APCO Senior and Life Member, he chaired the 2002 International conference. Author of more than 300 articles and four books, he currently provides consulting services internationally.

BREAKING THE STATIC:

A DISPATCHER'S PLEA TO LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER



Adobe Stock

We work in the dark. Rows of monitors cast a cold, blue light across the dispatch floor, illuminating tired eyes and headsets tethered to heavy consoles. Our cinematic, tech-noir reality is defined by glowing CAD grids, flashing red lines, and the relentless hum of radio traffic. We weave order out of panic, translating humanity's worst moments into life-saving dispatches. But there is a stark contrast between the chaotic noise of the comm center and the crushing silence of a dispatcher struggling to survive their own mind.

Since January 1, 2026, National 9-1-1 Telecommunications Suicide Awareness Day, numerous public safety communications dispatchers have died by suicide. Our partners. Voices in the dark who guided strangers through nightmares but could not find a lifeline for their own.

I write this from the trenches. I sat in the chair, felt the burnout, and know the dread of a blinking cursor after a horrific call. I carry the jagged grief of losing three loved ones to suicide.

Their faces haunt me when the room goes quiet. One was a close friend outside of public safety, a reminder that this darkness is part of the human condition. The second was a firefighter friend and former colleague who spent his life running into flames while we held the line on the phones. But the loss that shattered my world completely, leaving a permanent, bleeding scar on my soul, was my friend and former colleague who was a police sergeant. He took his own life while on duty, sitting in his cruiser during the quiet, crushing isolation of the overnight shift.

Every dispatcher knows the weight of the overnight shift, those crushing hours between 0200 and 0500 when the air inside grows thick. On our screens, a cruiser is a glowing icon—the officer inside is a partner. The absolute horror of knowing a brother was sitting in his unit, drowning in despair while we monitored his status on a digital map is an agony I cannot adequately voice. The radio didn't stop. The CAD didn't freeze. The world kept spinning, forcing us to process strangers' emergencies while our own hearts broke over a silent tragedy inside a parked cruiser.

I know the agonizing guilt of replaying every shift, every radio transmission, and every quiet conversation, wondering what I missed. I have buried three friends. I refuse to be silent anymore. This is a direct, peer-to-peer plea: we must change our culture before the static takes another one of our own.

The Invisible Burden: Why We Are Vulnerable

There is a unique weight to the headset. Field responders experience the physical resolution of a scene. Dispatchers are tethered to the desk. We absorb the raw, unfiltered terror of a crisis, panicked screams for backup, or the chilling quiet of someone hiding from an intruder, and then the call disconnects. We are left with the echo, expected to clear the screen and answer the next line with a steady, robotic calm. This vicarious trauma is eating our community alive. The psychological toll of continuously hearing worst-case scenarios without physical release creates a cumulative shift effect. Over months and years, chronic sleep deprivation, mandatory overtime, and isolation erode our resilience.

The numbers tell a truth we all secretly know but rarely voice. Studies show that between 17.8% and 24.6% of dispatchers meet clinical criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and up to 33.2% suffer from major depressive disorder. Nearly 70% of telecommunicators report feeling intense stress or anxiety before our shift even begins, and roughly 17.8% turn to hazardous drinking behaviors just to cope. We talk about the thin blue line and the thin red line, but the thin gold line holds them both together. Yet, we wrap ourselves in an "impenetrable armor" culture. Admitting we are drowning feels like a betrayal of the badge. When the CAD goes dark and the adrenaline dumps, we are left alone with the ghosts of the calls we couldn't save, and the friends we couldn't protect.

Spotting the "Static": Recognizing the Signs in Our Peers

We are expert chameleons, trained to sound composed while all hell breaks loose. We hide distress flawlessly because our livelihood depends on sounding fine. Yet data warns us to look closer: up to 21% of dispatchers report suicidal ideation, with 16% attributing it directly to the job. Public safety telecommunicators account for roughly 2% to 3% of first responder suicides, a number severely underreported due to stigma. We must learn to spot the "static", the subtle, underlying interference in a partner's behavior that indicates their frequency is breaking down.

Behavioral Red Flags: A shift from standard cynicism to genuine, dark hopelessness.

Watch for uncharacteristic mistakes, memory lapses, or a sudden drop in performance.

- Isolation: Withdrawing from shift banter, eating alone at the console, or hiding during breaks.
- Attendance Shifts: Burning through sick leave, or conversely, volunteering for every overtime shift because they are terrified of being alone with their thoughts at home.
- Substance Use: Increased reliance on alcohol or medication to "wind down." There is a massive difference between having a beer and relying on a bottle to shut off the ringing in your ears.
- Giving Things Away: Giving away prized shifts, abandoning long-held passions, or distributing personal, meaningful belongings to co-workers.

Rewiring the Comm Center: Actionable Peer Support

Knowing the signs is useless if we do not act. We must break the bystander effect on the dispatch floor. We are trained to ask the hardest, most intrusive questions of total strangers: "Are you safe? Does he have a weapon?" but we freeze when it comes to asking our partners if they are okay. We must bypass the defensive, "I'm fine." If you notice a change in your partner, say something. Script the hard conversation beforehand so you don't back out: "Hey, you've seemed really heavy lately. You don't look like yourself, and I'm worried about you. You don't have to tell me what it is, but I'm right here at the next console, and there is zero judgment."

If you suspect they are truly in the dark, you must ask the hardest question of all: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" It will feel unnatural. Ask it anyway. We must actively work to normalize help within our agencies. Using Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or

trauma-informed therapy cannot be viewed as a weakness. It must be viewed as standard, necessary gear maintenance. We cannot expect a dispatcher to perform at their best with a shattered nervous system. I challenge every single person reading this to build a "Console Pact" within your center. Find one or two trusted partners on your shift and make a solemn agreement: check on each other. After a brutal call, pull them off the floor for five minutes to debrief. Don't let them take that trauma home to fester in the quiet.

It's Time to Clear the Air for Ourselves

Dispatchers are the first, first responders. We are the lifeline in the dark. We look out for the public, we protect our field units, the firefighters on the engines, the sergeants in their cruisers, and we make sure everyone goes home at the end of their watch. But our final, most crucial dispatch must be to protect each other. I look at the empty chairs in my life, and the pain is a physical ache. I would give anything to go back to that overnight shift, disrupt the silence, and save my friends. I cannot change the past, but I can fight like hell for your future.

To the dispatcher reading this who feels like the walls are closing in, who feels like the headset is a chain, and who is tired of carrying the weight of a thousand tragedies: You are not just a voice in the dark. You are not replaceable. The static in your mind does not have to be the end of your transmission. There is a community here that understands exactly what you are carrying, and we need you to stay on the line. Take care of your console partners. Listen to what they are saying, but more importantly, listen to what they aren't saying. It is time we start answering our own calls for help.

We all should be on the rooftops screaming at the top of our lungs about mental health and suicide, NOT TREATING THEM LIKE THEY ARE DIRTY SECRETS!

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Jeremie Meyer, RPL, is a 33-year Public Safety Communications Leader/Master Instructor. He contributed to public safety during the Olympic Winter Games and established communication centers for the U.S. military. Retiring as the Director of Emergency Services Communications for Albany, NY, he shares his expertise at conferences, podcasts, and teaching.

Resources for the Headset:

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
Call/text 9-8-8 for free, 24/7 support.

Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741741.

Safe Call Now: First responder crisis line: 206-459-3020

First H.E.L.P.: Suicide tracking and mental health resources (1sthelp.org).

911derline: Support and training for emergency dispatchers (911derline.org).

The Code Green Campaign: First responder mental health advocacy.

NENA: Wellness education and tools for the comm center.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, REAL LEADERSHIP



I recently had the opportunity to attend the NENA 2026 Conference in Columbus, Ohio. As you would expect, Artificial Intelligence was one of the dominant topics throughout the week. Whether walking the Expo Hall, attending Innovation Theater presentations, or participating in educational breakout sessions, AI and its applications to public safety communications seemed to be everywhere. Beyond the educational sessions, another trend became impossible to ignore. Technology companies are rapidly acquiring AI firms,

forming strategic partnerships, and embedding AI into existing public safety platforms. One comment I heard repeatedly throughout the conference has stayed with me: "If you're not using AI—or at least thinking about how you'll use it—you're already behind." Whether or not we agree completely with that statement, one thing is certain—AI is no longer something on the horizon. It's here, and its role in public safety will only continue to grow.

As I flew home from Columbus, I found myself thinking less about what AI could do and more about what it had already taught me. Surprisingly, the biggest lesson wasn't about technology at all. It was about leadership. For years I've referred to AI not as Artificial Intelligence, but as Assistive Intelligence. The more I've used it, the more convinced I've become that it's exactly that—an assistant. Over the past several months, I've relied on AI to help develop lesson plans, summarize reports, prepare executive briefings, create presentations, and design graphics for social media. Like any assistant, its effectiveness depends on the direction it receives. As I became more comfortable with the technology, I noticed something interesting: The quality of AI's work depended almost entirely on the quality of my instructions. When I provided clear expectations, context, and a vision of what I wanted, the results were impressive. When my instructions were vague, the results reflected that. It wasn't AI's fault—it simply responded to the information I gave it.

That realization made me stop and think: How often had I expected people on my team to somehow know what I wanted without giving them the same level of direction? One experience really drove the point home. I asked AI to create a Fourth of July flyer. It returned a beautiful design that included the phrase "Friday, July 4th." The problem? July 4th fell on a Saturday. I didn't get frustrated. I didn't criticize it. I replied, "Please change Friday to Saturday." Seconds later, it was corrected. Then I asked myself a difficult question: If one of my employees had made that same mistake, would I have responded with the same patience? Would I have coached them and moved on, or would I have focused on the mistake instead of the correction?

That question has stayed with me. The same thing happened while designing graphics. I would explain my vision, then step back and let AI work. I wasn't standing over its shoulder. I wasn't interrupting every thirty seconds with corrections. I let it think. I let it create. If the first version wasn't exactly right, I simply asked for another version or offered additional guidance. Ironically, I realized I was often giving a computer more freedom to succeed than I gave the people I supervised. Good managers don't just assign work—they communicate expectations, provide resources, allow people to work, and coach them toward success. AI reminded me of something that leadership books have been saying for decades: people perform better when they understand the mission, not just the task.

That lesson extends well beyond management. As AI becomes more integrated into public safety Communications, we need to stop thinking about replacing people and start thinking about removing obstacles that prevent people from doing their best work. In the 9-1-1 profession, we're already seeing AI assist with transcription, language translation, keyword identification, quality assurance, and the handling of certain non-emergency calls. Those are valuable tools, but I believe they represent only the beginning. The greatest opportunity may be using AI to perform the routine processes that consume valuable seconds while telecommunicators focus on what humans do best - critically, communicating compassionately, and making life-saving decisions.

Imagine one of the most terrifying calls imaginable. A parent calls 9-1-1 and screams, "Someone just grabbed my child." If the caller witnessed the abduction, they'll hopefully provide a vehicle description, a direction of travel, and maybe even a license plate. Those

first few moments are critical. Yet in many agencies, checking license-plate reader systems, searching premises history, and gathering related intelligence may not happen until much later because the call taker is focused on interviewing the caller, entering information into CAD, notifying dispatchers, and coordinating the response.

Humans are remarkable, but we still think largely in a linear fashion. While we pride ourselves on multitasking, our attention is still divided between competing priorities. AI doesn't have that limitation. The moment an incoming call delivers location information, AI could begin searching historical incidents, premises history, license plate reader systems, mapping data, and other authorized databases simultaneously. Instead of presenting pages of case numbers and incident reports, it could provide concise, meaningful summaries that immediately help the telecommunicator understand what they need to know. None of this replaces the judgment of the public safety telecommunicator. It simply provides better information faster.

The same concept applies to standard operating procedures. Every communications center has procedures that require employees to stop, search through a manual, and verify the next step. AI can become the assistant sitting beside every telecommunicator. If a call involves poison exposure, AI could immediately display the applicable protocol while Poison Control is being contacted. If the substance is corrosive, it could instantly remind the call taker not to induce vomiting. If agency policy requires a specific notification or question, AI could prompt the telecommunicator before an important step is overlooked. These aren't futuristic concepts. They're practical improvements that reduce cognitive

workload, improve consistency, save valuable seconds, and ultimately improve the safety of both responders and the public.

AI can also provide tremendous value by handling many routine administrative and non-emergency calls, allowing trained public-safety telecommunicators to remain focused on true emergencies that require human empathy, judgment, and decision-making. Of course, none of this should happen overnight. AI must be tested, validated, and implemented responsibly. Public safety demands accuracy, reliability, security, transparency, and human oversight. Technology should never replace professional judgment, but waiting until technology is perfect isn't the answer either.

Now is the time for public-safety professionals to engage with AI developers and vendors. We are the ones who understand our workflows, our challenges, and our priorities. We know where seconds matter. We know which repetitive tasks consume valuable attention. We know where decision support can truly improve outcomes. I've had conversations with several AI vendors. They've shared innovative ideas, and I've shared the realities of working inside a communications center. Those discussions have convinced me that the best AI solutions won't be designed solely by software engineers. They'll be designed through partnerships with the people answering emergency calls every day. Public-safety telecommunicators, supervisors, trainers, and managers need to be active participants in shaping this technology. We shouldn't simply accept what AI becomes—we should help define what it becomes.

Ultimately, AI taught me two lessons. The first is that better results begin with better communication. Whether you're leading a team or prompting an AI

assistant, clear expectations matter. The second is that technology is at its best when it makes people better—not when it replaces them. If we continue to think of AI as Assistive Intelligence rather than simply Artificial Intelligence, we'll stop asking whether it can replace public safety telecommunicators and start asking a far more important question: How can it help them save more lives? That's the conversation our profession should be having, and that's the future we, as leaders, have the responsibility to shape.

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Dan Koenig is the Senior Manager with Palm Beach County Public Safety Department's 9-1-1 Program Services Division. Dan's work focuses on integrating new technologies into emergency communications, strengthening continuity of operations, and supporting the county's PSAPs through education and best practices, while ensuring our 9-1-1 PSTs' perspectives are considered.

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WHO WERE YOU BEFORE THE HEADSET?

Who were you before the headset? That’s right. That is how this starts. No rewrite. No explosive beginning. Just a thought-provoking question to make you stop in your tracks and think. Who were you? Who are you today? This question came up recently during an Open Mic Live broadcast. I posted the question on social media before the broadcast to let people know what we would be talking about. Many people responded, and the answers gave a glimpse into the past. It was not only eye-opening, but it was fun to look back. I’m a firm believer that sometimes we need to go back to basics or reflect on the past in order to move forward. The question helps us not only remember the past, but it also

helps us realize who we are and what makes us great. I say this because sometimes we forget that we are also someone outside of this profession. The calls we take are not the entirety of who we are.

In this edition of the column, One Voice, I want you to remember who you were before the headset. I want you to remember a time before this profession changed you, for better or for worse. Some of the most important questions we ask ourselves don’t have anything to do with the next call. I’ll start, while you take a moment to think. Before the headset, I was a kid fascinated with electronics, music, and writing short stories. I also used to play pranks on the phone. Before the headset, I was a band geek, and I

picked blueberries for work—not fun. I made pizza at a convenience store. I met all kinds of people while working at a grocery store and while carrying out groceries for customers. What I didn't know was that years later, some of these experiences would help me in the future. You see, our past experiences help shape who we are and what we do. We don't always realize it, but it happens. For example, years ago, I was in dispatch with a trainee. She answered a 9-1-1 call that started as an open line. I was monitoring the line, and we could hear someone breathing in the background. My trainee said hello a few times, and then asked if anyone was there. The caller hung up the phone, and when the person hung up, I heard a pulse sound from the phone. My trainee was about to hang up the phone when I told her to stop.

“Don't hang up the phone!” My trainee froze, waiting for direction. “Just wait a moment. The caller will pick up the phone and try to call us again. When they do, that's when you jump in.” After a few moments, we heard the line pick up. My trainee's eyes grew wide as she looked at me. We heard the caller dial again. “Now! Say something now!” “Hello! This is 9-1-1,” my trainee said.

The caller sounded surprised to hear my trainee. In the end, my trainee asked me how I knew that this was going to happen. I chuckled and told her that I was old. She laughed and asked again how I knew. I told her that many years ago, when I was a kid, my friends and I used to play pranks over the phone. I told her that I remembered that pulse sound because of the phone lines back then. My grandmother had an old rotary dial phone, and when you called someone, the line was open, like normal, but if one person hung up and the other person was still on the line, the phone call remained open. We would wait

until someone picked up the line, and then we would yell to scare whoever was on the other end. We got in trouble a few times, but because of those pranks, I was able to help her that day. The sound of that pulse over the phone transported me right back to those days, and it paid off.

Reflection is powerful. When I hit my burnout and struggled with who I was and if I was in the right place, it took going back to school to help me realize that I was, in fact, where I was meant to be. I came to this conclusion by working on myself and creating projects around the work we do in dispatch through something I had put aside because of the stress of dispatch. Through these projects, the storyteller came back, the writer came back, and really, many parts of who I was before the headset. #IAM911, yes, and in that are hard stories, powerful saves, peer support, and a form of closure and healing in sharing stories when you're ready, but it is not the entirety of who you are.

You are so much more, and that is important to remember. Before the headset, there was a person with dreams, hobbies, talents, and passions. There was an athlete, an artist, a musician, a writer, or someone who just loved spending time with family. Those experiences didn't disappear the day we answered our first 9-1-1 call. They became part of the foundation that helped shape the hero sitting at the console today. The past isn't something to leave behind. It's something to remember. Reflection reminds us that we've overcome challenges before. It reminds us that we've grown, adapted, and become stronger through every chapter of life. It also reminds us that the qualities that make us great dispatchers were often developing before we ever put on the

headset. So again, I ask you this question: Who were you before the headset? You might just discover that the person you were then is very much who you are today. Reconnection with that person may be what you need to move forward. And remember this: while 9-1-1 is something you get to do, it has never been everything you are.

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One Voice is written by Ricardo Martinez II, Founder of the #IAM911 Movement, creator and host of the Within the Trenches podcast, and creator of Imagine Listening - Your worst day is our everyday, a peer support session that allows for a safe space for 9-1-1 professionals to share their stories. For more information please visit liinks.co/iam911.

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