

# THE COMMVERSE

MAGAZINE







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**WELCOME TO THE COMMVERSE.**

Grab your headphones, iPad, or console computer and get ready to experience The Commverse, a barrier-breaking, industry-first-of-its-kind magazine.

Across digital and audio platforms, The Commverse delivers high-quality insights, practical tools, and forward-looking perspectives to the public safety and critical control room communications personnel who answer the call 24/7.

We are dedicated to elevating the industry’s voice, showcasing innovation, and providing actionable information that strengthens responses, builds resilience, and supports those on the front lines.

While working with a class recently, I said, “Any agency is only as strong as the personnel working at 0330 hours.” Sadly, the students noted that while the boss may be familiar with the newest technologies or advanced interpersonal techniques, they were not. I recalled working in communications for many years, not knowing there were industry magazines. When I learned they existed, I discovered they were ensconced in the supervisor’s office and never filtered down to the personnel on the floor doing the job.

Then I saw a social post where a communicator asked for someone to explain NG911 to her as if she were 3 years old. (Thank you for that, if you’re reading this!) Again, I reflected on the lack of information flow to the line personnel in some organizations. As our profession embraces explosive innovation and technological advancements, it is more crucial than ever that those who will be required to operate with emerging technology and enhanced call-taking techniques understand it and its impact on operations.

Over the past several years, I also noticed that the various types of communications centers were often unaware of each other’s operations, despite the need to collaborate during large-scale incidents. Whether the critical control room monitors highways, provides medical transport, ensures safety at a nuclear power plant, handles hazardous-materials incidents at a chemical manufacturing facility, or provides fire protection at an oil refinery, all critical control rooms must interact with the emergency communications centers. Through sharing and working together, we are all stronger.

I decided to address this dilemma by creating The Commverse and distributing it to all communications personnel for free online. The information cannot get stuck in an office. The focus of every article will be on the line personnel. The Commverse will eliminate barriers to critical information, providing line personnel with the information they need to succeed in their mission.

We will have a wide variety of articles in every issue, including:

- Technology in layperson terms
- Control room articles
- Extreme Dispatching
- Personal Development
- AI Implications
- Wellness/ Self-Care



With recurring columns such as:

- One Voice
- Interstellar Insights
- Connecting the World’s Lifelines

This magazine is for every one of you. Those who, like diamonds, are Forged Under Pressure and Trusted in Crisis.

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Lori Preuss, CPE, became involved in public safety in 1986 and started in Telecommunications in 1987. Lori has worked in a wide variety of positions, including volunteer firefighter, Crime Analyst, Communications Center Supervisor, ISD, CIT, and CNT. Lori served as Chapter President of the FL Chapter of APCO in 2008. A dedicated lifelong learner, Lori has a degree in Adult Vocational Education and Industry Training, specializing in Public Safety Telecommunications. She is a Certified Public Safety Executive (CPE) and has served as an International Adjunct Instructor since 1999, and is an experienced international speaker and presenter. Lori is the founder of The Commverse Magazine and Director of Communications and Project Management with Emerging Digital Concepts.

# NG911 IN PLAIN SPEAK:

IMPACT TO THE PERSON ON THE CONSOLE AT 03:30



If you've ever tried to send a photo over a flip phone, you already understand the difference between "old 911" and NG911. Legacy 911 is like that flip phone: voice only, short on context, and built for a world where every call came from a landline at a fixed address. NG911 is 911 upgraded to the internet era, and a secure network designed for voice, text, pictures, video, precise location, and data that can move with the speed and reliability you expect from the apps you use every day. This isn't about replacing you. It's about giving you better tools so you can do the job you already do—faster, safer and with more confidence.

FIRST, WHAT IS NG911?

Short version: NG911 = 911 + modern internet plumbing + shared data.

Behind the scenes is a dedicated, secure network connecting 911 centers (and partners) so information can flow to the right place, with the right detail, right now—not just voice, but texts, location pins, photos, short video clips, medical/device info, and building details when they're available and appropriate. If legacy 911 is a single-lane road, NG911 is a multi-lane highway with guardrails and good signage.

**What changes for you at the console?**

1) The call lands in the right place the first time.

Instead of guessing from a cell tower, NG911 uses map data (GIS) like how your phone drops a pin. Result: fewer misroutes and quicker starts. Picture a moving dot on the map instead of "somewhere near Exit 12."

2) You can get (and send) more than voice.

- Text-to-911 for people who can't safely speak or who are deaf/hard of hearing.

- Photos, short videos, chemical placards.

- Contextual data from smart devices: crash severity, airbag deployment, or a smartwatch fall alert.

- Two-way links: you can request a secure photo or location share without forcing someone to install an app.

3) It's easier to share with neighboring agencies, including the data.

When you transfer, you don't just hand off a ringing line. You can pass the whole package—notes, location, text thread, and attachments—so the next center (or a specialty partner) picks up where you left off. Less re-asking, more doing.

4) Better connections with other control rooms.

The 'big ones' rarely stay inside one agency's fence. NG911 helps your center collaborate with traffic operations, utilities, campuses, industrial sites, and hospitals by sharing the right info to the right team. For example, a highway control room can push a verified camera snapshot to your PSAP, and you can push a concise incident summary back. Everyone sees the same picture—literally.

5) Built for bad days.

NG911 is designed with redundancy. If your center must evacuate, calls and data can be rerouted to a partner center while keeping your work visible and your community covered. Your work is saved in the cloud and easily accessible.

6) Accessibility is better by design.

Real-Time Text (RTT), improved language access, and clearer location details help you serve more callers equitably. The tech is the booster—your judgment is still the engine.

**How does this feel in real life?**

- Silent rideshare text: I can't talk. Driver won't stop. You reply by text. Their live pin moves down the avenue. You data-transfer the package to the next jurisdiction as the car crosses a boundary. Units already have the plate from information in the Rideshare App.

- Crash auto-alert: A smartwatch triggers a possible fall with impact. You have a map pin, a callback number, and a note that the device detects motion but no response. You triage, request a wellness check, and update when the person texts back, I'm okay—bike wipeout.

- Apartment fire: The caller's photo shows a green H-2 placard on a cylinder. That's enough for you to flag hazmat to the arriving crew. You push the photo with your notes—no one is guessing on-scene.

- Campus lockdown: The university control room shares a 30-second camera clip and the building door status. Your CAD entry includes the clip link and door status for patrol. You transfer the whole bundle to the neighboring city as mutual aid rolls.

In each example, you decide what to request, what to open, and what to forward. NG911 adds options, not obligations.

**Will NG911 drown me in info?**

It shouldn't. Good workflow focuses on relevance and consent:

- Ask on purpose: Send a photo of the placard only.

- Use filters: Some systems can blur graphic images by default, and you can unblur if needed.

- Set thresholds: Short clips are better than endless streams; key frames are better than raw feeds.

- Keep it simple: A plate, a placard, a pin—that's often all you need.



If a piece of media isn’t actionable, you’re empowered to not request it, not view it, and not store it.

“Is this replacing call takers?”

No. NG911 amplifies human skill. Technology can route faster and package data neatly, but empathy, triage, and judgment belong to you.

Wellness matters—especially with new media

More media can mean more exposure. Healthy agencies set guardrails:

- Purpose-limited requests (send only the plate).
- Blur by default.
- Short clip caps.
- Rotation policies for heavy events.
- After-action decompression and peer support, and
- Easy opt-out if a particular image isn’t needed.

You are allowed to protect your head and heart. That’s not weakness—that’s professionalism.

What should you expect to learn?

- Map-based routing basics: why the pin matters and how to check it.
- Text workflows:--when to switch to text; how to keep it brief and clear.
- Media requests: the exact words to ask for useful, minimal visuals.
- Package transfers: how to ship the whole context to the right partner fast.
- Cross-room etiquette: sharing with traffic, campuses, utilities—what helps them, what helps you.
- Evidence handling: simple rules for saving, tagging, and privacy.
- Self-care switches: blur toggles, clip limits, and when to step away.

Quick Glossary:

- NG911: Modern, internet-based 911 that supports

voice, text, pictures, video, and data on a secure network.

- GIS: The map brains that route calls by where they actually are, not just which cell tower heard them.
- Text-to-911 / RTT: Ways to communicate in writing when speaking isn’t possible or safe.
- Data package: The notes, location, text thread, and attachments that move with a call to the next team.
- Control room partners: Traffic ops, utility dispatch, campus security, plant/facility control—your teammates during big incidents.

Bottom Line:

NG911 is not a tech fad or a gadget demo. It’s the next logical step in how communities ask for help and how responders get the right information, right away. The job at 3:30 A.M. doesn’t change at its core: a human in trouble needs a human who knows what to do. NG911 simply removes any friction between those two humans. YOU bring your skills. We’ll bring the lanes, the guardrails, and the better signs. Together, we’ll get there faster—and safer.

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Mark J. Fletcher, ENP (Fletch)

Fletcher is the Founding Principal at Fletch 911, LLC Consulting, and the Author of Kari’s Law, and the Dispatchable Location definitions in the RAY BAUM’S Act. He has a popular Blog series on Fletch.TV, and hosts the TiPS: Today in Public Safety Podcast at 911TiPS.com.

YOU ARE THE CULTURE:  
HOW EVERYDAY ACTIONS BUILD A STRONGER COMM CENTER

A FRONT-LINE PERSPECTIVE ON RESILIENCE, TEAMWORK, AND PRIDE IN THE HEADSET

When the phones won’t stop and the radio chatter is incessant, culture shows up in its truest form. It’s not a slogan on the breakroom wall or a speech from the boss—it’s the feeling in the room when everything hits the fan. It’s how we treat each other when we’re tired, short-staffed, and stressed. You are the culture. Every shift, every call, every interaction builds or breaks it.

Most of us entered this profession for the same reason: we wanted to help people. We wanted to make a difference—to be the calm voice that brings order to chaos. But somewhere between the mandatory overtime, the negativity, and the constant pressure to “just deal with it,” it’s easy to forget that our impact doesn’t end when the call disconnects. The way we show up for each other defines the health of our center just as much as the way we show up for the community.

THE HIDDEN POWER OF EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

Leadership isn’t about a title. It’s about influence—and influence happens at the console, not in an office. You influence your team every time you pick up the phone, answer a question, or vent frustration. You’re either reinforcing trust or eroding it.

When I was a dispatcher at LAPD, the supervisors who made the biggest difference weren’t necessarily the ones with the rank. They were the ones who listened, who took a second to check in, who had the guts to say, “Hey, I know it’s rough right now. You’re doing great. Keep going.” Those moments might seem small, but they create ripple effects that change how a team feels about coming to work.

So what does that look like in practice? Here are three “people-driven” habits you can start using right now, whether you’ve been on the job six months or sixteen years.

1. BE THE CALM IN THE ROOM

Every center has a vibe. You can feel it when you walk in—tight shoulders, low voices, maybe a little sarcasm in the air. Energy spreads fast in confined spaces, and negativity is the easiest thing to catch. So what’s the fix? Emotional awareness. Take a second before your shift to check in with yourself. Are you bringing calm or chaos to the room? The tone of your voice, your body language, even the sigh you let out after a tough call—all of it communicates something. If you’re having a hard day, own it. Tell your partner, “Hey, I’m dragging a bit tonight.” That vulnerability isn’t weakness, it’s honesty. It helps your team understand where you are emotionally instead of leaving them to guess. When you can manage your own emotions, you make space for everyone else to do the same. You become the calm in the storm. And in this job, calm saves lives.

2. MAKE RECOGNITION A DAILY HABIT

We’re quick to notice when someone misses an incident comment or gets short on the radio. But how often do we call out what’s going right? One of the simplest ways to shift culture is to make appreciation visible. Not the “nice job” drive-by comment—but real, specific, sincere recognition.

Try these:

- Catch it. Notice when someone goes above and beyond—covers a radio channel without being asked, stays late without complaint, mentors a rookie with patience.
- Name it. Say exactly what they did and why it mattered. “Hey, I saw how you walked that caller through CPR. That calm voice probably saved a life.”
- Link it. Connect it to a bigger purpose. “That’s what teamwork looks like,” or “That’s why people trust us to help them.”



When you get specific, you remind your coworkers why what they do matters. That's fuel for resilience, especially in a profession that rarely hears "thank you."

### 3. OWN YOUR PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

It's easy to think, "That's not my job" or "Nothing will ever change." But every improvement in any center started because one person decided to stop waiting for someone else. You can't control scheduling, policy, or the CAD system—but you can control your lane. You can mentor the new trainee so she feels confident instead of terrified. You can speak up respectfully when something feels unsafe. You can share solutions instead of just frustrations. At the centers I've worked with across the country, the healthiest ones all have one thing in common—people at every level take ownership. They don't wait for a directive. They see something that could be better and ask, "What can I do about it? It doesn't always mean taking on more work. Sometimes it's as simple as improving communication. Instead of letting rumors swirl, go to the source. Instead of assuming the worst, ask for clarity. Each act of ownership strengthens trust—and trust is the foundation of a healthy culture.

**TECHNOLOGY WILL CHANGE. HUMANITY WON'T.**

As AI, NG911, and new tech reshape how we do the job, it's easy to feel left behind. You might think, "I'm just trying to survive my next shift—why should I care about some new software or acronym?" Here's why: technology is only as effective as the humans using it. You are the heartbeat of the system. The next generation of tools will depend on your situational awareness, your empathy, your ability to make decisions when the data doesn't add up. When you take pride in learning—not just surviving—you keep yourself relevant and your center strong. Ask questions. Be curious. Don't be afraid to say, "Can you show me that again?" The future of this profession belongs to the communicators who stay open, adaptable, and human.

## YOU MATTER MORE THAN YOU KNOW

Every call you take echoes into someone's life story. Every tone drop, every reassurance you give, every calm command over the radio—it matters. But just as important is the way you treat the person sitting next to you. Culture isn't "out there." It's built in these small, human moments—when we choose patience over sarcasm, respect over rumor, teamwork over isolation. You don't have to have a title to make your center a place people want to work. You just have to decide, right now, that you'll be the example of the culture you wish existed. Be the calm. Recognize the good. Own your lane. Because when you do, everyone wins—your partners, your center, and the community you serve. That's how healthy dispatchers save more lives.

Adam Timm

Founder/President of The Healthy Dispatcher

Adam Timm is a former 9-1-1 dispatcher, author of “People Driven Leadership: How the Best 9-1-1 Centers Inspire Positive Change,” and founder of The Healthy Dispatcher. His mission is to help emergency communications professionals thrive—on and off the headset.



Duncan Anderson / Getty Images

## WHY CHANGE FEELS HARD (EVEN WHEN WE WANT IT)

At 0330 hours, the room hums with quiet routine. The radio chatter has a rhythm, the CAD screen pulses familiar light, and for a few moments, everything feels steady. Then a message pops up--a new software version is going live next week. Or maybe a new policy hits your inbox, promising "streamlined efficiency." You feel your shoulders tense before you even read the details. If that sounds familiar, you're not alone. We talk about "change fatigue" as if it's a buzzword, but for dispatchers, change is our daily environment. The truth is, most of us don't fear change itself; we fear being unprepared for it.

## THE REAL ROOTS OF RESISTANCE

In public safety, we thrive on control and predictability. It's how we keep people alive in chaos. Change, by definition, disrupts both. When something shifts—

software, structure, or even tone—it threatens three things we value deeply.

Control. We know our systems inside and out. When something new enters the mix, it's not just an inconvenience-- it's a temporary loss of mastery.

Identity. Being good at this job is part of who we are. When change makes us stumble, even briefly, it can feel like losing a piece of ourselves.

Belonging. Every comm room has early adopters who dive right in and those who hang back, watching. When you're not in the first group, it's easy to wonder, Will I still measure up?

None of that means we're weak or resistant. It means we're human. The human brain is wired to protect us from uncertainty, and unfamiliar often feels unsafe. In



dispatch, “unsafe” is the last thing we ever want to feel.

### HOW FEAR SHOWS UP IN THE COMM ROOM

Fear rarely announces itself directly. It wears sarcasm, shrugs, or deflection: That’ll never work here. We tried that once. Guess I’ll retire before we switch to that. These phrases aren’t laziness, they’re armor. They’re how we buy time while our confidence catches up. But over time, they can become contagious, spreading quiet resistance that slows everything down.

### TURNING FEAR INTO FAMILIAR

The antidote to fear is familiarity. Every time we engage instead of avoid, our brain rewires a little bit. Here’s how to make that happen:

Get curious, not cynical. Ask questions about how and why the change helps. Curiosity puts you back in control.

Test it, break it, learn it. Play with new tools before you have to depend on them. The more you explore, the faster your comfort returns.

Ask for bite-size learning. Don’t be afraid to request quick demos or side-by-side practice time. Change becomes easier when it’s paced for humans, not headlines.

Find the helper mindset. When you figure something out first, teach the next person. Sharing knowledge doubles confidence and halves fear.

### LEADERSHIP WITHOUT THE TITLE

You don’t need bars, stripes, or an office to be a leader. In fact, the most powerful influence in any center comes from the person on the floor who keeps others calm when things shift. The colleague who listens instead of mocks, who says, “Let’s try it together,” who reminds everyone that learning something new doesn’t erase what we already know.

Cultural change doesn’t start in meetings. It starts at consoles. When one shift embraces openness, it sets the tone for everyone else.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Change isn’t the enemy-- isolation is. The more we talk about what feels uncomfortable, the less power fear has over us. Every rollout, every update, every new acronym is another chance to prove what 9-1-1 professionals already do best: adapt under pressure. We are the calm in someone else’s chaos. The trick is learning to offer that same steadiness to ourselves.

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Tina Buneta, ENP, CPE, RPL

Tina Buneta is the Director of Aurora911 in Colorado. A 25-year public safety veteran, she’s dedicated to cultivating healthy culture, empowering dispatchers, and helping 9-1-1 professionals thrive through change.

## How to Stay Grounded During Change:

- Take a deep breath before reacting.
- Ask one genuine question.
- Try the new tool once before judging it.
- Teach a teammate what you just learned.



Imagine your brother, wanting to kill himself. Imagine. Handing him a gun to show him how crazy the thought of it sounds. He takes that gun, and shoots himself in the head. In front of you.

Now imagine you’re 911, listening to the aftermath of a tragic mistake... “Are you ok,” asked the supervisor.

“Yeah. I’m good,” I responded.

But I wasn’t ok, and she knew it. She let it go though. She didn’t ask me again. The screams I had just heard engulfed my brain. It played over and over. The last few hours of my shift dragged on.

“I can’t believe he did it! I can’t believe he fucking did it!”

That’s what I heard over and over. The screams crackling in my ears like a roaring camp fire. I played back in my head how I told my caller that help was on the way. EMS had to stage in the area until it was safe, but that help was on the way. My caller told her boyfriend this and his response echoed in my head.

“What the fuck is EMS going to do? My brother’s face is all over the snow.”

My heart sank. I could feel his pain, and all I could think about was my own brother. The shift continued after that call. 911 doesn’t stop. Not much else happened, and as soon as I was relieved I bolted for my car. I slammed the door, and called my brother. It was almost five in the morning.

“Please pick up,” I thought. “Hello?”

Finally!

“I love you,” I said, fighting back tears. “Shut the hell up,” my brother responded. “No man. I’m serious. I love you.”

“What happened?”

I told him about my call. Afterwards, he said, “I love you too, man.”

This is but a glimpse of a call I took. It was years ago. The only thing that helped me that time was my brother’s voice. I needed to hear it. I needed to know that he was ok. I needed him to know that I loved him. It’s funny how one voice can truly make a difference. We don’t always think about it, but we hold so much power in our voice, and our story. In this case, the one voice, out of all the voices I heard that night, that made a difference was that of my brother. It brought a form of peace that is hard to explain. Think about the last time you truly hugged someone, and held it for about twenty seconds or so. The stress melts off during this connection. It’s an embrace that lets you know that you are not alone. That is what his voice did for me.

One voice can make a difference. One voice can change the world. There are many stories out there that highlight these voices. That is what this column will focus on. It’ll be about people like you who make a difference every single day. “One Voice” will focus on stories that have been shared during an Imagine Listening session, submitted for the #IAM911 Movement, and I will share a few personal stories like the one above. It’s a call that will always stick with me.



Ultimately, it is my hope that this column will also allow you to reflect on your career, and all of the good you've done, and continue to do.

You might not ever experience that full circle moment, but believe me when I say, you truly do make a difference. Through the power of storytelling your work is recognized around the world. Here is just one example. Years ago, I was traveling back from a conference. While I sat on my plane, waiting for everyone to board, I heard a voice say,

"Hey you."

I didn't look up right away, because, why would they be calling me?

"Hey!" I heard again. I looked up and saw a girl in her mid-teens. She was waiting in line with her mother.

"Yeah, you."

I pointed at myself, asking, "me?" She chuckled and nodded her head. "Thank you for your service."

No one had ever said that to me before. I was slightly confused. Then I remember I was wearing my #IAM911 ballcap. I always wear it backwards so that people can see the hashtag logo with the thin gold line through it.

"Thank you," I replied.

As the girl and her mom continued down the aisle of the plane, her mother leaned in and asked, "What does he do?"

Her daughter replied, "Didn't you see his hat? He's 911. He answers calls."

I got a little emotional when I heard her say that because times had truly changed. The work of a 911 professional is recognized and appreciated. It wasn't always like that. I remember a time before 2016 where there was minimal recognition. Resources were scarce. Towards the end of 2016, though, something changed. Since then, we have changed the landscape of the 911 profession through the power of storytelling. We are sharing. We are feeling. And

we are there for each other. We have opened the eyes of millions, around the world. Although we still struggle to a point with our hard calls, it's important to remember that the calls we take might not always have the outcome that we want, but we can give ourselves some grace, and focus on the fact that our callers were not alone.

One voice can change the world. And even if you think that your voice can't change the world, I want you to remember that your voice can change the world of your caller. It can also change the world of those out in the field, and those around you. What you do might feel like a drop in the water, but what happens when that drop hits the water? It ripples. That is where your impact lies. Your story could be another person's inspiration. In the end, your callers had you. They were not alone. You were their "one voice."

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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 911 professionals to share their stories. For more information please visit [liinks.co/iam911](https://liinks.co/iam911).

**One voice can  
make a difference.**

**One voice can  
change the world.**

# THE HOMECOMING

## A JOURNEY OF LOSS, HEALING, AND GROWTH

Recently, I was invited to attend the Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association (MCSA) Gala, a celebration of twenty-five years of community, support, training, and education for 9-1-1 leaders in my home state. In the days before the event, I was excited to see some of my favorite people in the profession, but I also felt some understandable trepidation. A mix of fear and anxiety surrounded the thought of crossing paths with a few colleagues linked to old wounds and disappointment. The evening turned out beyond wonderful and much-needed. If you appreciate vulnerability and lessons learned, please take some time to read my journey of loss that turned into growth, pain that turned into grace, and a path that led me back home.

When I became the Chief Dispatcher of the Rochester Communications Center in 2003, I was overwhelmed and had no idea what I was doing. While going through files in the admin office, I stumbled upon an MCSA flyer. I jumped on their website to see what it was about and saw there was a meeting coming up, so I went. Little did I know that this organization would become a significant part of my professional foundation. During the thirteen years I was actively involved in MCSA, I had the pleasure of contributing to all things 9-1-1 across the state. In 2016, I made the difficult decision to leave my position as Chief Dispatcher. Leading up to that decision, I had been dealing with a less-than-supportive and borderline abusive leadership team. This behavior exposed old wounds I thought had healed, and it was clear they had not. What I was not aware of at the time was that the weight I was carrying was the culmination of PTSD and other mental health factors that had been brewing for years and had not yet been diagnosed.

Two months after I left the communications center, I attended my first MCSA meeting, but this time it was different. I was no longer the Chief Dispatcher, the person I had been for the last twenty years. I was Tracy Eldridge, RapidSOS Community Engagement Manager. I did not realize how hard it would be to write those words on the attendance roster. As I signed in as my

new self, my heart rate and breathing increased. My heart pounded in my ears, and my mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. I instantly went into a full-blown panic attack. The supervisor of the host agency noticed, brought me into a private office and stayed with me until it passed. While I did go back in and stay for the rest of that meeting, it would be almost eight years before I returned to another MCSA event. I simply could not bring myself to go back.

After years of working on my mental health, I finally began to understand that my past trauma, conflicts, misunderstandings, and experiences with my employer had convinced my hippocampus, the storytelling part of the brain, that I had been cast aside, that no one wanted me there, and that I no longer belonged to this organization. It was not until I began the hard work of healing that I realized the big-mouth storyteller in my brain had been feeding my amygdala, the emotional alarm system, a series of lies with only a sprinkle of partial truths. The partial truth was no different than anywhere else in life. The truth is, no, I am not for everyone, and that is okay. Some members did prefer for me not to be involved, and that is okay too. In addition, at that time, something I had worked hard on and was excited to continue building was stripped from me without explanation and given to others to pursue. It hurt, and it hurt deeply. Losing that opportunity was yet another confirmation for my trauma brain that I did not belong. However, the most important truth I wish I had learned years ago was this: the only person who told me I no longer belonged to this association was me. My own trauma, low self-esteem, and lack of self-worth created the narrative that I was not wanted, and unfortunately, I believed it.

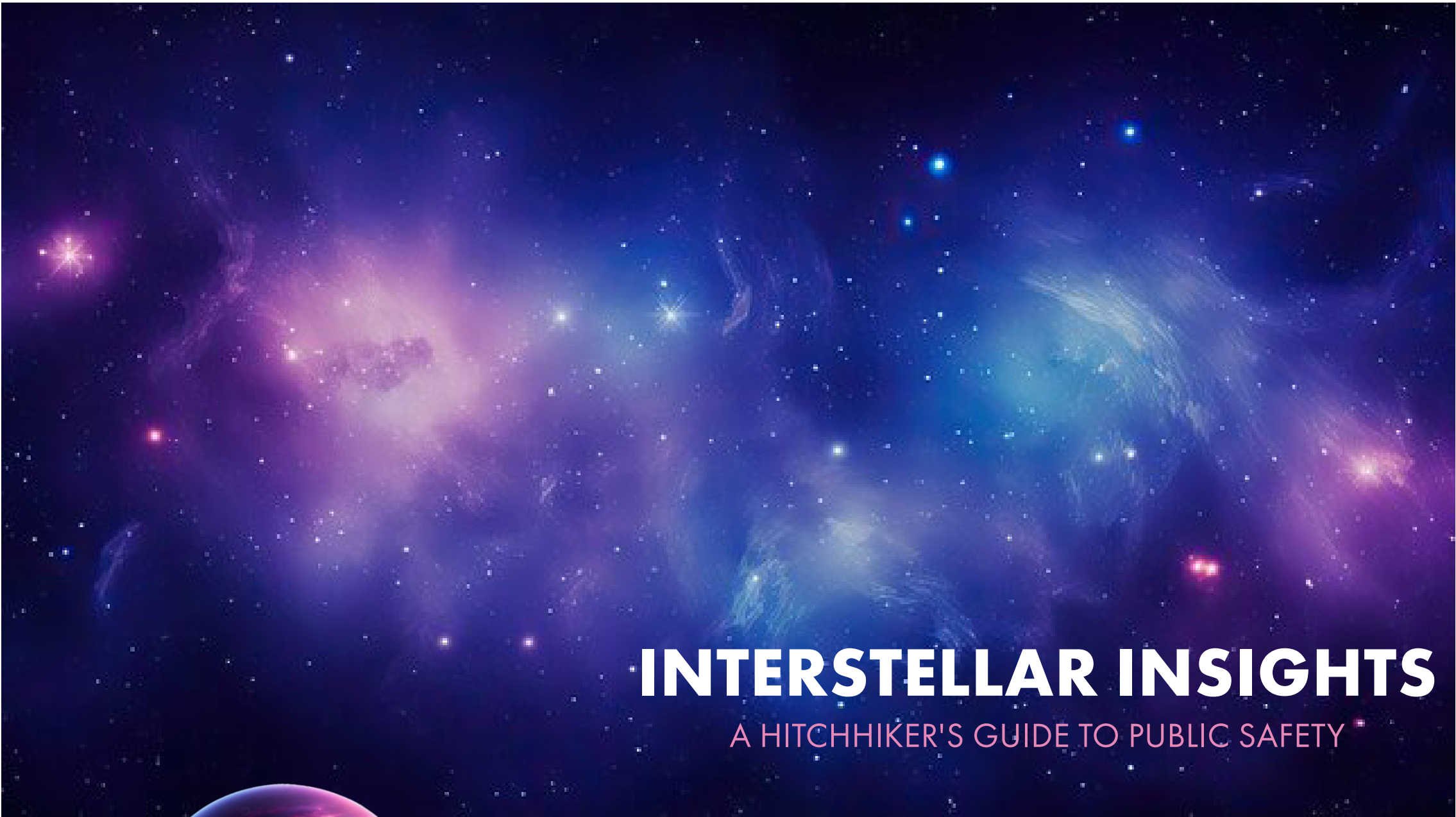
This year, I was personally invited back to participate in three MCSA events, and I gratefully accepted all three. While I was a bit nervous, at no point did I feel like I did not belong, nor did any part of the hurtful past rise to the surface. I did the work, and it became clear that this is what healing looks like. This experience is the reason I share my PTSD story. Others need to



know that healing and letting go are possible. Looking back now, I realize it was not the community that let go of me--it was me who let go of the community. And I missed it. After an evening of wonderful memories shared with colleagues and mentors, I walked away with a profound lesson. Sometimes it is not about thinking you are being excluded. It is about learning how to include yourself again. In this profession, we all get a little lost sometimes. We create narratives in our heads that do not always match reality. If you find yourself on the outside looking in the window of a place you miss, tap on the glass. See who opens the door and welcomes you back in. Focus on them, because they are the main characters in the story and deserve to have that part shared. Remember, you belong in the room, do not let anyone, including yourself tell you, you don't!

Tracy Eldridge  
CEO, on scene first

With almost 30 years in Public Safety, Tracy launched her company and podcast, On Scene First, dedicated to educating public safety professionals on essential technology, leadership skills, and mental health resources to help “save lives on both sides of the call.” Tracy spent many years serving her rural Massachusetts community, advancing from dispatcher to chief dispatcher, and continues to serve as an on-call firefighter/EMT with her local fire department. After her 20 years in the 9-1-1 Communications Center, Tracy spent four years with RapidSOS, where she played a key role in building the world's first emergency response data platform and advancing device-based location delivery to 9-1-1 centers, a technology that has saved thousands of lives. For the past 12 years, she has traveled the country training 9-1-1 telecommunicators through her part-time role with The Public Safety Group. As a passionate speaker and mental health advocate, Tracy is nationally recognized for her work in raising awareness about PTSD across all public safety disciplines through training sessions, webinars, and keynotes. She is the proud recipient of the 2007 Jeff Grossman Telecommunicator of the Year Award, the 2018 Illinois APCO Presidential Award, the 2018 Illinois NENA Sponsorship Award, and the NG911 Institute's 2020 Industry Professional of the Year honor.



### WELCOME, INTERSTELLAR NAVIGATOR.

Congratulations, traveler. You've just clocked in for your shift aboard starship Public Safety 1, where the headset is your flight helmet, your console is the helm, and your galaxy... is glowing red on the CAD map. Out there swirl countless worlds — ANI, ALI, NG911, EIDO — each with its own gravitational pull and black holes of confusion. You're the navigator who keeps the ship from drifting into chaos when a hyperspace lane (or network circuit) collapses, when another planet (read: Vendor) starts speaking in acronyms nobody understands, and when your crew of first responders suddenly punches it to warp nine.

Take a deep breath. Adjust your mic boom. And remember: Don't panic — just answer the call.



# FL-TERT: ITS BEGINNINGS

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**FIELD NOTES:**

Life in the Cosmic Comm Center

From your seat on Deck Dispatch, you can chart the pulse of the galaxy in real time. A meteor shower of 9-1-1 calls streaks across your console — each one a world in distress. You triage, translate, and transfer with the reflexes of someone who could probably fly an actual starfighter if the pay were any better. The problem is, every year the galaxy expands. New data constellations appear, real-time text, IoT sensors, video feeds, digital IDs, and the ever-elusive “interoperability nebula.” NG911 isn’t a single jump point; it’s the wormhole we’re all hurtling through — faster than our training manuals can keep up.

Still, you adapt. You laugh at the absurdities (“Another new acronym? Sweet!”). You lean on your crew. You take pride knowing that even in the cold vacuum of packet loss, your voice — calm, clear, and caffeinated — guides others home.

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**PRO TIP FROM THE FIELD:**

“Never Argue with a Black Hole.”

Translation: Don’t waste cycles fighting the inevitable.

If the network drops, reboot. If the CAD freezes, breathe. If the officer’s radio cuts out mid-sentence, resist the urge to throw your headset into orbit. Every black hole eventually stabilizes... and tech support always calls back five minutes after you’ve fixed it yourself.

.....  
**ACRONYM OF THE QUARTER:**

EIDO (Emergency Incident Data Object)

Definition: A magical container that bundles call data, media, and incident details so systems can trade information without melting down.

Galactic Translation: The universe’s way of saying “don’t just tell me there’s a fire — send me the playlist, coordinates, and who started it. And don’t tell me it was Billy Joel!”

Survival Tip: When someone says, “the EIDO didn’t populate,” nod wisely and blame quantum interference.

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**SUBSPACE TRANSMISSION:**

Ask Fletch from Mission Control

Q: Hey Fletch, if I can’t even get my CAD to talk to records, how am I supposed to survive NG911 integration?

A: Easy. Remember what every seasoned navigator knows — you don’t integrate the universe in a day. Start by making sure your systems know each other’s names, then introduce them over coffee (or an API). Small connections make big constellations.

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**CLOSING THOUGHT:**

The galaxy of public safety is vast, messy, and occasionally on fire — but you were born to navigate it. Keep your towel (and your headset) handy. The next transmission is already inbound.

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Fletch is an innovator, a former dispatcher, holding 14 NG911-related patents. Authoring Kari’s Law, helping shape RAY BAUM’S Act, and building pioneering NG911 solutions. A past NENA leader, FCC advisor, and global speaker, he now leads <http://Fletch911.com> and the <http://911TiPS.com> podcast every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

**THE BEGINNING OF A MISSION**

It was Sunday, August 23, 1992. Like so many in South Florida, I was bracing for Hurricane Andrew — but unlike most residents, I wasn’t heading home. I was heading in to work.

At Miami-Dade Fire Rescue’s Communications Center, the air buzzed with anxious anticipation. Dispatchers spoke in quick bursts — some worried about their families, others mentally preparing for whatever awaited us. Those of us in 9-1-1 communications know what it means to be “deployed to your agency”: settle in, secure your belongings, and prepare to stay for the duration.

**WHEN ANDREW ARRIVED**

At 4:40 a.m. on August 24, the storm struck. We couldn’t see outside the center, but we heard Hurricane Andrew — in the background of every call and in the rising urgency of voices around the room. The 9-1-1 lines rang relentlessly. In two hours, over 800 emergency calls were pending — handwritten on legal pads until responders could safely mobilize again. Our Bravo shift worked nearly 18 hours straight, fueled by duty and determination before relief arrived.

**A CALL FOR REINFORCEMENTS**

As devastation became clear — and exhaustion set in — it was obvious: our dispatchers needed help. I contacted the FL-APCO Chapter President at Fort Lauderdale PD. “I need dispatchers.” She responded: “We’ve never done that — but I’ll put out an announcement. When I returned after checking my home, I found dispatchers in our lobby — ready to serve.

A bus with twelve Palm Beach County Fire & Sheriff’s dispatchers stayed 10 days to support us. More came as able — on days off, between shifts, and sometimes only for a night.

For 6–8 weeks, we organized rotating support — handling downed wires, Medcom channels, non-emergency requests — while we continued 9-1-1 operations alongside Miami-Dade Police.

**FROM LOCAL MUTUAL AID TO STATEWIDE READINESS**

The FL-APCO Board recognized that dispatchers supporting dispatchers was the future. We presented our deployment concept to FDLE (ESF 16), Communications (ESF 2), and Fire/Rescue (ESF 4/9). Fire/Rescue agreed to sponsor the program.

In 1992, the foundation of the Florida Telecommunicator Emergency Response program began — originally known as FAST: Florida APCO Strike Team.

Deployment Highlights (1992–2025)

- 17 hurricanes supported since inception
- Hundreds of TERT members deployed statewide
- 266 members deployed after Hurricane Ian (2023)
- 10 ECCs on the west coast supported
- 5 states assisted (GA, TN, OH, LA, TX)

**NATIONAL RECOGNITION AND GROWTH**

By 2007, after lessons from Hurricane Katrina, NJTI-TERT was established nationally — recognizing Florida as a pioneer program.

## WHAT IS TERT?

The Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) enables trained 9-1-1 professionals to deploy into disaster-impacted emergency communications centers — providing relief, continuity of service, and operational support when local teams are overwhelmed.

## WHY WE SERVE

“When 9-1-1 needs help, we answer that call” TERT brings calm to chaos, strength to the exhausted, precision to the mission, and hope to the overwhelmed. We show up. We step up. We take care of each other — and the communities we serve. We are dedicated to every telecommunicator who stands the watch. The Thin Gold Line.

With over 40 years in public safety, Natalia Duran’s career spans leadership, training, and service excellence. A retired Fire Communications Officer from Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, she now leads Peer Support efforts. An APCO instructor and FL-TERT founder, Natalia continues shaping 911 professionals nationwide. Proud Marine mom and grandmother, she’s truly blessed.



# LESSONS FROM THE CONSOLE:

## EMBRACING AI THROUGH CURIOSITY AND COLLABORATION



DANIEL GUTTORMSON

When I first sat down at a console as a new call taker, I never imagined I’d one day be working alongside artificial intelligence. Like many in this profession, I came up through the ranks the traditional way — call taker, dispatcher, trainer, supervisor, operations manager — learning from experience, repetition, and the people around me. My education wasn’t in computer science or engineering. I learned technology by necessity and curiosity, by reading, experimenting, and asking questions until the answers made sense. Later in my career, I worked in a consultative

role for the Department of Homeland Security, where I helped identify ways technology could responsibly enhance and supplement emergency communications and emergency management. Those experiences cemented something I’ve believed ever since—curiosity is one of the most powerful traits a practitioner can have.

Artificial intelligence, or AI, isn’t a new phenomenon. It’s been studied, tested, and refined since the mid-twentieth century, but only recently has it become



accessible in ways that directly impact public safety communications. AI spans a wide spectrum – from lightly- assistive tools that automate simple, repetitive tasks to fully autonomous systems that make decisions without human input. In our field, we are firmly on the assistive end of that spectrum, and that’s exactly where we should be. The AI tools emerging in 911 centers today are not designed to replace human judgment or decision-making. They are built to support the people doing the work, allowing them to focus on what matters most--serving the caller and supporting the field units who rely on them.

I once heard a colleague describe AI in a way that resonated deeply. They said, “Imagine as a Director you could hire an administrative assistant for every telecommunicator on the floor. What would you want that assistant to do?” That is where AI belongs – not in decision-making, but in the background, quietly assisting with the tasks that take time and attention away from critical thinking. In practice, that could mean technology that transcribes radio traffic in real time so transmissions can be searched and replayed instantly, or software that recognizes distress phrases like a faint “mayday” that a fatigued dispatcher might not catch in the moment. It might mean automatically alerting when an officer has been on a stop longer than usual or initiating notifications to specialized teams without the need to manually draft a page or click through multiple screens. These are small examples, but collectively they represent a massive shift toward efficiency, consistency, and safety.

When I talk to telecommunicators about AI, I often hear, “I don’t need it. I’m already good at my job.” And they’re right. Those who answer 911 calls and manage emergency resources in the field are superhuman. They’re among the most capable professionals in public safety. But even the best dispatcher can’t operate at peak performance forever, especially after multiple double shifts or mandatory overtime. Fatigue, stress, and cognitive overload are

very real. AI doesn’t get tired. It doesn’t lose focus at three in the morning. It doesn’t miss the whispered plea for help in the background of a chaotic call. It complements the skill of the professional, stepping in where human limits meet the relentless pace of emergency communications.

This doesn’t make AI a replacement for human skill--it makes it a safety net. When used responsibly, AI preserves and amplifies the expertise of the telecommunicator. It handles the tedious, time-consuming, and error-prone elements of the job so that the human can focus on empathy, intuition, and complex decision-making – the things technology cannot replicate. In this way, AI becomes a reinforcement to the craft, not a threat to it.

My own understanding of AI didn’t come from classrooms or certifications – it came from curiosity. Early in my career, I started reading everything I could find from industry organizations like APCO and NENA: standards, white papers, and best practices that explained how technology was changing emergency communications. Resources like APCO’s Definitive Guide to Next Generation 9-1-1 give foundational knowledge that connects so many dots as you research more and more technology. I’d highlight, take notes, and reread sections until the terminology became second nature. That kind of self-driven learning – not formal technical education alone – is what makes practitioners the most adaptable and innovative.

Today, there are more opportunities than ever to experiment and learn. Many AI platforms offer ‘sandbox’ environments where anyone can test ideas, build simple models, fail spectacularly, and try again. That process of failure and iteration is how understanding takes root. You don’t have to be an engineer to grasp how AI works-- you just have to be willing to explore, ask questions, and occasionally get your hands dirty. Some of the most insightful technologists in public safety I know aren’t programmers – they’re dispatchers and call takers

who saw a process that could be better and decided to figure out how.

But as exciting as it is, AI must be approached responsibly. In public safety, that means keeping the human in the loop. Technology should assist, not decide. It should be transparent in how it works and equitable in its outcomes, avoiding bias or unintended consequences. And it must be secure, adhering to standards such as the FBI’s Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) requirements for data protection. Responsible AI isn’t about chasing trends or shiny tools--it’s about applying technology thoughtfully to improve operations without compromising trust.

For those just starting to explore AI, the best way forward is to stay curious and stay informed. Read the industry standards and guides. Ask your vendors and technology partners to explain how their systems operate and what safeguards are in place. Participate in demos and discussions. Seek out colleagues who are experimenting and learn from their experiences. Every question asked and every concept explored strengthens our collective understanding and helps ensure that innovation benefits the people actually doing the work.

The future of AI in emergency communications isn’t about replacing humans – it’s about reinforcing them. It’s about making sure that even when staffing is short and fatigue is high, the community and our public safety partners still receive the same level of care, consistency, and professionalism. The best technologies are those that disappear into the background, seamlessly supporting the practitioner without getting in the way.

What excites me most about this moment is the collaboration AI not only inspires, but also requires. The future of AI in 911 cannot be built by technologists and engineers alone – it has to be shaped by the people who live and breathe the work every day. Those who design and code these systems depend on insight from the console. They crave feedback,

vision, and direction from the end user. The only way AI becomes truly useful in public safety is if the telecommunicators who understand its complexities are part of the process.

Don’t sit idly by waiting for your director or administrator to decide what technologies are worth exploring. Be informed. Learn what tools exist, how they work, and what problems they actually solve. Ask hard questions, share your observations, and speak up when something could be better. The best innovation in our industry has always come from the floor – not the front office.

And as you evaluate what’s out there, remember there’s a balance to strike. There are times when it’s appropriate to go with the established, enterprise-scale vendor whose systems are built for wide deployment. But there are also times when the right solution comes from a smaller, focused company that has turned their craft into their mission. Those are the innovators who often bring the most agility, creativity, and attention to detail. Knowing when and how to leverage both types of partners is what moves our profession forward.

AI in 911 isn’t just about technology – it’s about partnership, trust, and shared purpose. It’s the collaboration between practitioner and technologist that will define the next generation of emergency communications.

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Daniel Guttormson works with Smart Response Technologies, helping public safety agencies leverage artificial intelligence to enhance emergency communications. A former 911 practitioner, he’s passionate about bridging frontline experience with technology to support telecommunicators, improve situational awareness, and strengthen community safety nationwide.



# ALWAYS LEARNING

## PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE LIFE OF A 911 COMMUNICATOR

If there's one truth that holds steady in the world of 911, it's this--there is always something to learn. The moment we start to believe we've learned it all, that we have nothing left to absorb or improve upon, is the moment we should probably step back and rethink why we're here. This profession demands not just skill and composure, also humility, curiosity, and a lifelong commitment to growth. Every call, every shift, every technology update, and every new procedure brings with it a lesson. Some lessons are small, like learning a quicker way to navigate a CAD screen. Others are life-changing, like learning how to steady your voice when a caller's world is falling apart. Growth doesn't

stop when training ends. In many ways, that's when it begins.

The 911 telecommunicator's job sits at the intersection of human emotion and rapid decision-making. We are constantly balancing information, emotion, and urgency. That balance can't be perfected--it must be continually refined. Growth in this field isn't just about collecting certifications or memorizing policies--it's about evolving as both a professional and a person. It's about adapting to new technology, understanding changing procedures, and developing techniques that make us better communicators and calmer leaders in the midst of chaos.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING A STUDENT

The 911 profession refuses to stand still. Technology advances, policies shift, and the community needs to evolve. What worked five years ago may not be enough today. A telecommunicator who embraces the role of a lifelong learner doesn't see these changes as frustrations—he sees them as opportunities. We grow when we remain teachable. Staying teachable means asking questions, even when we think we already know the answer. It means being open to feedback, even when it's uncomfortable. It's sitting through refresher courses and realizing that maybe our habits could use a little tightening up. It's the humility to admit that we could have handled a call differently, and the courage to try again next time with a new approach. The best telecommunicators aren't the ones who claim to know it all, they're the ones who recognize how much more there is to know. Every new tool, every updated protocol, every difficult caller teaches something that adds depth and strength to our skills. The more we learn, the better we serve our communities, our responders, and one another.

### POLICIES AND PROCEDURES:

#### THE FOUNDATION WE STAND ON

Every 911 center has its own set of policies and procedures, and while they might seem routine or repetitive at times, they are the backbone of consistency and professionalism. Understanding them isn't about checking boxes--it's about knowing why they exist. Policies aren't just rules--they are lessons written in ink, often born from experiences where something once went wrong. When telecommunicators commit to truly understanding their center's policies, they equip themselves with confidence and structure. They learn how to make decisions that align with best practices, protect the agency, and ensure the safety of everyone involved. Growth in this area means not just memorizing procedures but learning to apply them in real-world situations, where no two calls are ever quite the same.

But personal growth also means being willing to question and improve those procedures when necessary. Sometimes, what's written may not fit new technology or changing call trends. Growth-minded telecommunicators don't resist evolution--they participate in it. They bring up gaps they notice, they suggest improvements, and they help create policies that reflect today's challenges. That's how an agency grows stronger--when its people invest in shaping the process rather than simply following it.

### UNDERSTANDING RESOURCES:

#### KNOWING WHO AND WHAT IS OUT THERE

Growth as a telecommunicator isn't just about what you know, it's about who you know and how you use the resources available to you. Every call is different, and every situation may require a different type of help. Knowing the depth of your community's resources, law enforcement, fire, EMS, public works, utility companies, animal control, mental health crisis teams, and many others, turns a telecommunicator from a dispatcher into a problem-solver. When you understand your resources, you can think outside the box. You can connect a stranded motorist with tow services before the situation becomes dangerous. You can send the right responders to a structure fire because you remembered mutual aid agreements with neighboring departments. You can coordinate emergency management resources during a severe storm because you've taken the time to learn the chain of communication. Growth here means taking initiative. It's asking, "What more can I learn about how this agency works?" It's building relationships with responders, attending briefings when possible, and paying attention during post-incident reviews. The more we understand the ecosystem we operate within, the better equipped we are to make sound, informed decisions during critical moments.



EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

There’s no denying that technology is one of the fastest-changing parts of our profession. From CAD systems to Next Generation 911, text-to-911, GIS mapping, AI integrations and call-handling analytics, our workstations have transformed from simple phone-and-radio setups into complex command centers. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed when something new rolls out. But growth means leaning into that discomfort instead of resisting it. When we understand the technology, we take ownership of it. We stop being afraid of breaking something and start mastering it. Learning new technology requires patience and curiosity. It means reading updates, asking vendors questions, and practicing with new tools before emergencies hit. It also means understanding how technology supports, but never replaces, human skill. A telecommunicator’s empathy, tone, and ability to think critically remain irreplaceable. The technology simply amplifies our effectiveness, if we let it. The best professionals in this field are the ones who can adapt quickly. They learn the updates, explore the functions, and share knowledge with others. They become mentors to those who struggle and, in doing so, strengthen not only themselves but the entire team.

REFINING TECHNIQUES AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

No matter how advanced our systems become, 911 is still a people-centered profession. Our greatest tools are our voices, our patience, and our ability to listen intently. Growth in this profession often shows up in small, subtle shifts--a calmer tone during a chaotic call, a more patient response to an upset caller, or a more confident radio transmission when seconds count. Communication techniques evolve, too. As we grow, we learn to tailor our approach to the caller’s emotional state, knowing when to be firm, when to be gentle, and when silence speaks louder than words. We learn to manage multiple radio channels while still giving our caller undivided attention. We learn

to prioritize information and filter out background noise to find the detail that matters most. There’s an art to asking questions that draw out information without overwhelming a panicked caller. There’s skill in keeping your voice steady when you’re hearing something tragic. And there’s growth in recognizing when a call affected you deeply and taking steps to care for your own mental health afterward.

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION

Personal growth requires honest reflection. It’s easy to move from one call to the next without ever stopping to ask, “What did I do well?” or “What could I have done differently?” But the greatest leaps forward often happen when we take the time to analyze our work with honesty and compassion. Feedback isn’t always easy to hear, but it’s one of the most powerful tools we have for growth. Supervisors and peers who offer constructive feedback aren’t criticizing-- they’re investing in your success. Taking that feedback to heart and applying it can transform how you handle future calls.

Equally important is self-reflection. After a difficult call, it’s okay to ask yourself tough questions: Did I follow policy? Did I listen fully? Did I maintain my composure? What can I take from this to do better next time? Growth doesn’t always mean big, dramatic improvements-- it’s the quiet, consistent self-evaluation that shapes a skilled and confident professional.

EMOTIONAL GROWTH AND RESILIENCE

This career asks a lot of us emotionally. We absorb trauma secondhand, we hear pain daily, and we’re expected to stay calm through it all. Growth also means recognizing our own humanity and understanding that emotional resilience isn’t about being numb, it’s about being strong enough to feel, cope, and continue to serve. Developing resilience involves learning how to decompress, when to reach out for help, and how to support one another. Peer support

programs, employee assistance, and mental wellness initiatives are all tools of growth. It takes courage to say, “That call shook me,” or “I need to talk about it,” but that’s where maturity and strength in this profession really shine. We grow when we learn how to take care of ourselves as well as we care for others. A healthy, balanced telecommunicator can think more clearly, perform more effectively, and sustain a long, rewarding career.

THE MENTORSHIP CYCLE

One of the most beautiful parts of growth in this field is that it’s cyclical. The more we learn, the more we can teach. Becoming a mentor, a trainer, or simply the person others can come to with questions is one of the highest forms of growth. It’s a sign that we’ve internalized our knowledge enough to pass it on. But mentorship isn’t about hierarchy, it’s about humility. The best mentors remember what it was like to be new. They create safe spaces for learning and encourage others to ask questions without fear. They know that sharing knowledge strengthens the team and keeps the culture of learning alive. When a workplace values growth, everyone benefits. It creates an environment where curiosity is rewarded, mistakes become lessons, and innovation becomes natural. And in the world of 911, where change is constant, that kind of culture is invaluable.

NEVER ARRIVING, ALWAYS BECOMING

The telecommunicators who last and thrive are those who treat every shift as a classroom. Every call, every debrief, every piece of feedback, every training, every change in policy is a chance to sharpen their skills and deepen their understanding. Growth isn’t always comfortable. It challenges ego, it asks for effort, and it sometimes requires admitting that we could do better. But it’s also what makes this career meaningful. It’s what transforms a job into a calling and a dispatcher into a true professional. To grow as a 911 telecommunicator is to accept that there’s no finish line. Mastery doesn’t mean knowing

everything, it means staying open to learning more. It’s understanding that technology will keep advancing, that policies will keep evolving, and that the human element will always require empathy and adaptability.

In this profession, growth isn’t optional--it’s survival. It’s what keeps our voices strong, our minds sharp, and our hearts compassionate. That is what the people on the other end of the line truly need--a voice that never stops learning how to be just a little better, call by call, day by day.

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Rhonda Braudis, RPL, CPE, NREMT, has 23 years of experience in public safety communications, beginning her career as a call taker ultimately becoming a Director in 2013. She joined the Marshall County Communications Center in Marshalltown, Iowa, as Director in 2019. Rhonda holds a Master’s in Emergency and Disaster Management and serves as a National Instructor.

No matter how advanced our systems become, 911 is still a people-centered profession. Our greatest tools are our voices, our patience, and our ability to listen intently.



# VANISHED VOICES

## #MMIW

### UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN

Across the United States and Canada, Indigenous women and girls face disproportionately high rates of violence, disappearance, and homicide. These losses are not isolated tragedies but the result of intersecting historical, social, legal, and economic forces. Understanding why Native American women disappear and what concrete steps can reduce these disappearances requires confronting colonial legacies, gaps in law enforcement and jurisdiction, systemic socioeconomic marginalization, and cultural erasure — and centering Indigenous leadership in solutions.

North American telecommunicators and their 911 brothers and sisters around the world can come together as a force in every community prepared to receive reports and information while working the frontline of humanity. In 2023, there were over 5,800 American Indian and Alaskan Native females reported missing with 74% of those reported under the age of 18. There is no comprehensive national recovery rate for these women and girls due to significant data collection issues, underreporting and jurisdictional complexities.

As an example, a 2016 report by the Urban Indian Health Institute identified 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, but only 116 of those cases were logged by the U.S. Department of Justice's federal missing persons database (NamUs). The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) estimates there are approximately 4,200 currently unsolved missing and murdered indigenous female cases across the United States.

Indigenous women face murder rates more than ten times the national average and overwhelming rates of violent crime, twice the amount of their non-indigenous counterparts in the United States. In Canada, the rate is 3.5 times higher. Homicide is the third leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaskan Native women and girls ages 10-24. In Canada, Indigenous females make up 4% of the population yet account for one quarter of all homicide victims in Canada.

The National Institute of Justice revealed that 84% of American Indigenous women have experienced violence against them in their lifetime, and 56% of these women became victims of sexual assault as well.

To try to address the tragedy, the FBI has an MMIP (Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons) program and provides annual statistics through their NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics Report. The Department of the Interior has also created a Missing and Murdered Unit within the BIA to better investigate these crimes. It is beyond violence and murder; thousands disappear every year across North America with many presumed to be involved in the human trafficking trade.

"My friend doesn't dare to let her girls walk to school alone on the reservation; she drives them," explained one source for this article. That mother was too afraid to be named in this article for fear of the safety of her children. This robs women and girls in native



Photo by Frank Minjarez.



communities of their security, safety and visibility. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls #MMIWG initiative has brought forward the plight of these women and girls in recent years.

“It follows us through the generations,” explained Kimberly Bronander, an Oneida Tribe member in Wisconsin. Kimberly’s great aunt, Elizabeth Hill-Duff-Denny, was forcibly moved to a boarding school decades ago. “In the end, it made our tribe stronger, by fighting to keep our traditions and making sure we were taught where we really come from. We get through it, but the unknown is always there,” said Bronander. “My ancestors were stripped of their language and clothes. They were beaten if they didn’t do as they were told and often this meant handing over children of the tribe. So many were never recovered, and the disproportionate danger of violence, abduction and death continues across the country.”

The original forced boarding school process stripped Indigenous women and girls of their identity, making it easier for them to disappear in society.

The Murder Accountability Report collects data on unsolved homicides in the United States to apply pressure on law enforcement in communities with disproportionately high unsolved homicide rates; and to put a spotlight on communities that fail to report this information to federal databases.

#### Why Native American Women Disappear

1. Historical and structural violence. The disappearance of Indigenous women is rooted in colonial processes that disrupted communities, family structures, and gender roles. Policies like forced removal, boarding schools, and assimilation erased language, cultural knowledge, and social networks that historically protected women. Intergenerational trauma, high rates of substance use, and community destabilization are direct outcomes of these policies and increase vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

2. Jurisdictional and legal gaps. A major driver of impunity is the complex and often confusing legal



patchwork that governs crimes involving Native people. In the United States, crimes on tribal lands can fall under tribal, state, or federal jurisdiction depending on the perpetrator’s and victim’s status and the location of the crime. Historically, tribes had limited authority to prosecute non Native offenders. Although recent federal reforms (e.g., the Violence Against Women Act reauthorizations and the Tribal Law and Order Act) have incrementally improved tribal jurisdiction, many loopholes remain, and

underfunded law enforcement on reservations struggle to investigate crimes effectively. In Canada, similar gaps historically existed between provincial and federal responsibilities and in relations with Indigenous governments.

3. Underreporting and data failure. Official statistics dramatically undercount Indigenous victims. Missing persons cases involving Native women are often not investigated thoroughly, misclassified, or not entered into national databases. A lack of culturally competent reporting mechanisms, distrust of authorities, and fear of retaliation discourage families from reporting or persisting in cases. Without reliable data, the scale of the problem is minimized, resources are misallocated, and policy responses lag.

4. Socioeconomic marginalization. High rates of poverty, limited access to healthcare and mental health services, housing insecurity, and unemployment increase risks. Marginalization pushes many Indigenous women into dangerous circumstances: survival sex, transient lifestyles, or work in isolated settings (e.g., long-haul trucking corridors, resource-extraction camps) where they are more vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

5. Cultural stereotyping and dehumanization. Longstanding racist and sexist stereotypes (sexualization, invisibility, or assumptions of criminality) shape how victims are perceived by the public and institutions. This can reduce empathy and urgency, leading to slower or inadequate police responses and less media attention for missing Indigenous women compared with other demographics.

#### What Can Be Done to Mitigate Disappearances

1. Strengthen legal jurisdiction and enforcement collaboration.

- Expand and fully fund tribal criminal jurisdiction over non Native offenders for violent crimes committed on tribal lands, while ensuring due process safeguards. Bureaucratic complexity must be simplified through clear agreements among tribal, state, and federal authorities.

- Promote inter-agency task forces that include tribal law enforcement, federal agencies, state police, and community organizations to coordinate investigations, share intelligence, and monitor high risk areas (e.g., highways, resource extraction zones).

- Fund and deploy more tribal police, prosecutors, and victim service providers so investigations are timely, culturally informed, and sustained.

2. Improve data collection, transparency, and reporting.

- Create and maintain comprehensive, disaggregated databases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls that are easily accessible to tribal authorities and families.

- Standardize reporting protocols across jurisdictions and require timely entry of missing persons cases into national systems (e.g., NCIC in the U.S.) with culturally appropriate follow up procedures.

- Support community driven data projects and mapping initiatives that document disappearances and identify geographic patterns to guide prevention and policing.

3. Invest in prevention through social and economic support.

- Address root causes by funding housing, education, mental health, addiction treatment, and job programs in Indigenous communities. Culturally grounded services increase resilience and reduce exposure to risky circumstances.

- Develop safe transportation options and services in remote areas, and regulate and monitor industries (mining, logging, trucking) that bring transient workers into Indigenous territories where women have disappeared.

- Support programs that provide safe housing and economic alternatives to individuals engaged in survival sex or who are otherwise vulnerable.

4. Increase culturally competent victim services and family support.



• Fund culturally-informed advocacy, legal assistance, and trauma informed counseling that centers Indigenous healing practices.

• Ensure families of missing people have access to regular updates, investigative transparency, and resources for searches, travel, and media outreach.

• Train law enforcement in trauma informed, anti bias investigations and require protocols that respect Indigenous cultural practices during searches and repatriation.

5. Empower Indigenous leadership and community solutions.

• Prioritize Indigenous voices in policymaking; involve tribal governments, women’s organizations, and grassroots groups in designing and implementing responses.

• Support Indigenous led public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes, educate the public about systemic causes, and sustain media attention on cases.

• Fund community led prevention programs such as early warning networks, neighborhood patrols, and youth engagement initiatives that restore social cohesion and safety nets.

6. Accountability and public awareness

• Increase federal and provincial funding specifically earmarked for investigating MMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls) cases.

• Hold agencies accountable through audits, independent oversight, and public reporting on case clearances and service delivery.

• Encourage responsible media coverage that centers victims’ identities and contexts, rather than sensationalizing cases or reinforcing stereotypes.

**CALL TO ACTION FOR 911 TELECOMMUNICATORS**

Critical actions for 911 include:

- Encouraging reporting early and as often as necessary.
- Treating reports seriously and immediately.

• Understanding and spreading the knowledge that there is NO 24 HOUR WAITING PERIOD.

• Cases should be treated as potential criminal investigations until proven otherwise, instead of waiting for a return.

• Asking for and receiving specialized training in the unique circumstances surrounding MMIP cases with training on jurisdictions in Indian Country, historical trauma and cultural needs.

• Call takers should use a trauma-informed approach. Communicate with empathy, establish a positive relationship with distressed family or reporters.

• Understand the statistical risk in this demographic.

• Thorough information gathering – less is not more.

• Inter-agency coordination to include coordinating a multi-jurisdictional response which may involve tribal, local, state and federal law enforcement agencies.

• Understanding the purpose of different agencies in helping prevent, investigate and document MMIP cases.

• Activating available alert systems.

• Connecting families with resources.

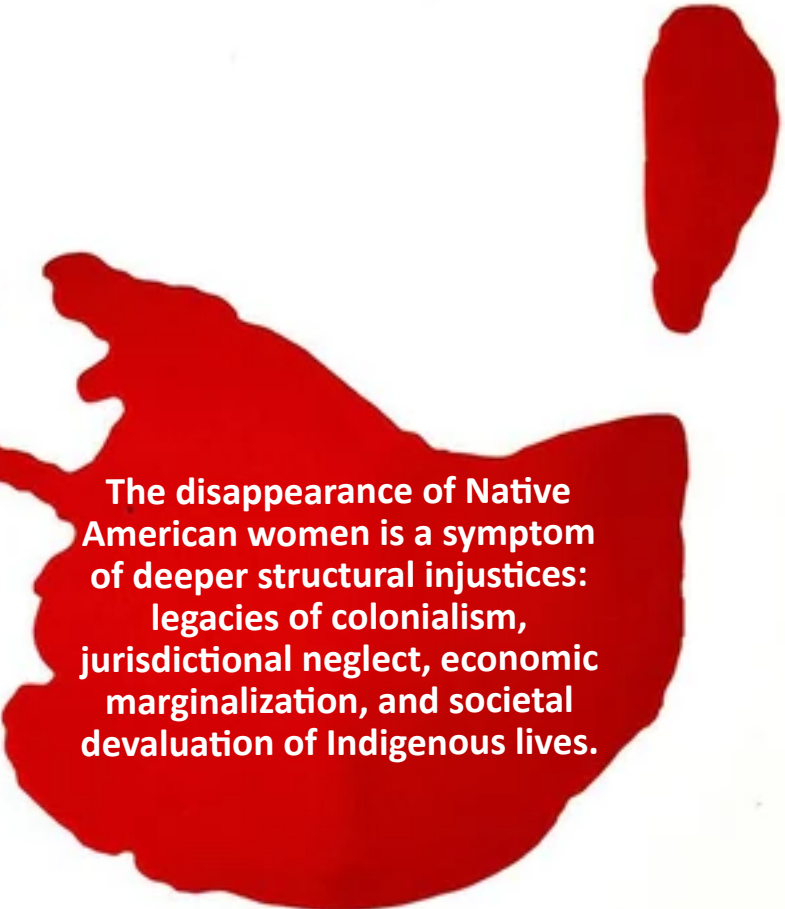
• Expressing Support – we are not a place holder until help arrives. We are help and the way we treat callers determines if they will call in the future when they need help or have information to alert or help us.

By answering this international call to action, 911 dispatchers can significantly improve the initial response to Missing, Murdered, Indigenous Women & Girls cases. This increases the chance for a safe recovery and ensures families feel heard and supported in your communities.

The disappearance of Native American women is a symptom of deeper structural injustices: legacies of colonialism, jurisdictional neglect, economic marginalization, and societal devaluation of Indigenous lives. Meaningful progress requires combining legal reform, better data and policing, sustained social investments, culturally appropriate services, and —

above all — leadership from Indigenous communities themselves. When Indigenous people set priorities and lead solutions, from prevention through investigation to healing, the pattern of disappearances can be reversed and the voices of missing women honored and restored to their communities.

Tracy C. Ertl is a 33-year retired 911 veteran who has been training in classrooms across North America for 25 years. She has a special interest in vulnerable populations. Her training company, HeroLight Training LLC, anticipates offering training for working with the Indigenous population in Fall 2026. She is a trained journalist, a former reporter for Gannett. A published author herself, Ertl founded TitleTown Publishing 17 years ago and continues to lead the boutique publishing house focused on incredible survivors and true crime.



**The disappearance of Native American women is a symptom of deeper structural injustices: legacies of colonialism, jurisdictional neglect, economic marginalization, and societal devaluation of Indigenous lives.**



*I live in the state of Wisconsin with multiple Native American tribes represented. One can see images of red dresses hanging in trees within this article. Those images were captured within an hour’s drive of my home, representing women and girls who were never recovered as well as many others who were recovered dead. The MMIW images are from Menomonee tribal land.*



# BEHIND THE SCENES OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE:

## THE VITAL ROLES OF 911 DISPATCH

When an emergency strikes, whether it’s a car crash, a fire, or a medical crisis, the first thought for many is to call 911. This simple three-digit number is synonymous with urgent help, but have you ever stopped to think about what happens once that call goes through? Who are the voices on the other end, and how do they manage the chaos? Let’s dive into the fascinating worlds of 911 dispatch and university dispatch, exploring their unique landscapes, challenges, and the essential roles they play in keeping us safe.

Imagine a room buzzing with energy; phones ringing, screens flashing, and the air heavy with tension. This is the world of 911 dispatchers, the first responders before the first responders arrive. These dedicated professionals handle all public emergencies for cities, counties, and regions, acting as the lifeline for those in crisis. Whether it’s a robbery in progress, a serious car crash, or a fire consuming a building, the stakes are high and every second counts.

When a call comes in, it’s not just about answering; it’s about swiftly evaluating the situation. Dispatchers must exercise sound judgment under pressure, quickly gathering critical information and relaying it to police, fire, and EMS units. It’s a high-stress environment where dispatchers juggle multiple calls, prioritize emergencies, and coordinate multiple agencies—all while maintaining a calm demeanor that can help reassure terrified callers.

The diversity of calls is astounding. From major crimes to natural disasters, 911 dispatchers deal with it all. They have access to an extensive range of resources, from GPS tracking systems to information about

available personnel in the area. It’s their responsibility to ensure that help is dispatched accurately and promptly—a task that could mean the difference between life and death.

Consider the case of a woman in a car crash who dials 911. As the dispatcher speaks to her, assessing her injuries and position, he simultaneously dispatches an ambulance and police unit, ensuring that their arrival is as quick as possible. This orchestration of chaos requires rapid thinking, composure, and a deep understanding of public safety protocols.

Now, let’s shift gears to the university dispatch system. Picture a vibrant college campus alive with students, bustling with activity, and full of unique challenges. Here, dispatchers play a vital role, managing both emergencies and non-emergencies within the university setting. Though the pace may not always match that of a 911 center, the situations they encounter can be just as critical.

University dispatchers act as the guardians of campus safety. Their responsibilities range from responding to fire alarms and wellness checks to handling disturbances that arise from late-night social gatherings. They focus on fostering a safe environment for students, faculty, and staff, which requires an intimate knowledge of the campus layout and a keen understanding of the university community’s dynamics.

Imagine a late-night party where someone suddenly feels unwell. A student calls campus dispatch, and within moments, they have dispatched community service officers to provide assistance. Unlike their 911

counterparts, university dispatchers often work to de-escalate tense situations, providing assistance not just as responders but as trusted resources for students navigating emotional or physical crises.

While the pace can be slower, university dispatchers must be just as prepared for unexpected dramas, from dealing with intoxications to addressing serious threats like active shooters. This means developing rapport with students and understanding the campus’s unique culture, allowing them to respond to situations effectively and compassionately.

The environments of 911 dispatch and university dispatch vary significantly, each possessing its own unique pressures and challenges. In 911 dispatch, the atmosphere is filled with urgency; the stakes are high, and lives are on the line. The sound of ringing phones and incoming calls can create an almost frenetic energy, demanding laser-like focus and rapid responses.

University dispatch, in contrast, may enjoy a slightly slower pace during the day. However, as evenings roll in, the atmosphere can quicken, particularly during weekends when students partake in social events. This shift can lead to a surge in calls that require immediate attention, packing a different kind of intensity into dispatch operations. Moreover, the resource utilization differs dramatically between the two. 911 dispatchers have access to city-wide emergency services and extensive technology, including real-time tracking systems that help deputies navigate to scenes quickly. On the other hand, university dispatchers tend to operate with campus-specific resources—monitoring equipment like fire alarms and security cameras, which allows them to manage campus safety effectively.

Despite the technological advances in dispatch systems, at the heart of both 911 and university dispatch lies an irreplaceable human element. Dispatchers in both settings must possess remarkable emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience. Their compassionate voices can provide a lifeline for people in distress, often representing calm in the storm of

a crisis. For instance, imagine a frightened student calling campus dispatch late at night feeling lost and unsafe. The dispatcher’s ability to listen, reassure, and provide clear directions can transform a paralyzing experience into a manageable situation. Similarly, a 911 dispatcher’s steady presence can soothe a terrified caller during a life-threatening emergency, reinforcing the importance of their roles.

Both 911 dispatch and university dispatch perform vital functions within our communities, each facing unique challenges and responsibilities. While 911 dispatchers tackle a broad range of public emergencies with coordination and urgency, university dispatchers focus on safeguarding the specific needs of campus life, ensuring the environment is secure for all students and staff.

Understanding the complexities and pressures faced by these dispatch professionals invites a newfound appreciation for the behind-the-scenes heroes who work tirelessly to protect us. So, the next time you dial 911 or interact with campus dispatch, remember the dedicated individuals on the other side, ready to spring into action and help in our greatest times of need. Their commitment ensures that help is always just a call away, reminding us that safety and support remain paramount in our communities.

Jeremie Meyer is a 33-year veteran of public safety communications leadership. 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 Communication for Albany, NY, he shares his expertise at conferences, podcasts, and teaching.

# WHAT IF ALARMS ACTUALLY MEANT SOMETHING?

## AVS-01 HAS THE ANSWER.

Burglar alarm calls can be a valuable training tool for new Telecommunicators. These non-emergency calls offer a low-pressure environment to practice navigating the CAD call entry screen. But for seasoned call-takers, especially during peak call volume, they often become a frustrating drain on time and resources.

Recognizing this inefficiency, APCO and the alarm industry introduced the ASAP (Automated Secure Alarm Protocol) program over a decade ago. ASAP automates the processing of alarm calls, significantly reducing the time Telecommunicators spend on the phone—saving hours each month.

But the problem extends beyond the Emergency Communications Center (ECC). Data shows that over 95% of alarm calls dispatched to law enforcement are false alarms. This not only wastes ECC resources but also diverts officers from legitimate emergencies. It’s a missed opportunity, considering alarms could serve as a powerful “force multiplier” for law enforcement—if only they were more reliable.

When I began as a 911 call-taker thirty years ago, the situation was much the same. Despite advances in technology, alarm reliability remained stagnant. Fortunately, that’s beginning to change. ECCs and law enforcement agencies now have access to tools that can dramatically improve alarm-response effectiveness.

One such tool is the Alarm Validation Scoring standard, AVS-01, released in 2024. This standard has the potential to flip the false alarm statistic on its head. With AVS-01, alarms validated by monitoring centers have a 95% or greater likelihood of indicating a genuine threat to life or property. While not all monitoring centers have adopted AVS-01, many of the largest ones have. If you’ve taken alarm calls recently, you may have noticed operators referencing an alarm “threat level”—that’s AVS-01 in action.

What Is AVS-01?

AVS-01 standardizes the information that alarm monitoring centers provide to ECCs. Its core innovation is a scoring system that assigns a threat level from 0 to 4 based on available evidence of a threat or crime in progress:

- Level 0: No threat; alarm canceled; no request for police response.
- Level 1: Unverified; police response requested with minimal or no supporting information.
- Level 2: Police response requested with confirmed or highly-probable human presence of unknown intent.
- Level 3: Police response requested with confirmed threat to property.
- Level 4: Police response requested with confirmed threat to life.

This uniform classification enables ECCs to assess and prioritize alarm calls more effectively. Instead of treating all alarms as equal, dispatchers can now make informed decisions based on the validated threat level. This not only improves officer safety but also enhances strategic deployment of resources.

When ECCs incorporate AVS-01 threat levels into their dispatch protocols, it encourages monitoring centers—and alarm customers—to upgrade their systems to support alarm validation. The result is a more intelligent, responsive, and efficient public safety ecosystem.

Q: Should we update our policies and procedures?

A: While dispatch protocols vary across jurisdictions, a strong starting point is to ensure alarm threat levels are accurately captured within the incident record. For example, in addition to standard commercial and residential burglary alarm types, we’ve added Alarm Level 1 through 4 for each category. This helps responders build familiarity and trust with the new

classification and opens the door for tailored response strategies.

For instance, receiving a Level 3 or 4 alarm might trigger deployment of specialized resources such as K-9 units, aviation support, or even a Drone as First Responder (DFR) program. These enhancements can significantly improve situational awareness and response outcomes. It can help catch more bad guys!

It’s important to note that Level 1 and Level 2 alarms still represent the majority of calls received today. Level 3 and Level 4 alarms are rare—preliminary data from one major monitoring center shows that fewer than 0.5% of alarms nationwide fall into these higher threat categories.

Q: Where can I learn more about AVS-01 and related standards?

A: Visit [TMA.us](https://TMA.us) and [PPVAR.org](https://PPVAR.org) for resources, including Telecommunicator training and updates on emerging alarm technologies.

Q: You mentioned “tools” in this article—what else is available?

A: In addition to AVS-01, there are several emerging standards and enhancements worth exploring. When you visit [TMA.us](https://TMA.us) and [PPVAR.org](https://PPVAR.org), be sure to check out the upcoming ATN-01 standard. This new protocol will enable monitoring centers to transmit Active Threat Notifications to ECCs in a standardized format. These notifications will cover a growing range of scenarios, including audible or visual firearm detection, school violence activations, and other high-risk incidents identified in recent months.

The ASAP program has also seen recent improvements. A new integration partner now allows agencies without an NLETS account—or those unable to connect directly to their CAD system—to still benefit from ASAP’s automation and efficiency.

Looking ahead, audio and video clips from monitoring centers will soon be available to responders, providing real-time context and enhancing situational awareness. These capabilities are part of the broader migration to Next Generation 911 systems, but the good news is: you don’t have to wait. Agencies can begin adopting these tools now and build a strong foundation for future enhancements.

Bob Finney III, ENP is the Director of Communications Technology for the Collier County Sheriff’s Office. He began his thirty-year, 911 career at SHELCOM on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. A poor CTO program pushed Bob to improve the system, which led to him becoming a volunteer firefighter and EMT. Upon moving to SW Florida, Bob began again under the headset, then becoming a shift supervisor. Bob pushed for the implementation of a consistent and comprehensive training program. He became the first Communications Training Coordinator and later was promoted to Technical Manager and Comm Center Director. Bob now oversees CAD, 911, Radio, and GIS as well as serving as an advocate for Next Generation implementation and Interoperability across systems in the State of Florida.

AVS-01 establishes **standardized** methods for calculating an alarm score that results in a repeatable metric that estimates the validity or potential threat level of an intrusion alarm activation. Turning data points, many of which already exist in the monitoring center, into measurable priority levels makes it possible to create five alarm classification levels that range in urgency from no call for service to a call for service with confirmed threat to life.







The headset is heavy.

Not because of its physical weight, but because of the lives, emotions, and pressures it represents. In the world of emergency communications, the storm is constant: ringing phones, urgent voices, policies and protocols, the unpredictable chaos of human crisis. And behind that headset sits a professional, often tired, sometimes overwhelmed, who must carry it all.

The truth is, the job doesn't demand just technical skills. It demands resilience, purpose, and a culture that doesn't forget the humanity of those answering the call. Yet, all too often, organizational patterns leave people feeling unseen, unsupported, and burned out. This isn't just individual stress, it's something deeper, what experts call organizational trauma: the cumulative toll of broken trust, silence, and unaddressed wounds in the workplace.

So how do we hold steady when the storm rages? How do we, as individuals and organizations, find our ground?

**The 80/20 Rule: Saving Something for Yourself**

Early in my career, I believed that giving 100% of myself to the job was a badge of honor. Long shifts, skipped meals, endless overtime—it felt like proof of dedication. But what I didn't realize was that by giving everything, I was leaving nothing for myself.

That's where the 80/20 rule comes in. Think of your energy and capacity as five glasses: Work, Family, Friends, Growth, and Self. You only have 100% to pour. If you give too much to one, the others run dry. The 80/20 principle reminds us that, no matter how demanding the job is, we must reserve at least 20% for ourselves, to protect our health, identity, and long-term resilience.

My distribution may look like this:

- Work: 40%
- Family: 20%
- Friends: 10%
- Growth: 10%
- Self: 20%

Yours might be different. The point isn't the exact breakdown, it's the discipline of leaving something in your own glass. Because when we drain ourselves completely, we don't just fail ourselves, we fail the people who rely on us. Reserving that 20% isn't selfish. It's survival.

**From Survival to THRIVE**

But surviving isn't enough. The goal is to thrive. That's why I use the THRIVE framework—a set of principles that transforms that 20% reserve into an anchor for growth:

- T – Trust in yourself and your team.
- H – Health & well-being as non-negotiable priorities.
- R – Resilience in the face of challenges.
- I – Intentional leadership that fosters growth.
- V – Vision for the future and the impact you want to make.
- E – Empowerment to take control of your purpose and role.

THRIVE is more than a checklist; it's a mindset. When I began to live these principles, my outlook shifted. I wasn't just reacting to the job; I was actively shaping how I engaged with it. Trust allowed me to lean on my team. Health reminded me to care for my body and mind. Resilience reframed setbacks as growth. Intentional leadership turned mistakes into lessons. Vision gave me a horizon to pursue. Empowerment reminded me that purpose isn't given, it's chosen.

When combined with the 80/20 rule, THRIVE ensures that what we reserve for ourselves isn't wasted. Instead, it becomes fuel for endurance, clarity, and growth.

### **Anchors in the Storm**

And that brings us back to the storm.

The 80/20 rule teaches us to save something for ourselves. THRIVE shows us how to use it wisely. Together, they form what I call an anchor. An anchor is what holds you steady when everything else is pulling you under. For me, THRIVE is one anchor. For others, it may be faith, fitness, creative expression, or family traditions. What matters is not the form it takes, but the grounding it provides.

Without an anchor, we drift. We allow the job to consume every ounce of who we are. With one, we remember that even in the most chaotic moments, we have something solid to hold on to.

### **Finding Your Ground**

The headset will always be heavy. The storms will always come. But resilience doesn't mean pretending the weight isn't real. It means preparing yourself and your organization to withstand it.

That preparation starts with simple but powerful practices:

- Reserving your 20% so you're not running on empty.
- Living THRIVE principles so your reserve becomes strength, not stagnation.
- Holding to your anchor, whatever it may be, so the storm doesn't define you.

The profession of emergency communications is built on answering the call for others. But we can't forget to answer the call for ourselves. The real question is: "What is your anchor, and are you holding on to it?" Because thriving under pressure isn't just about the work we do. It's about the ground we find beneath our feet, the purpose we carry in our hearts, and the anchors that keep us steady in the storm.

Dr. Andre Jones is an international thought leader in emergency communications, organizational psychology, and workforce resilience. He currently serves as Assistant Executive Director & Head of Profession – Emergency Medical Dispatch at Hamad Medical Corporation Ambulance Service in Qatar, where he leads clinical standards, quality improvement, and modernization initiatives across the national dispatch system.

With over 20 years of experience in 9-1-1 and emergency services, Dr. Jones has overseen large-scale technology upgrades, secondary triage innovations, and workforce development strategies that directly impact the well-being of telecommunicators. Academically, he holds a PhD in Public Policy and is currently pursuing a second PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, with research interests focused on leadership, organizational culture, and resilience in high-stress environments.

A frequent APCO, NENA, and IAED speaker, Dr. Jones brings a unique perspective at the intersection of operations and organizational science, helping leaders shape healthier, more resilient ECCs in an era of rapid change.

**The truth is, the job doesn't demand just technical skills. It demands resilience, purpose, and a culture that doesn't forget the humanity of those answering the call.**

# DISPATCHING AT THE END OF THE EARTH

When most people picture Antarctica, they imagine penguins huddled together against icy winds or icebergs breaking free into the sea. Usually hidden from National Geographic is a small collective of people who dare to work in the world's harshest environment to support science. Every year, a brave few trade comfort for ice, drawn to Antarctica in search of adventure and the bond that comes only from surviving together.

For four months I served with the Antarctica Fire Department at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station as a dispatcher. The Amundsen-Scott Station is home to around 160 people in the summer months, when travel is possible, and home to around 40 people in the winter.

### **THE ROAD TO THE ICE**

The journey to the South Pole was just as epic as arriving at the South Pole. Before you ever step onto the ice, you pass through Christchurch, New Zealand, a city that feels like a gentle exhale before

the harsh reality of Antarctica. Known as the "Garden City," Christchurch is lined with tree-shaded streets, blooming parks, and the winding Avon River where you can watch punts (flat-bottomed boats) glide by under willow branches.

It's a city with an old-soul charm, English-style architecture and stone cathedrals, yet it hums with the resilience and creativity born from rebuilding after devastating earthquakes. Pop-up cafés, colorful murals, and a lively arts scene give it an edge of modern vitality against its historic backdrop. For those bound for the South Pole, Christchurch is more than a stopover. It's where you collect your polar gear, grab your last real cup of barista coffee, and make those final phone calls before vanishing into a world with limited connection. The contrast is unforgettable; one day you're walking through rose gardens under the Southern Hemisphere sun, and the next you're stepping off a military transport plane into a place where the sun never sets, and the air itself stings your lungs.



Stepping off the aircraft was surreal. The knife-edge cold hit my face, the air was thin, and every breath came harder at the high elevation. The sun blazed without ever setting, bathing the ice in relentless light that made the landscape look more like another planet than Earth. This only gave life to the many conspiracy theories I had heard about the South Pole; Stories of aliens and giants were showered on me every time I told anyone where I was headed for work. They had such an impact on me that on my first night I laid awake wishing the station would lock its doors as everyone slept, as if a locked door could protect me from the scary things.

Walking toward the station, I noticed the winter-overs waiting; the small collective of 40ish people who dared the long dark winter, eight months of darkness and temperatures that can reach -100 degrees Fahrenheit, making it harder to reach than the emergency space station. Their reward was the Aurora Australis, the Southern Lights, dancing across the endless polar night. Some winter-overs were visibly relieved, eager to hand over their duties after months of isolation. Others were less enthusiastic, already dreading the sudden influx of people who brought noise, disruption, and unrelenting activity to their peaceful lives. For me, though, it was the start of an adventure.

**DISPATCH WITHOUT 911**

This was unlike anything I had ever done. There were no 911 calls, no domestic disputes, no traffic stops. Instead, I tracked C-130 aircraft for the U.S. Air Force as they delivered the supplies that kept the station alive. The cargo flights weren’t just airplanes, they were lifelines. Every pallet of food, offload of fuel, and piece of equipment meant survival for the months ahead. Most everything unloaded off the planes was in the name of science or in the name of survival.

We could have taken 911 calls but since there isn’t any reason to have dispatchers stay the long eight months of winter, emergency response teams were taught to respond to emergencies. Emergency response teams were composed of scientists and support staff who were willing to stay for the winter. The community

is so small all year that you can call medical directly. Every alarm was tied to a specific point in the station, so responders knew exactly where to go. For me, it meant a different kind of dispatching, less about directing units across miles of county roads and more about being the steady voice in the background, offering support, recording details, or making announcements over the intercom.

My focus was “flight following” which was tracking the aircraft and their contents arriving and departing the South Pole. That even included a dozen tourist planes with wealthy patrons willing to pay upwards of \$30,000 to land at the South Pole for a few hours. A few lucky groups could even get a tour of the Amendun-Scott Station.

**LIFE ON THE ICE**

At the Pole, you don’t go home after a shift. You live where you work. For four months straight the station itself was my whole world. Outside was little more than wind and an endless sheet of ice, no penguins, no seals, and certainly no polar bears. Everything I needed was inside.

And inside, life was surprisingly comfortable. There were hot meals in the cafeteria, trivia nights, pickleball tournaments, a craft room, a music room, a sauna, and even multiple movie lounges. Those little escapes mattered. They kept monotony at bay and gave us something to hold onto when isolation pressed in. There were wild nights, too. Impromptu concerts, parties, and laughter echoing through narrow halls. Some of the most fascinating people I’ve ever met were there. Scientists studying the stars, engineers keeping the station alive, adventurers who thrived on extremes.

In that compressed, isolated world, relationships formed quickly. With no distractions from the outside world, human connections happen fast and cut deep. Friendships, romances, and sometimes heartbreak are all magnified by the ice. My own story was no exception. I travelled to the ice with a man who was complicated, quiet, and drawn to solitude. He seemed to fear connection as much as he craved it,

keeping people at a distance, perhaps convinced that closeness only led to pain. At times he reached for me, but his desire for solitude always won, leaving me suspended between companionship and loneliness. I think Antarctica not only brings the most interesting people but also the most damaged. His silence left space in which other bonds began to form. A carpenter stepped into my life. He was steady, kind, and always present. In a place where privacy didn’t exist, even a glance across a crowded room felt charged. Our connection grew in whispers, in laughter tucked into corners, in stolen moments that felt both impossible and inevitable. At the South Pole, there’s nowhere to hide, and yet we tried to carve out a secret in a place where secrets can’t last.

But reality has a way of catching up. The carpenter was bound to a life far from the ice, and the man I had arrived at the South Pole with would always choose his solitude over me. What had burned so brightly in the endless daylight eventually flickered out. Love at the South Pole, I learned, could flare quickly but it melted just as fast. And yet, that keeps no one from trying to find connection in one of the loneliest places on Earth.

Most dispatchers spend their careers tied to a single county, a single community. For a brief window of my life, my “community” was the most isolated outpost on Earth. While I’ve returned to the familiar world of 911 back home, I’ll always carry those four months with me. Still, it wasn’t just romance that defined those months. It was the friendships, the long nights of laughter, the shared exhaustion of isolation, the raw humanness that surfaces when you can’t escape each other, the hope of something more, the rush of doing something so few people will ever experience. For a time, I lived in a completely different world without ever leaving the planet.

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Rebecca Goodspeed is the Barber County, KS, Emergency Communications Director.

For additional information on the Antarctica Fire Department you can visit antarcticfire.org

If you are interested in applying for a position with the department, visit <https://www.pae.com/career> to search for available openings. Once the department has received your application from the Human Resources department, and you meet minimum qualifications, a department representative will contact you. Hard Copy Resumes Are Not Accepted.

**Additional Polar Info**

All contract positions include competitive salary and a comprehensive benefits package.

For the time you are in Antarctica compensation also includes travel to and from the ice, room & board, and you are eligible for a performance-based bonus upon successful completion of your contract.

FYI - Only authorized personnel are allowed on station and you need to remain on station for the duration of your contract except in case of emergency.

Check out the USAP website at <http://www.usap.gov>.

All applicants must be able to provide proof of U.S. citizenship or permanent residency once employment is offered and pass strict physical, dental, and psychological (for winter-over positions) examinations in order to qualify for deployment.

Offers of employment are also contingent upon ability to pass a pre-employment drug screen and background check.

Failure to meet these requirements may result in withdrawal of employment offer or other employment action.

All employees must also comply with applicable safety, environment, health, and waste management policies and procedures.

If you like to live on the edge and are interested in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, go to <https://www.pae.com/career> and apply today.

# NO CALL TRANSFER

## THE POTENTIAL OF INTEROPERABLE CAD DATA

When emergencies occur, the public expects to receive help from emergency services when they answer the call. Unfortunately, there are times when the call is routed to an incorrect PSAP, the caller has travelled away from the location of a situation, or a different agency is required for response, and the caller is transferred. There are also times when the caller is transferred multiple times to reach the correct response agency. The transfer process can cause a delay of 2½-4½ minutes per call. With shared data, what is referred to as “No Call Transfer” is possible. No Call Transfer is when the call taker can electronically transfer information to the correct agency in near real time using an interoperable solution. No-call transfer recovers life-saving minutes for emergencies. For example, the survivability of a cardiac arrest patient decreases by 7-10% per minute without CPR or defibrillation.<sup>i</sup> Should CPR be delayed more than three minutes, the lack of blood flow to the brain can lead to brain injury that gets progressively worse.<sup>ii</sup> In contrast, the early onset of CPR plus defibrillation within 3 – 5 minutes of cardiac arrest can produce survival rates as high as 49 – 75%.<sup>iii</sup>

This delay in transferring callers on E9-1-1 is one of the reasons that the National Association of State 911 Administrators has recommendations for regionalization on their website. “There has been an increase in the regionalization of 911 systems in recent years, driven, in part, by the need to:

- Reduce costs
- Use costly 911 system components more efficiently
- Minimize the number of times a 911 call has to be transferred
- Enhance purchasing power
- Leverage technological advances to improve or expand services to citizens.”<sup>iv</sup>

However, regionalization bears massive implementation costs to replace functioning systems and that may not be the best solution for many organizations. Instead, the center should seek to dismantle the traditional, independent silos of public safety information and enable information sharing among agencies and departments within a region to enhance emergency response for all your citizens. Enable real-time communication with adjacent departments with a single keystroke or automated transfer rules, providing faster, more efficient service to the public. An interoperable CAD data solution must work with all CAD systems involved. It must also integrate calls for service and unit detail to third-party, authorized applications such as maps and vehicle location technologies. You should not need to change CAD systems or use a shared CAD to share data with adjacent jurisdictions; your solution should be CAD vendor-neutral. Data-sharing provides a secure, reliable, and easy-to-use platform for exchanging critical information across platforms and jurisdictions, improving responses to citizens experiencing crises. In the best situations, you use your own CAD and don’t even feel that it is interoperable. It is as if your CAD is connected seamlessly to extend your reach and resources.

Within the U.S., the National 911 Program (Program), housed within the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Office of Emergency Medical Services, conducted a study entitled “Current Status of Computer-Aided Dispatch Interoperability.” In that study, they identified primary issues created due to a lack of data sharing, including:

- 80% of those studied experienced delays in the delivery of emergency services.
- 100% of study participants reported caller frustration from multiple transfers.

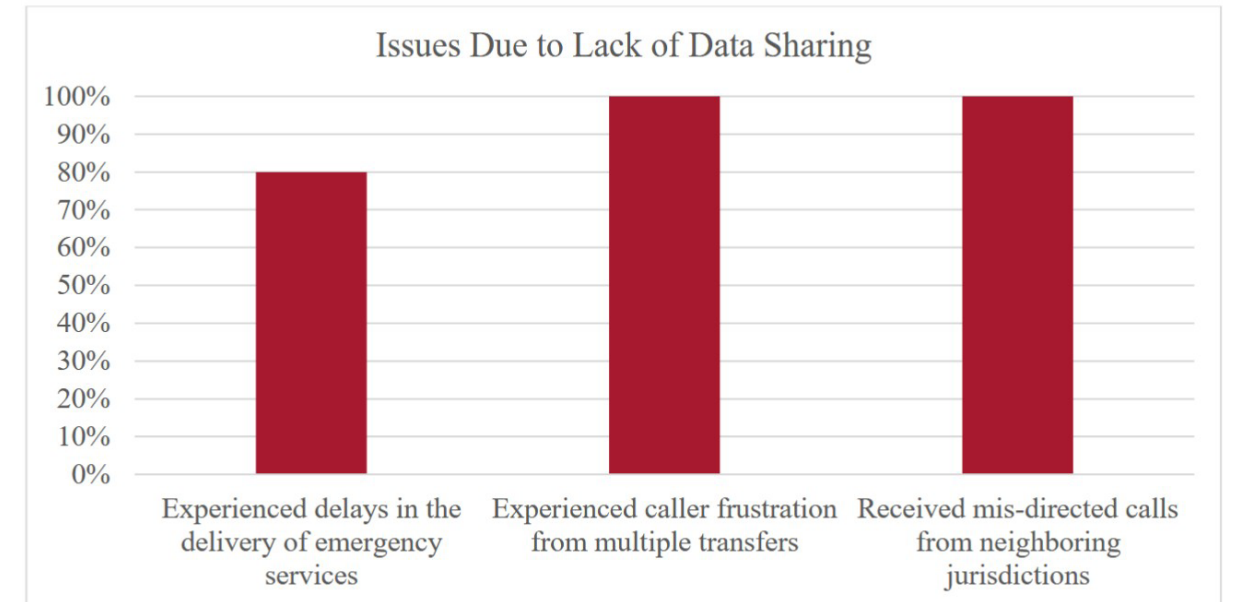


Figure 1: ECC Identified Issues Due to Lack of Data Sharing

- 100% of the agencies studied reported receiving misdirected calls from neighboring jurisdictions. (see Figure 1).<sup>v</sup>

Benefits of CAD Interoperability identified in the report include optimal service levels for their communities and first responders. Some ways in which CAD interoperability would help provide better service levels include:

- Reduced call times for shared calls
- Entering an incident for a neighboring jurisdiction rather than transferring a call saves time in a life-threatening situation
- Improved response times
- Fewer call transfers, which in turn reduces caller frustration
- Improved mutual aid and quicker mutual aid responses
- Enhanced situational awareness from a county or regional perspective versus an agency perspective
- Reduced strain on 911 personnel
- Reduction in errors
- Assists with record requests

An additional benefit of interoperable CAD data is the elimination of the need for radio dispatchers to place traditional telephone calls or use ring-down lines to contact neighboring communities, where they may end up waiting in a queue or on hold. The best benefit is it saves lives and saves property.

When considering interoperable CAD data, many factors should be considered, including:

- Your agency should not need to change radio IDs for response units; the solution should perform translation on the back end.
- The increased availability of emerging technologies requires integrating new technologies into the CAD system. Integration is a true benefit because the last thing your center needs is an additional screen to monitor when their focus should be on their CAD. All the data integrated and delivered into CAD via the interoperable solution can then be copied over to your records management system (RMS), creating a streamlined pathway for data such as artificial intelligence (AI) transcription, AI foreign language translation, and texts or incident-related imagery (including video) received via E9-1-1 calls.



# BE AN ENCOURAGER

## IN THE COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

• Data sharing will also allow references to critical images and videos to be passed through the CAD system to field personnel on mobile data terminals, getting them into the hands of commanders and response personnel on the scene without any additional technologies, apps, or devices.

Interoperable data also enables automatic first response for fire/rescue, reducing response time to citizens’ emergencies. With automatic first response, where the closest available response unit is dispatched regardless of political jurisdiction, an agency can see a significant decrease in response time. Information sharing enhances situational awareness of incidents impacting your neighboring communities, enabling your team to prepare in advance for rapidly unfolding calls for service that require mutual aid. This information can be viewed by your center or by a real-time crime or real-time information center. This enhancement provides a high-level view of all exchange participants’ active incidents, sorted by jurisdiction, in real time as incidents develop and evolve. This overview of all active incidents in a region enables mitigation or supplementation of response efforts and rapid identification of the widespread impact of critical incidents. The situational awareness provided by the command-and-control console enhancement also enables vertical integration among state and Federal agencies.

With shared data, response personnel across all disciplines will have access to the same information in real time, ensuring a streamlined flow of information. This flow of information creates a much safer response for all public safety personnel and enhances community safety. This makes shared data truly a customer-focused service.

Footnotes:

- i <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2600120/>
- ii <https://www.verywellhealth.com/brain-activity-after-cardiac-arrest-1298429#citation-2>
- iii <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2600120/>
- iv <https://www.nasna911.org/911-regionalization>
- v [https://www.911.gov/assets/NHTSA\\_CAD\\_Current\\_Status\\_of\\_CAD\\_Interoperability\\_Final\\_29July2022.pdf](https://www.911.gov/assets/NHTSA_CAD_Current_Status_of_CAD_Interoperability_Final_29July2022.pdf)

Information sharing can connect to small agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as power or gas companies, water departments, tow services, the Department of Transportation, military installations, or other NGOs, allowing them limited access without a full CAD integration. The benefit of connecting to NGOs using CAD-like capabilities and functions similar to those of a CAD system, where support can be requested electronically for large-scale critical incidents.

No Call Transfer is a concept being voluntarily adopted by some jurisdictions and agencies and being lawfully required in others. Recognizing the inefficiencies and downright disadvantages of transferring a live caller around when an incident can already be responded to, minutes ago, is critical. Interoperable CAD data solutions empower agencies to leverage No Call Transfer in addition to the many other benefits gained by implementation of a proper, dependable solution.

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Chris is former IBM Systems Engineer with large-and small-scale integrated systems expertise. He founded EDC because he preferred the dynamic nature of emerging technologies and became a SME in public safety CAD interoperability. Emerging Digital Concepts, is the leader and offers the preeminent solution in the CAD Interoperability space. Chris graduated in engineering from Virginia Tech and currently resides in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area.

### The Tone We Set Behind the Console

Walk into any 911 center, and you can feel the culture long before you understand it. It’s in the way people greet each other at the start of shift. It’s in how they handle mistakes, frustrations, or long nights. It’s in the tone that fills the room between calls. That tone, whether it leans toward sarcasm, silence, or support, shapes how people feel about coming to work every day. It determines whether someone feels safe asking a question, sharing a struggle, or offering an idea.

The call for dispatchers to be encouragers isn’t about being overly positive or ignoring the realities of this profession. It’s about intentionally creating a culture that makes people feel valued, respected, and capable even on the hardest days. Encouragement, when practiced consistently, doesn’t just improve morale; it transforms performance and retention.

We sometimes fall into the trap of thinking our culture is what we write in our policies or the quotes we post on the walls, but how do we speak to each other during stressful moments? Are sarcasm and gossip the norm? Do we joke at someone’s expense or use humor to lift the mood? The words we choose can either build connection or create distance. A culture of encouragement doesn’t demand perfection, but it does require intention.

Another element of creating a more encouraging workplace is reinforcement. What gets noticed and praised in your center? Speed and accuracy matter, of course. But do we also reward kindness, teamwork, and patience? When encouragement becomes part of what we celebrate, not just what we expect, it signals that emotional intelligence and empathy are valued alongside technical skills, as they should be.

### Behavioral Norms and Everyday Influence

Every center has its own rhythm of communication, and this rhythm is made up of the behavioral norms that guide who speaks up and who stays quiet. Is it a center where it’s safe to ask for help? Are mistakes treated as learning opportunities or as reasons for embarrassment? Encouragement also begins with psychological safety. When people know they can express confusion or vulnerability without ridicule, they’re more likely to engage, learn, and stay. Being an encourager might mean speaking up for someone who’s hesitant, or simply saying, “I’ve been there too.” As dispatchers, we rely on each other for more than just coverage. We rely on each other for courage. Every time we model understanding over judgment, we make it safer for someone else to do the same.

### Challenging Old Expectations

For decades, public safety culture has carried the weight of the “tough it out” and “suck it up” mentality. Strength was measured by how much you could endure without breaking, asking for help, or admitting exhaustion, but endurance without empathy leads to burnout. When we approach work with more of an attitude of encouragement, it challenges that mindset by shifting expectations: it’s not weak to seek support and it’s critical to surviving and thriving in life to sustain yourself. Encouragement isn’t the opposite of accountability; it’s the foundation that makes accountability possible.

Supervisors and trainers play a crucial role here. When leaders model kindness, gratitude, and openness, they give permission for others to do the same. A simple “thank you for handling that call” or “I appreciate how you supported your trainee today” costs nothing, but it communicates everything.

The Hidden Culture: What’s Really Valued Here?

As mentioned above, it doesn’t matter what’s written in a manual. Your center culture is based on how people treat each other and what’s valued. It’s important as a team to every so often reflect on the following questions to really get a good view of what your culture is. What’s really valued here? What behavior gets tolerated, even though it shouldn’t? Do we have unsaid rules? What would a new person pick up on their first week here? These questions uncover the truth about what’s reinforced day to day. Maybe the unwritten rule is “don’t show emotion.” Maybe gossip is tolerated because “that’s just how we vent.” Or maybe your center already values encouragement, but it’s not yet consistent. When we know what we’re really teaching through our actions, we can start to align it with what we say we want: teamwork, respect, and resilience.

Encouragement in Action

Encouragement doesn’t always look big or loud. Most of the time, it looks ordinary, but it’s consistent. It’s the senior dispatcher who tells a trainee, “You’re improving every shift.” It’s the coworker who checks in after a hard call instead of pretending nothing happened. It’s the supervisor who celebrates growth, not just perfection and welcomes ideas and feedback from their team. These moments build emotional trust. They remind people that their effort matters, even when results are imperfect. Over time, encouragement shifts the collective mindset from “Don’t mess up” to “Keep learning.”

Why Encouragement Matters More Than Ever

The work of an emergency communications professional is demanding, technically, emotionally, and mentally. Encouragement doesn’t erase the challenges, but it gives us a way to meet them together.

In a profession where exposure to trauma and stress is constant, encouragement serves as a buffer. It reduces isolation, strengthens relationships, and helps people stay connected to the purpose behind

the pressure. It reminds us that we’re not just call-takers or dispatchers, we’re human beings supporting other human beings. When we make encouragement a habit, we create a culture that sustains people, not just systems.

The best part of being an encourager? You don’t have to have a certain title or role to do it. Every interaction in the center contributes to the tone and culture. How are you speaking to your coworkers? Do you praise and reinforce a job well done? How are you responding when someone is struggling? It’s in the small actions, even just taking advantage of opportunity in a shift to encourage someone around you.

Many of us feel that we’re not able to influence our center’s culture, but it’s not a question of “if”, it’s a question of how. And if we each decide to be an encourager, we can build a workplace that reflects the very best of what 911 is meant to be: calm in the chaos, and compassion in the call for not only our callers, but for our team.

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Halcyon Frank is the founder of Under the Headset with Halcyon and Halcyon Consulting Services LLC helping emergency communications centers through training and consulting leveraging over nine years of dedicated service in emergency communications and public safety. She holds a degree in Training and Development, along with being a certified Associate Professional for Talent Development by the Association for Talent Development, underscoring her commitment to excellence in public safety training.

# THE POWER OF CARE:

## HOW A CLEAN CONTROL ROOM ELEVATES MORALE AND WELL-BEING

A 911 control room is the heartbeat of emergency response operations—a place where seconds matter and decisions can save lives. In such a high-stress environment, the physical condition of the workspace plays a critical yet often underestimated role in staff performance, morale, and well-being. A clean, organized control room is not only a matter of professionalism, it’s a foundation for both mental and physical health.

Boosting Morale Through a Positive Environment

Dispatchers spend long hours at their workstations, often under intense pressure. A cluttered or dirty workspace can subtly amplify stress and frustration, while a clean, orderly environment promotes calmness and focus. When employees walk into a spotless, well-maintained control room, it communicates respect and care from leadership. It tells them that their work—and their comfort—matters.

Morale is deeply connected to one’s surroundings. Dusty surfaces, grimy keyboards, and disorganized cables send a message of neglect, which can erode motivation over time. Conversely, a tidy workspace enhances professionalism and pride. Dispatchers who feel comfortable in their environment are more likely to remain engaged, cooperative, and positive



throughout their shifts. Cleanliness also fosters teamwork—no one wants to let down their colleagues by leaving a mess behind. Over time, this collective responsibility strengthens the culture of the entire center.

Supporting Physical Health and Reducing Sick Days

The physical health benefits of a clean control room are equally significant. Dispatchers work in close quarters, sharing phones, headsets, and keyboards. Without proper cleaning, these surfaces can become hotspots for bacteria and viruses, increasing the risk of illness. Regular sanitization of shared equipment and common areas helps prevent the spread of colds, flu, and other infections that could take valuable staff members off the schedule.

Dust accumulation from electronics and HVAC systems can also trigger allergies or respiratory issues, especially for those working 10- or 12-hour shifts. Maintaining clean air vents, wiping down monitors, and vacuuming floors with HEPA filters can drastically improve air quality. Better air quality means fewer headaches, less fatigue, and improved overall concentration—essential qualities for dispatchers who must stay alert and make split-second decisions.





# PROTECTING THE GUARDIAN

PAVING THE WAY FORWARD FOR OUR FIRST RESPONDERS

Protecting the Guardian is a national 501(c)3 non-profit organization, originally created in 2021 to promote and maintain the health and wellness of law enforcement officers through education and training. Since the start of officer wellness in 1975, we have witnessed countless health and wellness programs that come and go over the years. Many started with good intentions but succumbed to lack of funding, lack of succession plans, and changes in leadership. Still other programs lacked the proactive follow-through needed for sustainable wellness and suicide prevention. We realized no one was truly taking the lead in this area.

In February 2021, four individuals – Ron Clark, Mark DiBona, Trease Smock, and Nick Greco, came together to create an organization focused on proactive education and training on stress, trauma, suicide, and the impact of the job, with the goal of empowering officers and their families to succeed in their careers as well as in their personal lives. We formed Protecting the Guardian on three tenets: Pride for self, job, and family, preventing a brother or sister from dying by suicide, and prevailing by succeeding in all aspects of one’s life both personally and professionally. As we began to reach out to agencies across the country, something unexpected happened. Not only were law enforcement officers attending, but they were also inviting their brothers and sisters from fire, EMS, corrections, and dispatch to attend the various trainings we offer, such as one of our most popular - Surviving Life On and Off the Job.

As a first responder, every day you are filling your proverbial bottle with stress, trauma from the job, and unresolved stressors. Your bottle needs a relief

valve to lower and release these stressors. Some positive things you can do include regular exercise--even 15-20 minutes of walking counts, eating healthy, balanced meals, watching your caffeine intake, and cutting down on drinking and smoking. You can also spend quiet time alone, meditate, journal, do some deep breathing or yoga, find something that will recharge your batteries daily, and try to have one focused, connected, and meaningful conversation each day, preferably with your significant other. Many of us leave days off and vacation time unused far too often. We need to truly take vacation time and enjoy our days off rather than working more. You need this time off to help provide the necessary breaks and respite from the job. We all know the job takes an emotional toll, not just on you but also those around you, which is even more reason to use that vacation time to reconnect and refocus on what matters most. Hint: It should be you and your family.

We often ask attendees, who are you? If the first thing they say is a cop, a dispatcher, a paramedic, we ask, why your occupation first? Why not say that you are a father, husband, wife, mother? If your whole identity is your job, how can you truly be off the job? Where do you find happiness, where do you find your center, where do you reconnect with the person you were before you took the oath to serve? Putting one’s job above all else affects healthy relationships with your spouse and loved ones. You need to relate to your family and friends, talk about what is troubling you, and seek professional help when it’s needed, while you are active on the job, not when you retire. The realization that you are more than your occupation may seem simplistic, but it is crucial to surviving a career. Also crucial is recognizing that getting help

## Enhancing Focus and Reducing Cognitive Fatigue

Cleanliness isn’t just about appearance—it directly affects cognitive performance. Clutter and visual distractions can overload the brain’s ability to process information efficiently. In a 911 center, where dispatchers handle multiple screens, radios, and phone lines simultaneously, mental clarity is paramount. A well-organized, clutter-free environment minimizes distractions, allowing dispatchers to focus on what truly matters: the caller in crisis.

## Building a Culture of Care and Professionalism

Finally, maintaining a clean control room reinforces a sense of professionalism and care that extends beyond the individual. It reflects the standards of the organization to visitors, trainees, and partner agencies. When cleanliness becomes a shared priority, it strengthens pride in the job and the workplace itself. That sense of pride often translates into better service, lower turnover, and stronger team cohesion.

In short, a clean 911 control room does more than look good—it sustains the health, morale, and efficiency of the people who keep our communities safe. Investing in cleanliness is investing in dispatchers themselves, ensuring they can perform at their best when every call counts.

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Tanya Lee is the Manager of EvansCare, a Preventative Maintenance and Console Cleaning Service for ALL brands of consoles. She is passionate about creating a clean and healthy work environment for all mission critical environments and ensuring that you are all working in the most optimal work conditions possible. Tanya is proud to work at a company that not only believes in the value of amazing customer service but also taking care of the operators sitting at each and every console we make (while also building a premium product on top of all that!).

### Heroes Aren't Born. They're Made.

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is not a weakness, but a strength that should be embraced. Every year across the country, we lose at least 200 police officers to suicide--a number that sometimes exceeds line-of-duty deaths. The numbers for fire, EMS, and dispatch range from the low-to mid-100s. So many of our brothers and sisters are suffering in silence when they don't need to. Learning how to recognize when others are struggling with depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts by engaging them, building rapport, listening, offering help, and being empathic are the first steps to breaking the silence. This is why we include Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training in all the classes we teach. We want every first responder to be able and confident to have that conversation with their brother or sister who may be contemplating suicide. This is how to break the stigma, mitigate the suicide rate, and promote communication and healing. The goal is to empower first responders and their families to succeed both in their careers and in their personal lives.

Throughout the courses we have taught, such as Creating a True Peer Support Model, our Family support/involvement workshops, and Recruit and Young Officer Wellness Training, Retirement, and beyond, we began to see a pattern. We recognized that while each profession's goals and mission might seem different, the stress, trauma, and wellness needs were not. Whether it is the dispatcher who takes the initial call for service and does not have the benefit of seeing what is happening in the field and may never get closure, the law enforcement officer who is dispatched to the scene of an accident, murder, suicide, or domestic violence call, to the fire and EMS personnel who work to save the life of the individual, they all are affected by the same calls. While we didn't realize it when we initially formed PTG, we quickly saw the need to bring all these individuals together.

At nearly every training workshop, whether we were at departments in Illinois, Wisconsin, Florida, Colorado, Montana, Arizona, Indiana, Pennsylvania,

or Massachusetts, we had multiple first responders attending. What started out as an organization dedicated to law enforcement, soon became an organization dedicated to promoting and maintaining the health and wellness of all first responders who represent the nobility of their respective professions. These first responders are no longer alone, no longer must suffer in silence, and now have an organization willing to chart the way forward for health, wellness, and suicide prevention. Protecting the Guardian views physical and mental health as equally important. You cannot be a physically fit first responder and expect to function daily without addressing your mental health needs as well.

In addition to our highly successful and widely popular trainings, workshops, and seminars across the country, we realized there was a steady cultural shift. Agencies and departments were looking to develop successful peer support programs, expand their outreach to first responders, and create the sustainability of their programs—goals that we had always hoped for. We knew we couldn't do it alone. We knew we needed to continue to grow and expand our reach. This led us to create our Protecting the Guardian Ambassador Program, thereby extending PTG beyond Florida, Connecticut, and Illinois to have representatives in additional states like Massachusetts, Alabama, and Montana, to name a few. Our ambassadors are essential to our continued growth as they help us spread the word about PTG, fundraise, host workshops, and staff exhibit tables. We're continuing to grow and add new Ambassadors who believe in our mission of first responders first.

Protecting the Guardian continues to shine a light on the emotional toll first responders carry and promotes a culture where seeking help is seen as a sign of strength not weakness. As we continue to grow, we are inspiring conversations about trauma, peer support, and wellness within and across agencies and departments.

The heart of what we do is best summed up by retired Sgt. Ron Clark, Vice-President, and Founding Member of Protecting the Guardian. "The nobility of a Guardian lies in their unwavering commitment to serve and protect with compassion and integrity. They embody the highest ideals of duty and honor, prioritizing the well-being of their community above all else. Through empathy and respect, Guardians build trust and forge lasting bonds, demonstrating that true strength comes from fostering peace and understanding."

As we started out as a grassroots organization, we continue to embrace our roots in everything we do, and while we are growing every day, our main mission will always be protecting every first responder's health and wellness.

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Sgt. Ron Clark, RN, MS, APSO (Ret.)  
Sgt. Mark DiBona (Ret.)  
Nick Greco, M.S., BCETS, CATSM, FAAETS

If you're as serious as we are about the health and wellness of our first responders and want to learn more, please reach out to Ron Clark at ronclark@protectingtheguardian.com or Mark DiBona at mark@protectingtheguardian.com

Donations can be sent through PayPal via mark@protectingtheguardian.com Or directly via check to Protecting the Guardian P.O. Box 621678 Oviedo, FL 32762

Sgt. Mark DiBona  
Sgt. Mark DiBona is a retired 33 year Law Enforcement Officer. Currently he is a Co-Founder and President of Protecting The Guardian. During his career, Mark developed PTSD, Depression, Anxiety and had a suicide attempt. Mark is an advocate of mental health wellness and suicide prevention for First Responders.

Ron Clark, RN, MS  
Ron's professional career and personal interests have crossed between fields of law enforcement, nursing, health care, counseling and mental health. A military veteran and retired Connecticut State Police (CSP) Sergeant, he was a former Commanding Officer of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) / Medical unit, Senior Flight Nurse for the Medevac unit, coordinator of the Surgeons and Chaplains programs for the CSP and helped to establish the first Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team in Connecticut, serving as President. Presently, Ron is Vice President and co-founder of Protecting the Guardian. He holds a Masters of Science degree in Counseling / Education, is a retired therapist and has been a licensed Registered Nurse since 1969.

Nick Greco has over 28 years of experience training civilians and first responders on over 900 training programs globally across various topics including mental health disorders, verbal de-escalation techniques, and officer wellness. He is a certified CIT Coordinator with CIT International and co-founder of Protecting the Guardian.







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