THE COMMVERSE

COVER STORY:

VICTIMS OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE
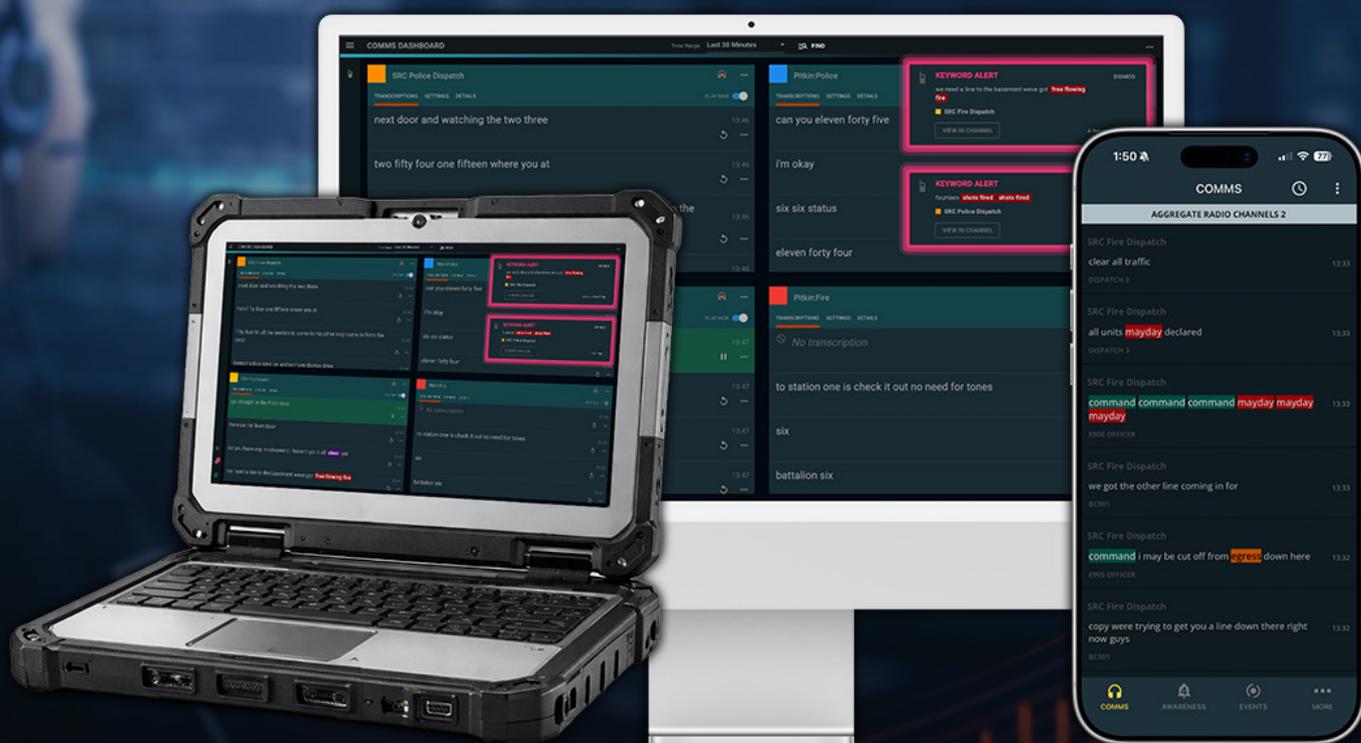
PLUS:

ADDICTED TO CHAOS

THE VOICES WE DON'T HEAR

CORNERSTONES OF GREAT CULTURE

AND MUCH MORE

ELEVATING RADIO INTELLIGENCE
FOR PUBLIC SAFETY

Transforming live radio communications into real-time awareness and insights.
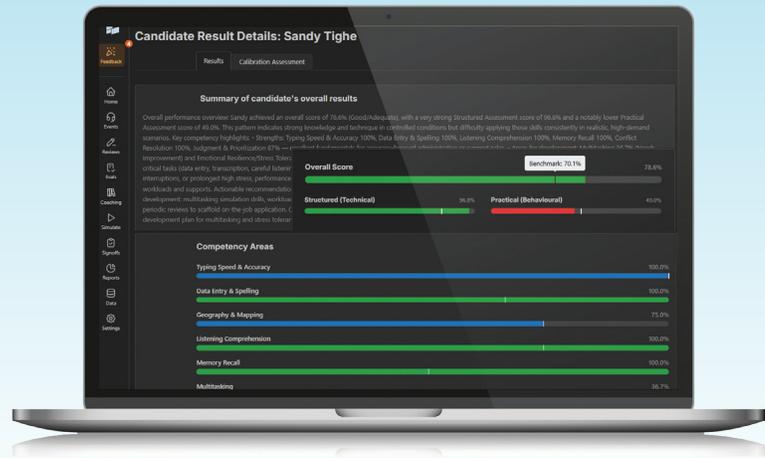
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THE COMMVERSE

ISSUE TWO | MARCH 2026 INCLUDES:

SPOOF, SWAT, REPEAT
HOAX EMERGENCIES TODAY

Jean Marc Bonnel / Pexels

Swatting is the 21st-century version of yelling "FIRE!" in a crowded theater, except now you do it with a phone, point it at an address, and try to summon armed police into a fabricated situation. According to the FBI, swatting is a hoax call to 9-1-1 intended to trigger a major law-enforcement response, often involving tactical teams. The intent is not a prank. The intent is fear, disruption, humiliation, and sometimes a dangerous confrontation that can end with somebody innocent getting hurt or killed. If you are thinking, "No one would actually do that," then; Welcome! You must be new here, or you still believe the internet is mostly used for cat photos and coupon codes.

SWATTING EXPLAINED IN PLAIN ENGLISH

A Swatter fabricates an urgent emergency: an active shooter, a hostage situation, a bomb threat, a murder in progress, or a suicidal person with a firearm. The goal is to force dispatchers and officers to treat the call as urgent, credible, and time-critical. These are scenarios where hesitation gets people hurt, and quick thinking invites mistakes. Swatters make calls appear legitimate by spoofing caller identity or exploiting compromised accounts and devices. Why does this work? Public safety treats threats as credible until proven otherwise. That is not naïveté. That is duty of care.

A SHORT HISTORY OF A LONG PROBLEM

Swatting did not appear out of nowhere. Hoax threats and false reports are older than rotary phones. What changed is the targeting and scale. The FBI was publicly using the term "swatting" as early as 2008 because the tactic had already become a recognizable pattern.

Phase 1: Gamer revenge and livestream chaos.

Swatting was used to punish someone, or win an argument by derailing a streamer live on camera. The social reward was attention and notoriety. The victim's real-world fear was the entertainment value.

Phase 2: Teen intimidation and peer warfare.

Swatting was so effective that it became a blunt instrument for bullying and threats. If you could summon police to someone's home or school, you could terrorize a target without physically showing up. The emotional impact is enormous.

Phase 3: Political intimidation and civic disruption.

Swatting expanded into threats aimed at public officials and political figures, often paired with doxxing and bomb threats. Reports in early 2024 documented a surge of swatting calls targeting public officials and members of Congress, highlighting how quickly it can become a security and governance issue rather than just an internet prank problem.

YES, PEOPLE HAVE DIED

Swatting isn't theoretical. It's resulted in tragedies, including high-profile cases where innocent people were killed after police responded to a hoax report. One of the most-cited examples is the 2017 Wichita case, where an uninvolved resident was fatally shot after a swatting call sent officers to the wrong home. To understand why public safety takes swatting personally, start there. This is the nightmare scenario–a fabricated emergency that produces fatal consequences.

THE MONEY DRAIN IS REAL, TOO

Public Safety leaders will tell you that swatting also wastes resources. It's been estimated that in 2019, more than 1,000 swatting incidents occurred nationwide, costing taxpayers thousands of dollars for each emergency response. That math gets into millions-of- dollars territory overall. You also have the secondary impacts like school lockdowns, business closures, overtime, investigative work, and the soft impact of time and attention lost to real calls.

WHY SWATTING GOT EASIER: THE NETWORK CHANGED

The way our communications networks evolved made certain kinds of long-distance deception simpler. Long ago, it was harder to convincingly reach a remote jurisdiction and pretend you were local. Today, caller identity is easily manipulated, and voice traffic can originate from anywhere in the world. Caller ID spoofing has become commonplace. With legacy 9-1-1, based on caller ID for identity, you can easily see the problem.

THE GLOBAL PROOF POINT: AUSTRALIA TO THE UNITED STATES

This is not a U.S. focused challenge, the problem has gone global. When "anywhere" can sound like "right next door," geography stops being a barrier . . . even from "Down Under."

Just before Christmas, law enforcement in Australia arrested a New South Wales teenager in a Swatting case tied to reporting fake mass shootings at U.S. retail and educational institutions. A joint Australian Federal Police and FBI media release detailed the international cooperation of the agencies, and local reports in Australia indicate the teen is facing twelve counts related to misuse of a telecommunications network with intent to commit a serious offense and one count related to possession of a prohibited firearm. Serious acts? Apparently so, with potential maximum penalties totaling up to seventy-four years.

That story is the exact headline that public safety has been repeating again and again: digital breadcrumbs cross borders. Online anonymity is no longer a viable shield. At best, it's only a temporary illusion that collapses the moment serious investigators

get involved, and the trend line is clear: the more it happens, the better investigators get.

WHAT ENTERPRISES CAN DO

The answer is not exotic. It is preparation, policy, and coordination.

1) Implement internal 9-1-1 awareness and reporting.

If your facility has a security team, a front desk, a safety officer, or an operations center, you should know when a 9-1-1 call originates from your environment. This is already a best practice and aligns with Kari's Law and the Ray Baum Act. If a caller claims to be locked in an office but there is no internal record of an emergency call, that discrepancy can provide useful context when officers arrive. It does not prove a hoax by itself, but it sharpens the picture fast.

2) Treat swatting like a safety scenario, not a social media story.

Fire drills exist because fire is real. Medical response plans exist because people have heart attacks. Swatting deserves a written plan for the same reason: it triggers emergency response activity at your location. Your plan should answer: Who meets responders? Who verifies internal call activity? Who pulls camera views? Who can provide access control details? Who can communicate across the building quickly?

3) Talk to your local police before it happens.

This is the part organizations skip, then regret. Establish a relationship with local law enforcement, share points of contact, and discuss how your team will help validate real emergencies versus likely hoaxes. You are not asking police to ignore calls. You are giving them operational context that can reduce risk.

4) Consider mobile awareness options if you have the scale and need.

Swatting can involve cellular calls too, not just enterprise phones. Some solutions can support geofencing-like awareness around emergency call activity from within a defined area, depending on jurisdiction, carrier, and available integrations. The important point is not the buzzword. The point is awareness and coordination.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Swatting evolved the way internet-enabled crimes usually do: it started as a nuisance, found a social reward loop, got more sophisticated, and scaled globally once communications networks made identity easier to mask.

You can't prevent being targeted. But you can absolutely reduce chaos and risk by planning, implementing internal emergency call awareness, and coordinating with local public safety. Swatting wants confusion. Your job is to replace it with a procedure, because when armed responders arrive at your facility, it's too late to start writing the plan.

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Mark "Fletch" Fletcher, ENP, is the founding principal at Fletch 911, LLC Consulting, and the author of Kari's Law, and the Dispatchable Location Definitions in the RAY BAUMS ACT. He has a popular blog series on Fletch.TV, and hosts the TiPS: Today in Public Safety Podcast at 9-1-1TiPS.com

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ADDICTED TO CHAOS:
CALM, WHAT'S THAT?

In a profession built on urgency, calm can feel suspicious. For many telecommunicators, the moments that feel most natural are the loud ones — overlapping radio traffic, fast CAD entries, that spike of adrenaline when everything is happening at once. Those were always my favorite. Give me a police pursuit with a helicopter request, K9s, multiple units, a perimeter, multiple channels going at once — the more chaos, the better. Exhausting? Yes. But it feels familiar, even comforting. And when the room goes quiet, something feels off. This isn't a character flaw. It's conditioning.

HOW CHAOS BECOMES NORMAL

9-1-1 communications is a high-stakes environment that demands constant vigilance, rapid decision-making, and emotional containment. Over time, the nervous system adapts to this level of intensity. What once felt overwhelming becomes baseline. What once required recovery now barely registers. That's why at home you can do laundry, watch a TV show, work on your laptop or iPad, feed the baby, pet the dog, help your other child with a school project, and make dinner — all at the same time. Catch my drift?

The problem is, the body doesn't distinguish between necessary urgency and habitual activation. When your system is conditioned to operate at full throttle, it can begin to equate stress with effectiveness and calm with complacency. This is what many professionals experience–being "addicted to chaos." Not because they enjoy suffering, but because their nervous system has learned that chaos equals competence.

THE CHAOS SUPERPOWER

If chaos didn't give something back, people wouldn't tolerate it. Telecommunicators develop real superpowers in high-stress environments: fast thinking, emotional control, multitasking, anticipation, and the ability to stay functional when others freeze. These skills save lives. They're earned through experience and pressure. But every superpower has a shadow side. The same traits that make someone exceptional in a crisis can quietly cause problems when there aren't any. Staying hyper-alert during slow periods, creating urgency where none exists struggling to disengage after calls. Irritability, exhaustion, or that uneasy feeling when things are calm. The issue isn't the skill, it's the inability to turn it off, and this isn't a light switch. So, what do we do?

WHY CALM FEELS COMFORTABLE

For professionals accustomed to intensity, calm can feel wrong, even unsafe. When the nervous system adapts to constant stimulation, slowing down can create anxiety instead of relief. Thoughts race. The urge to do something kicks in. Some people over-monitor others, jump into tasks unnecessarily, or create work just to reintroduce movement. That discomfort is often misinterpreted as laziness, lack of motivation, or restlessness. In reality, it's a nervous system that hasn't been taught how to downshift. Calm isn't the absence of readiness, it's controlled readiness.

GROUNDING: WHY IT WORKS

Grounding isn't meditation. It isn't positive thinking. It isn't "calming down."

Grounding is about letting your nervous system know: I am safe. This is not an emergency. Simple grounding practices — feeling your feet on the floor, noticing contact with the chair or console, orienting to the room, or taking a longer exhale — help the body recognize that the threat has passed. When the body settles, the brain can fully re-engage for the next task instead of carrying residual activation forward.

In communications, grounding supports clarity, consistency, and sustainability. It helps telecommunicators respond instead of react.

Let's try it. Look for:

• 5 things you can SEE
  (Screen, keyboard, radio lights, room details)
• 4 things you can FEEL
  (Chair, console, sensory toy, jewelry)
• 3 things you can HEAR
  (Radio traffic, typing, room noise, TV)
• 2 things you can SMELL
  (Coffee, lotion or oil, room scent)
• 1 thing you can TASTE
  (Gum, coffee, water, sour candy)

LEADERS SET THE TONE

Regulation will not dull performance or reduce your edge. In reality, the opposite is true. Regulation does not mean losing your chaos superpower. It means using it intentionally. And this matters beyond the individual. It shapes team culture.

Supervisors who model constant urgency, even unintentionally, can dysregulate an entire room. Conversely, leaders who demonstrate controlled urgency and visible resets create psychological safety and operational steadiness.

SHIFTING THE CULTURE WITHOUT LOSING THE MISSION

When telecommunicators learn to distinguish urgency from noise, they protect their focus. When they learn to ground between calls, they reduce emotional carryover. When agencies prioritize regulation over the glorification of exhaustion, retention improves. The goal isn't to eliminate chaos, it's to stop worshiping it.

A NEW DEFINITION OF PROFESSIONALISM

If calm feels uncomfortable, welcome to the club — you're not alone. It means your nervous system learned how to survive intensity. That's a skill. And here's the good news: if you learned how to survive this career, you can learn this too. You can learn how to ground. You can learn how to be calm in the chaos. And as someone who has lived on both sides — it's nice over here.

You can keep your superpower and be peaceful. True professionalism in communications isn't measured by how long someone can stay activated. It's measured by how well they can recover, recalibrate, and show up again with clarity. Chaos may have built the skill set; regulation is what sustains it. And in a profession that asks so much of its people, sustainability isn't a luxury — it's a responsibility.

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Cassie Sexton, CMCP

Originating from Southern California and now residing in North Carolina, Cassie Sexton possesses an extensive background in Law Enforcement, with the majority of her career dedicated to serving in the 9-1-1 Center. In her current role as Director of Client Relations at 9-1-1 Training Institute, she focuses on proactive wellness initiatives, providing resources, education, and consulting to first responders. She currently serves as the National NENA (National Emergency Numbers Association) Wellness Co-Chair, and as North Carolina NENA's 2nd Vice President.

BACKDRAFT:
A COMMUNICATIONS PERSPECTIVE

As Fire Telecommunicators, what do we know about backdraft at fire scenes or from call-taking? Regardless of which agency you dispatch for, the signs are the same and the dangers are real, maybe even more so for non-fire personnel as they are not expecting it or prepared for it. Let's introduce you to some basic backdraft clues as they pertain to communications. You can and will make a huge difference in responder safety.

When call-taking for a possible structure fire, we don't ask specific backdraft questions. We ask the routine fire protocol questions as set out by our agency. In my experience the caller's information for a backdraft potential is subtle or discrete. If we aren't aware of what the caller is telling us, we probably won't understand or get it. Gone are the days of call-taking where we got the address, callback number and just the basic type of situation, and then let the crews figure it out when they get there. This practice not only is a serious liability for the agency but, more importantly, is a safety issue to the responding units; not just the fire personnel—any personnel.

In a merged (consolidated) call center or one that does call take for police, we may be putting them in harm's way by not recognizing the discrete signs and sending them out to investigate. When dispatching the fire crews, you give the post-dispatch update while they're en route; we don't say it's a backdraft as a statement of fact. We are not on scene to have all the facts so that can't be determined yet, but we can and should be telling the responders what the caller said and the signs they gave. That can only be done if we recognize what the caller is telling us.

Backdraft situations may have been burning for some time and may have started to run out of oxygen. They may not even show any outward signs of fire at all if they are in the interior of a large building complex. If the Red Beast has run out of oxygen, flames may be dying down or gone (orange glow) and may be trying to suck in air through any small opening, giving the appearance of puffs of smoke from eaves, vents or windows—the appearance of breathing.

However, the heat is still extremely high, so if there was anyone inside, they may have already perished due to the smoke, extreme heat, lack of oxygen and the duration of the exposure.

If the caller is reporting lots of flames and heavy black smoke coming out of the roof or windows, that's what we report to the crew. They will probably guess that it's not a backdraft situation—if smoke and flames are coming out, then oxygen can get in.

Backdraft situations are sneaky, discrete and very dangerous because it is not so obvious to the naked eye. However, as Communications Specialists, we can and should pick up the clues and relay them to the responders. During the call-taking phase, the caller may give some subtle clues:

I'm not sure what's going on, but the house next door really looks odd, like it's on fire maybe?

I'm not sure what is going on at the house across the alley, but it has a strange orange glow in the basement windows.

There was black smoke but it's turning into a dense gray-yellow now.

The windows are getting dark like there is smoke inside, but I don't see any flames or fire.

I don't see any smoke or flames, but it seems like the windows and eaves are puffing a tiny amount of light grey smoke every once and a while?

The door is very hot, but I can't see any fire or flames.

It may be as subtle as one of these, a mix of some or all of them. But being introduced to this information now is planting that knowledge base if you ever come across it. Once you've been introduced, you can build upon it. Relaying this information to the responders will certainly help keep them safe and earn some points for dispatch.

For those who look after police officers, protect them even more.

As a fire dispatcher I have a vested interest in their safety by providing them with the best information I can; we are co-workers, they are my friends and family. Think about taking a call where the caller just says that the house across the street looks really strange tonight. All the lights are off except an orange glow in the basement window, or it seems to be puffing light smoke from the kitchen window every once and awhile.

We are not going to understand the clues if we don't ask good questions or only get very limited information. If we dispatch out the closest patrol car to investigate, they arrive on the street side of the house, so they don't see the glow in the basement window or the puffing smoke from the backyard side. They walk up and knock on the front door. Is that enough to change the integrity of the door? Do they see something suspicious and try to gain entry? But if we have to, then we give them every tool, every piece of information and every chance to say, "Back at station" or "Incident cleared."

You have ability to make a huge difference in responder safety and lives. We are more than dispatchers who call-take and dispatch. We are so much more. We are Emergency Communications Specialists.

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Mike Reschny, EFD, EPD, EMD (Retired)

Mike retired after 40 years in Emergency Services, a former Advanced Care Paramedic and EMT instructor. A Fire Telecommunicator for 26 years with the Saskatoon Fire Department. Former APCO Institute Adjunct Instructor.

> A good call is when all the crews come back, a better call is when I didn't send them into harm's way in the first place.

Creator: gorodenkoff | Credit: Getty Images

APPLIED WELLNESS FOR THOSE WHO LEAD

Wellness in policing has moved from theory to practice. A great amount of work has been done for those who spend their lives in service of others, to preserve them during their active duty and after, as they rediscover themselves without the patch or badge. Yet leaders face unanswered questions. What is our role in wellness?

Our goal with this article is to pose scenarios that will spark you as leaders to take tangible steps that support your teams in ways you may not have previously considered as "wellness." We urge you to move beyond viewing wellness as only therapy or exercise (though we support those!) to teaching your team how to actively reduce friction, build their skillsets, model behavior, and create a workplace where people feel good about coming in for their shift and preparing to go home whole.

SETTING THE FOUNDATION

Most teams have an "expectations meeting" at the start of a new rotation. Many professional staff members lack clear direction for internal customer service (colleagues from other units), external customer service (the public or allied agencies), and themselves. Our recommendation is that expectations are clear, communicated, collaborative, and continuous.

What does this mean in practice? When onboarding a new employee, your expectations of them will differ greatly from those of tenured staff. However, expectations for attitude, behavior, and willingness to learn should be consistent for everyone. Reiterate these expectations in person and in writing. Review expectations often and allow them to evolve as a living document. Defining behaviors simply is key. For example, say "In our center, we treat each other with kindness, dignity, and respect." This is clear, concise, and can be repeated without referring to a document. Then hold them accountable to that expectation. We have said before that "accountability means I love you." By this we mean to care enough about your teams and organization by upholding the standards as stated. When team members understand the foundation of their roles within an organization, that is wellness. You are giving them a clearly defined starting point from which they can build.

PROVIDING THE NEXT "CLICK-FORWARD"

Many professional staff start out optimistic. No organization hires someone they describe as "sarcastic and kind of mean." Yet, we often allow negative behavior to develop. In most workplaces, this would be unacceptable. There are online forums and shops that sell swag mocking the mental health of our profession. Why? None of us started this way. Our theory: small jokes to brush off a tough event, a curt radio transmission, or a chronic caller we dread spark a maelstrom in centers. One comment becomes two, then a third person joins in to escalate the jokes, and the cycle continues. How do we stop this from occurring? If we are serious about retention in our centers and keeping our people whole, we need a new path.

Wellness looks like getting your team-members OUT of the center, out of their seats, out of their unit for a balance check. Schedule ride-alongs at least once a year. They don't have to be with a patrol officer. They can be with animal control, a Community Services Officer, or any other mobile unit you have access to. This exposure will help to push "re-set" for your team about how much of a call for service they understand. It is easy to judge how an event is handled when we have access to 20% of the information. It is much harder to condemn what was perceived as a rude radio transmission when you realize the officer was trying to control a rowdy in-custody while relaying information.

The second exposure per year should be internal. Have your team spend time with another unit within your organization. Spending time with your records unit, Real-Time Information Center, or your investigators helps them understand that we are part of a solid continuum, not a universe unto ourselves. If you can also expose them to other facets of local government, do so. Once they understand how their roles fit into the mosaic of local government, performing their daily roles as part of a greater mission will matter more.

Lastly, move your people to action. Help them build relationships with other centers. Encourage your Training Officers to visit a sister agency to compare training program successes and challenges, or your Tactical Dispatch Team to train with allied partners. The relationships formed will help serve the public by improving skillsets and support wellness for the team in ways they may not have expected. In connection comes hope, and in hope comes the ability to continue.

GIVE THEM THE TOOLS THEY NEED

Is there anything more frustrating than trying to log into CAD and discovering your keyboard is dead? Or, worse, CAD is down? Issues like these may seem minor. They happen so often that we are immune to the terror they once caused as new supervisors. Take a moment though to remember what it feels like to be in the hot seat when your equipment isn't working. That's your toolbox, your patrol car, your duty belt, and it just plain doesn't function. Technical issues are

so common in centers that most of us are unfazed by them. But when problems persist unresolved for a long time, people lose faith in leadership. If management does not think it is important to get a working mouse, it must not be important to answer the phone. Wellness is working equipment; it's removing the frustration of not having the tools needed to do the job well. Budgets can slow progress, but that does not mean we should stop explaining what is happening. Be radically transparent. Tell staff exactly where projects are, so they are not left to guess or assume you do not care. Tell them what you are doing to make their workplace right.

Beyond equipment, however, lies the greatest tool of all–the ability to communicate with one another, with our peers, with our field supervisors, and with you. Real conversations and managing conflict are not skills learned by observing. You must wade through them, carve out time to talk openly about conflict resolution. If you don't have an open-door policy, create office hours for team members to come talk without making an appointment or going through the chain to reach you. Teach them how to communicate, and the investment will pay dividends in their performance. If we can give them the tools to be honest with each other, to move from transactional relationships to meaningful collaboration, we are much further toward wellness than we were before.

ACCEPT THEM FOR WHO THEY ARE

Wellness comes from being seen, heard, and accepted. While we may not vibe with everyone in the same way, we can find traits to celebrate. It's critical to also know how to recognize team members in a way that resonates. While one dispatcher may enjoy receiving a certificate in front of staff, another may dread such a public display and prefer a private note. Honor that preference when you can and your team will start to feel a sense of belonging.

Development is critical to wellness. Ask your people where they would like to see themselves, both personally and professionally, in the coming years. If there is a way you can support their growth, do so. People who feel that they are in "dead-end" jobs don't tend to thrive or seek improvement. We must show them how to take action to determine their own fate. The inverse of this is also true–it is easy to dismiss someone as either lazy or "less than" if they do not take advantage of the same training, schooling, or path that we did. Wellness is not expecting them to be you.

Keep opening opportunities to your people, but do not judge them if the current chapter of their lives doesn't coincide with what you view as a "use it or lose it" moment. There will be other moments, and you can dedicate yourself to supporting them in the way that they need until they are ready to take them.

MODEL THE WAY

If you are telling your team to take their meal breaks away from the console, but you are currently chowing down on your now-cold breakfast and lunch while reading this article, you are not setting an example for them. Let them see you live what applied wellness can look like.

Easy steps to try could include walking outside instead of sitting in your office for a one-on-one or blocking out time in your calendar to do some deep work while closing your email application. By taking such actions, you show those in your care what wellness can mean for the longevity of those in policing.

APPLIED WELLNESS

Wellness is a combination of physical actions, a philosophy of support, and an understanding that one without the others is not enough. Seek to actively and authentically apply these resources in the service of your team and yourself to carry out the mission.

> Wellness comes from being seen, heard, and accepted.

....

Nikki Bell

With over 20 years as a public safety dispatcher, Nikki Bell transitioned into real-time policing, building a Real-Time Information Center and Drone as First Responder (DFR) program from concept to reality. She brings people together, shares knowledge generously, and approaches public safety challenges with depth, perspective, and relentless dedication.

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Andrea Cortez

Andrea Cortez has been the Real-Time Information Center (RTIC) Manager with the Elk Grove Police Department since 2024. With 19 years of law enforcement experience, she has a proven track record of developing teams and workflows to maximize efficiency. She is driven by her commitment to develop and empower professional staff.

Chela Cottrell

A 20+ year Veteran, Police Services Manager Chela Cottrell currently serves the Emergency Communications Center and Operations Division of the Citrus Heights Police Department. As a recognized dispatch subject matter expert, her work centers on care for the community, collaboration, and diverse perspectives.

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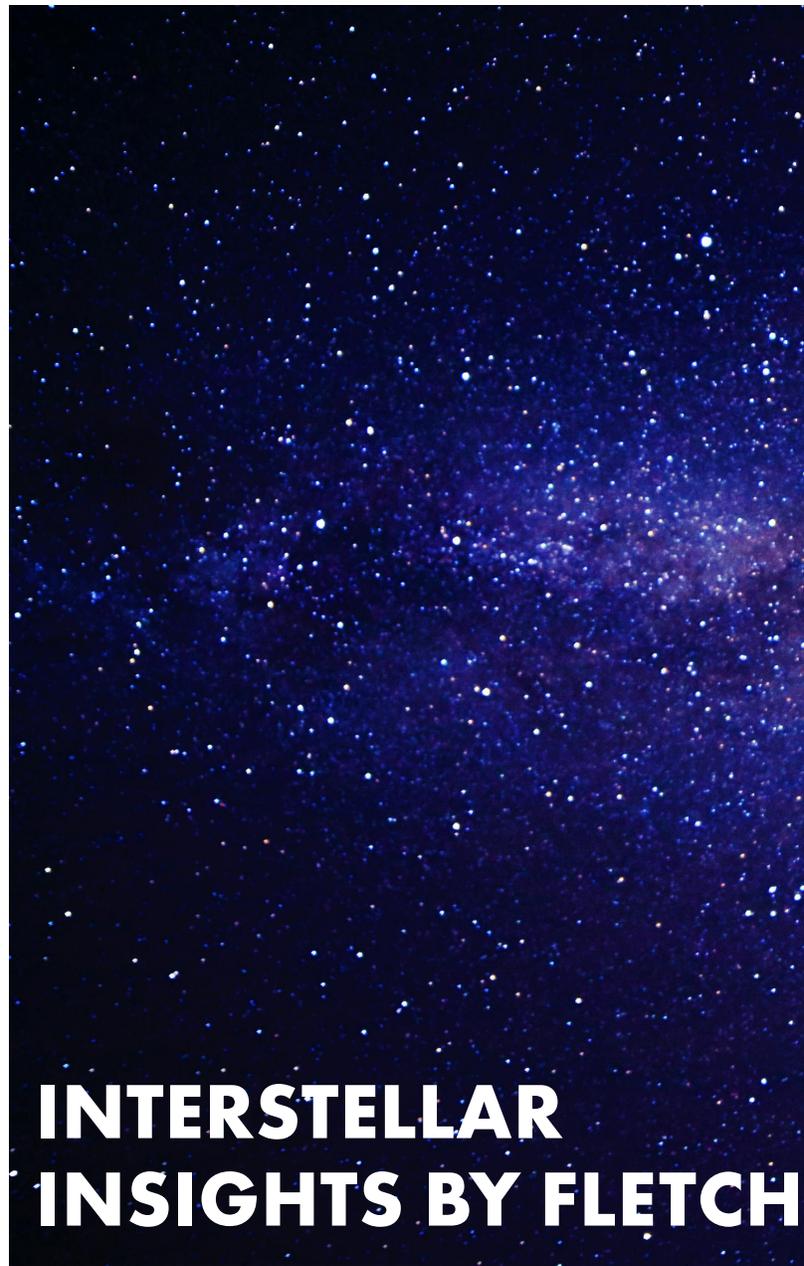
INTERSTELLAR INSIGHTS BY FLETCH

MARK FLETCHER

A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO PUBLIC SAFETY:
TECH NEBULA EXPLAINED

Miriam Espacio / Pexels

In the nebula of next-gen acronyms, only the prepared survive. Welcome Aboard the Starship Public Safety One. If you're reading this, congratulations. You've just been assigned to Engineering. Don't worry, the beeps, blips, and glowing consoles are supposed to make that noise, we think. This quarter, we're entering the Tech Nebula: a dense cloud of emerging technologies, cryptic standards, and the occasional vendor vessel claiming to have "the ultimate solution."

Our mission? To chart it all. One acronym, one alien protocol, and one slightly confusing standards document at a time.

Tech Nebula Explained: "AI Call Triage" — The Ship's Empathy Engine

Remember when call-takers had to rely solely on intuition and caffeine to prioritize emergencies? Those days are fading faster than an old CRT monitor, you could heat a breakfast sandwich on. (Pro tip: Wrap it in foil to keep out the crumbs, and reduce fires.)

AI-powered triage systems are learning to recognize tone, emotion, and context — sometimes even before the human ear can. Think of it as your ship's empathy engine, constantly humming in the background, translating panic into patterns.

When trained right, these systems don't replace dispatchers, they augment them, providing a calm, data-driven co-pilot who can flag stress levels, keyword urgency, and even detect when something doesn't sound right, flagging that visually so you don't miss it.

Of course, every good sci-fi story comes with a twist: the ethics. Do we let the machine "judge" emotion by itself? Who reviews the data? That's where human oversight remains the captain of this ship.

Constellation of Acronyms: NENA i3, EIDO, GIS, SIP, and Other Stellar Bodies

If you've ever tried to map the NG911 universe, you know it's less like a clean schematic and more like trying to read a star chart after three cups of coffee.

Here's the short version for cadets:

NENA i3 — The core star of the system; defines how all next-gen calls traverse the galaxy.

EIDO — Think of it as the cargo manifest, the official packet that logs every event from distress signal to resolution and is able to account for every lost towel.

GIS — The navigation system. Without it, you'd be dispatching rescue pods to the wrong quadrant.

SIP — The language that lets ships talk. It's the Babel Fish of interstellar communications. Not overly elegant, but undeniably reliable — like that old radio in engineering that still works somehow.

Individually, they sparkle. Together, they form the core constellations that make NG911's map possible.

Vendor Encounter Logs: "We Come in Peace…and Subscription Tiers."

Date: 2026-01-29

Galactic Ref: 2026.029

Status: Mostly harmless. For now.

Encountered a new vendor species claiming to solve "all interoperability issues" through proprietary open standards. Crew morale dropped immediately upon approach.

As protocol dictates, we initiated Vendor Encounter Procedure VEP 1-042g:

1. Requested technical documentation and reference planet or galaxy

2. Ship vanished in a puff of NDA smoke; reappeared in a new spot with a new flag

3. Unintelligible transmission decoded by B: "Our cloud is different."

4. Proceeded, cautiously, with evasive maneuvers

Lesson of the mission? Not every shiny ship in the nebula is carrying real innovation. Some just have better paint jobs and softer towels.

Final Transmission

NG911 isn't some distant sci-fi future. It's here, expanding faster than a supernova in a fiber conduit. From AI triage to quantum routing, the Tech Nebula is dense, dazzling, and sometimes dangerous. But with curiosity, skepticism, and a well-charged coffee cup, every dispatcher, engineer, and public-safety explorer can navigate it.

Until next quarter, keep your data packets aligned, your coordinates verified, and remember:

In the nebula of next-gen acronyms, only the prepared survive.

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Mark "Fletch" Fletcher, ENP, is the founding principal at Fletch 9-1-1, LLC Consulting, and the author of Kari's Law, and the Dispatchable Location Definitions in the RAY BAUMS ACT. He has a popular blog series on Fletch.TV, and hosts the TiPS: Today in Public Safety Podcast at 911TiPS.com

CORNERSTONES OF GREAT CULTURE

When I ask in trainings, "What is culture?" by and large, audiences aren't really sure how to answer. More often than not, I'm met by silence and looks of confusion.

I then ask, "Think about U.S. culture. How would you describe it?" Answers are slow in coming, so I continue with: "What things do you think of as being American?" They say the American flag, Statue of Liberty, American Revolution, baseball, apple pie, Fourth of July, freedom, immigrants, multicultural, capitalism, etc. Great, we're off and running.

And when audiences are asked to think about the culture of foreign countries, the categories become clearer: values, language, food and drink, the arts, traditions and rituals, knowledge and stories, and others. These categories help any group—including dispatchers—identify who they are, what they believe, and what behavior is acceptable to that particular group.

When it comes to organizations, there seems to be a unique definition of culture for each person talking about it: "Culture is the group's agreed-upon values, behaviors, and patterns." "Culture is the air you breathe." "Culture is the way things work around here." "Culture is the patterns of behavior exhibited." "Culture is the sum of a group's hopes, preferences, traditions, experiences, and beliefs."

For our purposes, let's go with this: Culture is the group's agreed-upon values, behaviors, and patterns. Culture is both the driver and the outcome of everything that happens in your comm center.

What does this mean? An organization does not simply "create culture" and suddenly all is well. Culture and action are in a symbiotic relationship. There is no great culture without the conscious creation of a roadmap, and there is no creation of the roadmap without correct, conscious, and consistent action. Therefore, great culture is the outcome of the continual dance, on a daily basis, between values and action, in an effort to live according to agreed-upon patterns of behavior.

The real question, ultimately, is, "What things do you think of as being specifically yours as a center?" What is your culture? What is your identity?

As we think about the essence of culture, the point of this article is to discuss some of the cornerstone characteristics of great culture.

Starts at the top. Leaders need to be educated in the ways of culture and culture change. All too often, leaders are bogged down in the critical operational and administrative aspects of the job. But leadership is about shepherding the process of culture building. Without guidance, a center becomes a collection of individuals who may be doing the right thing and may not.

Consciously created. Great culture does not occur accidentally. It is the result of a conscious and well-planned process of defining identity, clarifying values, developing modes of communication, holding each other accountable, and strengthening the tapestry that is the comm center. It is not haphazard or arbitrary. This doesn't mean it's pretty or easy. It's a journey.

Recreated daily. Creating, improving, or changing culture is not a one-and-done undertaking. There is no finish line. Every conversation, process, disciplinary action, and recognition is an opportunity to reinforce the culture, recreating on a daily basis the commitment the team has made to the mission and to each other. Culture is a way of life. It is the air you breathe in your comm center.

Driven by story. Since the dawn of civilization, storytelling has played a central role in transmitting history, ethics, identity, values, and culture through the generations. Story is a central part of learning and even survival. Comm centers must consciously create a story that broadcasts to employees, prospective employees, and the community who they are and what they stand for.

Prevailing patterns. So often, comm center front line supervision, managers, and leaders focus on the behavior of individuals, endlessly disciplining—and often dissatisfied when nothing changes. A more powerful approach is to focus on agreed-upon patterns of behavior, which will have a salutary effect on decision making, communication, and performance.

Conscious communication. The lifeline of comm center relationships is healthy communication among employees. It's essential to consciously decide and articulate on a regular basis acceptable and unacceptable communication, and correct misuse as soon as possible. This will have a major impact on problem-solving and team building.

Transparency. Great cultures are distinguished by leadership and staff that are transparent to the highest degree. Everyone is clear about individual roles and how they impact each other, fundamental budget issues, training issues, the logic behind promotions, and other aspects of center life that can be shared in an appropriate way.

Infused in everything. Your story, identity, and values will be infused in everything you do in the comm center. Job announcement, interview process, onboarding, training, recognition, and on and on. There is a right way to do this—which leads toward great culture—and a wrong way, that results in more of what you don't want.

These are a few of the cornerstone characteristics required for the conscious creation of great culture. In my experience, most dispatchers don't believe they can have a great culture. But it's been done by comm centers across the country. It is possible, but it requires everyone getting onboard and committed to the path.

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

JUST A BILL?

WHY 9-1-1 LEADERS MUST UNDERSTAND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS—BEFORE IT MATTERS MOST

Legislation rarely happens in a vacuum—and it never happens overnight. Over years of working at the intersection of 9-1-1 operations and public policy, I have learned that most legislative outcomes are shaped long before a bill is ever heard in committee. They are influenced by assumptions, informal conversations, and how well—or poorly—decision-makers understand what actually happens inside a 9-1-1 center. Equally important is letting our lawmakers know what does not happen in the 9-1-1 center. In conversations prior to this year's legislative session, I was informed that AI is answering most of the calls going into our centers. (This misconception was cleared up immediately!)

In every state, the future of 9-1-1 is shaped not only by technology, staffing, and operations, but by decisions made in legislative chambers. Funding models, statutory definitions of 9-1-1 services, governance structures, training requirements, and Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1) implementation are all products of the legislative process. Too often, 9-1-1 professionals engage the legislative process only when something goes wrong–when funding is threatened, when a well-intentioned but problematic bill is filed, or when a major initiative is already moving forward without input from those who operate emergency communications systems every day. By that point, our ability to influence outcomes is limited.

For supervisory, educational, and managerial personnel, legislative awareness is not optional. It is a leadership skill—and one that must be developed before it is urgently needed. Every bill begins as an idea, but ideas only become law when a legislator agrees to sponsor them. In many states, including Florida, that process starts months before the
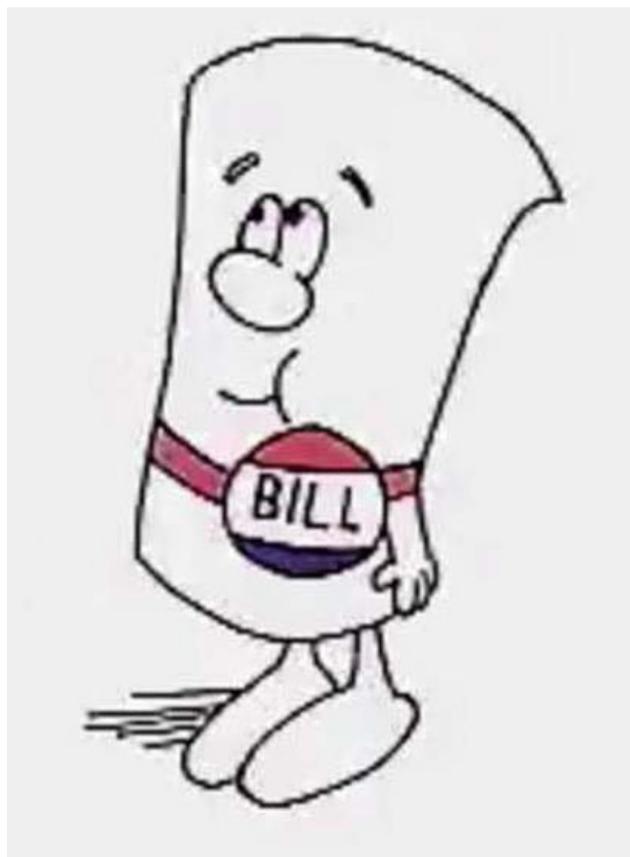
> When we invest in legislative awareness, we move from reacting to legislation to shaping it.

legislative session opens. Draft language is circulated, concepts are refined, and early input—often behind the scenes—shapes what ultimately becomes statute.

This was a lesson learned well during the passage of Alyssa's Law in Florida. After the bill became law, we were informed of the alerting process directly into the 9-1-1 center and the responsibility of County 9-1-1 Coordinators to ensure vendor compliance. This led to technical, operational, funding and oversight questions that had to be addressed after Bill became Law. If 9-1-1 professionals are not involved in the early stages, someone else defines both the problem and the solution. Understanding when bills are drafted, how sponsorship works, and when deadlines occur, allows leaders to engage proactively rather than defensively.

Many assume legislation lives or dies on the chamber floor. In reality, most bills succeed, fail, or change significantly in committee. Committee hearings are where subject-matter expertise matters most. For 9-1-1 leaders, knowing which committees oversee public safety, local government, technology, or appropriations is critical. These are the rooms where operational reality can be introduced before decisions are finalized.

One of the most overlooked audiences in this process is legislative aides. Legislative aides are, in many ways, the dispatchers of the Capitol. They manage information flow, follow strict procedures, prioritize competing demands, and ensure accurate information reaches decision-makers at the right time. These aides often draft bill language, prepare bill analyses, and advise legislators on operational impacts. If they do not understand 9-1-1, that gap will appear in policy. Educating legislative aides early and respectfully can prevent misunderstandings long before they surface publicly. In many cases, aides are the first point of contact and the most consistent voice advising an elected official.

Stakeholder awareness must also extend beyond the legislature. One of the most effective outreach tools we have is simply opening our doors. Inviting legislators and aides to visit a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), observe call handling, and speak with telecommunicators replaces assumptions with understanding. Community events, public safety days, and preparedness fairs offer similar opportunities to tell the 9-1-1 story outside of a crisis.

Grassroots engagement is equally important. Legislative success does not belong solely to managers or association leaders. Telecommunicators, supervisors, and educators sharing consistent, factual messages humanize the profession and reinforce that 9-1-1 is not an abstract system—it is people, training, and critical infrastructure.

As Legislative Committee Chair for Florida NENA, I have worked alongside FL APCO focused on building legislative confidence among our membership through a series called KNOW. SPEAK. INSPIRE. This effort includes regular Zoom meetings with legislative updates, explanations of the process, and practical outreach ideas. The goal is not to turn 9-1-1 professionals into lobbyists, but to help them understand the process, communicate accurately, and inspire informed decision-making. These meetings also include the cautionary message to know your agency's policies and procedures; agencies often have provisions on political activity and representing the agency in the public domain.

When we invest in legislative awareness, we move from reacting to legislation to shaping it. The strongest legislative position is built long before a bill is filed—when decision-makers already know who we are, what we do, and why 9-1-1 matters every single day.

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Dan Koenig serves as President of the Florida 9-1-1 Coordinators' Association. He is a Past President of Florida NENA and serves as the Public Affairs and Legislative Committee Chair. Dan is the Senior Manager for Palm Beach County Public Safety Department 9-1-1 Program Services Division. Dan's career spans over 40 years in all areas of public safety in NJ and FL.

INTRODUCING ICCRA:

It's a common assumption in the 9-1-1 industry that if you have seen one ECC (Emergency Communications Center), you have seen them all. There may be some truth to that statement, especially when considering the technology, operational experiences, and human challenges found in almost every center across the US and beyond.

But did you ever think about the number of places similar to 9-1-1 centers that aren't ECCs in the traditional sense but also very similar? Centers that house people and hold responsibilities for missions that are very close to 9-1-1, but just a little different? These places would be very familiar to anyone who has ever worked under a headset- even if the job they do is just a little different.

Air Traffic Control, Nuclear Power Management, Traffic Management, Utility Operations, Real-Time Crime Centers, Emergency Management- just to name a few- do not answer 9-1-1 calls as their primary or even secondary focus, but are just as important to the safety of a community. They have critical roles that require specialized facilities, technology, and personnel to ensure effectiveness, with zero room for error. Because of that reality, they share many of the same challenges of 9-1-1 but also the same opportunities.

Connecting these "same, same, but different" groups of professionals is the central focus of a unique professional association— ICCRA. The International Critical Control Room alliance was established in the UK in 2017 by founding chair and co-chair Peter Prater and Chris Dreyfus-Gibson to bring together all those who work in Critical Control Rooms, regardless of type or location. ICCRA has devoted its efforts to breaking down the silos that have too often kept these similar groups apart. Because of the historic separation by agency type, the opportunity to share insights, lessons learned, and best practices has too often been missed. This is even more critical in today's data-driven, information-rich world, where video, insights, and actionable intelligence are not found in a single 9-1-1 center but across multiple organizations, each with a role in the incident management process. Those Incidents and events often originate in one Critical Control Room and may be escalated or simultaneously managed by multiple Critical Control Rooms throughout their lifecycle.

Consider a major motor vehicle accident in a highway tunnel. The tunnel may have its own Critical Control Room, either separate from or part of a Traffic Management Center. The local ECC is a critical control room, as is the medical dispatch facility that manages

the response of two medical helicopters. The Air traffic control center that coordinates helicopter paths is a Critical Control Room, as is the operations control room at the hospital that handles helicopter arrivals, ER bed assignments, and requests for additional personnel. One incident- five or more Critical Control Rooms.

Given the reality of how many Critical Control Rooms exist, the importance of an organization bringing them together is clear. ICCRA accomplishes that mission through a variety of programs. The most prominent of which is the ICCRA World Congress. Held annually, this event brings together operational, vendor, and interested Individuals to shape the future for critical control rooms and share best practices, lessons learned, and other insights. It's not just the formal program that is the value of the congress. Connecting people with similar interests and roles often, for the first time, sparks creativity, learning, and fun. For many, the ICCRA World Congress is the highlight of their year.

In addition to the Congress, ICCRA hosts multiple webinars and meetups each year, publishes white papers, and serves as a content provider for other global events that connect in some way to Critical Control Rooms. As ICCRA has grown, the organization has also developed its first two chapters- one covering North America and the other Europe. Additional chapters will be established in other regions as interest grows.

If this sounds like an organization you would like to learn more about or engage with, please visit ICCRA's website- criticalcontrol.org. There you can sign up for the mailing list and learn about events and programs.

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Christopher Blake Carver is a 31-year public safety veteran who has served in agencies ranging from a one seat fire/EMS center to Director of the nation's largest and busiest Fire Department Dispatch Operation—the FDNY. Along the way he has worked for some of the most significant emergency events in recent American History—from Superstorm Sandy in 2012 to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After his time in FDNY, Chris served as Director of PSAP Operations for the National Emergency Number Association, supporting the roll out of NG9-1-1. Following NENA, Chris transitioned to the vendor community, moving to Hexagon SIG. There he serves as Director of Market Development, connecting the needs of the public safety and government industries with technological advancements, marketing, and sales processes.

Today, Chris resides with his husband Jayce in Columbus, Ohio, where he is active in the Broad Street Presbyterian Church and a member of multiple community, professional, and social organizations. Chris has presented at dozens of conferences around the world as a breakout and keynote presenter. His first book, Milestones and Miracles, the incredible odyssey of a fire dispatcher from Ohio to 9/11 and beyond was released in 2025. You can learn more about Christopher at cbcarver.com.

Scenes from ICCRA World Congress 2025 in Madrid.
Photos courtesy of Christopher Carver.

SURVIVAL TO SUSTAINABLE:

ARE WE BUILDING THE JOB FOR THE PEOPLE WE HAVE, OR THE PEOPLE WE WISH WE HAD?

It is just after midnight. The phones have not stopped. A dispatcher leans back in her chair, rubs her eyes, and exhales, not because the shift is over, but because she is trying to find the strength to answer the next call with the same focus, compassion, and clarity as the last. Nothing in the job description ever captured this moment—the quiet weight between calls, the emotional residue that stays long after the headset comes off, the internal conversation that asks, 'How much more can I give tonight?'

Every day, emergency communications professionals step into environments shaped by pressure, complexity, and responsibility that few outside the profession ever fully understand. We talk a lot about staffing, burnout, and retention, but those words often miss the deeper truth: Most of what we are facing is not a people problem; it is a problem of working conditions. The environment in which emergency communications professionals operate has a significant influence on their performance. It shapes culture. It impacts health. It determines whether people stay, grow, or quietly begin planning their exit. And if we want to build sustainable, resilient communication centers, we must be willing to ask an uncomfortable question: Are we designing this job for the people who actually show up, or for an ideal version of the workforce that no longer exists?

THE CONDITIONS WE WORK IN MATTER

Emergency communications has never been simple, but today's environment is uniquely demanding. Staffing shortages stretch already-thin resources. Call complexity continues to increase with every passing year. Public expectations rise while tolerance for mistakes disappears. Technology evolves faster than training programs can keep pace. Meanwhile, the emotional toll of the work does not pause. We often frame these challenges as individual struggles: this person can't cope, that employee lacks resilience, that team needs to try harder. But the truth is far more structural. When conditions remain broken long enough, even the strongest people begin to fracture. Culture, well-being, and retention are not independent issues. They are outcomes of the environment leaders create, intentionally or not.

CULTURE IS NOT WHAT WE SAY— IT IS WHAT WE TOLERATE

Posters on the wall don't build culture. Policies alone don't create safety, and mission statements don't heal exhaustion. Culture is built through lived experience: how schedules are created, how mistakes are addressed, how support is provided, how conflicts are resolved, and how growth is encouraged. When the conditions of work remain rigid, outdated, or indifferent to human limits, culture quietly shifts from purpose to survival. People stop bringing their full selves to work. Disengagement grows. Cynicism creeps in. Turnover follows. People do not leave their jobs. They leave the environment in which they are asked to survive.

"HIRE FOR CULTURE" IS NO LONGER ENOUGH

For years, we have said: hire for culture, train for skill. That principle still matters, but it is incomplete. In 9-1-1, technical skill and IQ are essential, but emotional intelligence (EQ) is just as critical. This profession requires emotional regulation under pressure, empathy without emotional collapse, clear communication in crisis, adaptability when plans fail, and the ability to recover and return to center, repeatedly.

We routinely test candidates on memory, multitasking, geography, and procedural knowledge. Far less attention is paid to whether they can process grief after a child-death call, remain patient with a panicked caller, or manage the accumulation of stress over a ten-hour shift that never seems to slow down. The next generation of dispatchers must be technically capable, emotionally prepared, and cognitively flexible. That balance is what sustains careers.

THE WORKFORCE IS CHANGING— SO MUST THE JOB

We are entering an era in which emergency communications will increasingly incorporate AI-assisted call handling, decision-support technologies, incident-related imagery, and automated workflows that transform the way information is processed. This is not about replacing dispatchers. It is about supporting them better. But the job itself must evolve to match this reality. The future dispatcher will not only answer calls, but will also manage cognitive load, integrate machine support with human judgment, and navigate ethical decision-making in the presence of technology. The job will demand sharper situational awareness, deeper critical thinking, and stronger emotional regulation than ever before. That future cannot be built on yesterday's job design. This is not simply a hiring problem–it is a redesign problem.

FROM SURVIVAL TO SUSTAINABILITY

If we want stronger centers, we must stop asking people to adapt endlessly to broken systems and start fixing the systems themselves. When conditions improve, everything else follows:

• Culture becomes steadier.
• Well-being becomes sustainable.
• Retention becomes possible.
• Performance becomes consistent.

Small leadership shifts can have a profound impact—rethinking schedules and fatigue management, designing workspaces for optimal performance and recovery, normalizing mental health support without stigma, building feedback loops with the floor, and preparing staff for new technologies before they arrive. These are not luxuries–they are infrastructure for resilience.

BUILDING THE JOB FOR THE PEOPLE WHO ARE HERE

The future of emergency communications will not be secured by asking people to work harder inside systems that no longer serve them. It will be built by leaders who recognize that conditions create outcomes, and who are willing to redesign the work to fit the humans who do it. When the conditions change, everything changes. Culture strengthens, well-being stabilizes, retention improves, and the profession becomes sustainable again–not through force, but through intention. The question is no longer whether the work is hard. We already know the answer. The question is whether we are finally ready to build the job for the people who carry it.

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

> Are we designing this job for the people who actually show up, or for an ideal version of the workforce that no longer exists?

Image courtesy of the Gabby Petito Foundation.

"To every dispatcher who answers these calls:
your voice matters."

"Together we can do better. Together we can be
the difference and change the world."

VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

Tanya Lee:

My experience with domestic violence was not just physical—it was psychological as well, and I still hold the deepest scars. Through manipulation, isolation, and fear, abuse slowly eroded my sense of reality and self-worth. I didn't reach out or leave sooner because trauma made me question myself, question my reality, fear retaliation, and believe I was alone. This is why asking "Why didn't they leave?" ignores the invisible damage that keeps victims trapped.

My abuse happened like it does for most, very gradually. Abusers do not just start out with control and manipulation at the beginning. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Our story was one of excitement, romance, and love. This is why abuse is so damaging to those who experience it. It is being done by someone they love and trust the most. It is confusing, and eventually, I began to question my reality, and my brain became confused as to what was real and what wasn't. When your mind has been trained to survive under control and intimidation, silence can feel safer than escape. Victims often don't stay because they want to, but because trauma teaches them to survive quietly.

I began teaching a class about domestic violence after meeting Nathan and realizing the extreme number of calls 9-1-1 faces from domestic violence victims. I tell my story because I want to help 9-1-1 understand what a victim experiences before she even has the courage to reach out for help. Through teaching this class for the Denise Amber Lee Foundation, I have been honored to also collaborate with Jim and Nichole Schmidt of the Gabby Petito Foundation. We have joined together in our cause of domestic violence awareness and understanding. Some of us survive the trauma. What I understand as a survivor is something Gabby's parents have experienced as a life-altering loss.

Petito's Story:

I never imagined I'd be writing something like this. My daughter, Gabby Petito, was vibrant, creative, and full of life. At just 22 years old, she was killed by someone she once loved and trusted–strangled after a relationship marked by escalating control and fear. Her story became a global headline, but the painful truth is that countless similar stories never do. For many victims of domestic violence, the first person they reach out to isn't a friend, family member, or advocate; it's a 9-1-1 dispatcher. Domestic violence is rarely a single, isolated incident. It is a cycle that builds over time. Control, intimidation, jealousy, and emotional abuse often come long before physical violence. Calls may start as verbal disputes or disturbances. Over time, they escalate. What may sound minor in isolation can be life-threatening when viewed as a pattern.
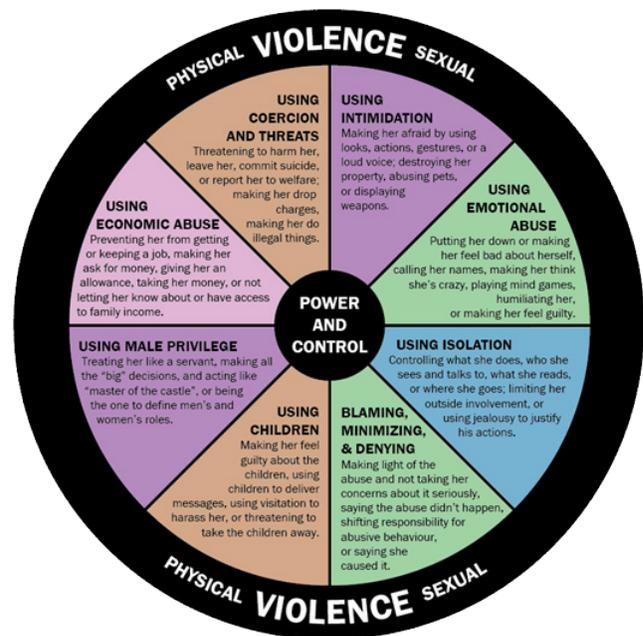
Dispatchers often hear victims minimizing what happened, defending their partners, or hesitating to answer questions. Some sound fearful, confused, or emotionally flat. Others may call repeatedly, then hang up, or struggle to speak freely. These behaviors are not signs of deception; they are survival responses shaped by trauma and fear.

One of the most dangerous points in this cycle is strangulation. Strangulation is frequently misunderstood and underreported, yet it is one of the strongest predictors of homicide in intimate partner violence. Research shows that a victim who has been strangled even once is 750% more likely to be killed by that partner. Victims may have no visible injuries but experience dizziness, confusion, memory gaps, panic, or difficulty speaking, symptoms that can be mistaken for anxiety or noncompliance during a call. This is where 9-1-1 dispatchers play a critical role. Your ability to recognize patterns, remain calm, ask safety-focused questions, and document escalating behavior can directly impact outcomes. Trauma-informed communication, slowing the call down, offering reassurance, and understanding why a victim may struggle to engage, can help keep someone alive long enough to get help.

If someone had recognized the warning signs in Gabby's relationship sooner, if someone had understood what those moments of fear and control meant, things might have turned out differently. That is why I share her story, not just to honor her, but to help prevent another family from living this loss.

To every dispatcher who answers these calls: your voice matters. When you understand the cycle of violence, you don't just respond to emergencies, you help interrupt them. And sometimes, that interruption is the difference between life and death. Together we can do better. Together we can be the difference and change the world.

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

Nichole Schmidt is Gabby Petito's mother. She is also President of the Gabby Petito Foundation and an advocate for change in the world of domestic violence and missing persons. Her mission is to be a voice for victims, survivors, and their families to create meaningful change that can save lives, and help find the missing, in Gabby's memory.

The Gabby Petito Foundation was created to turn tragedy into purpose. They recognized the urgent need for advocacy, awareness, and prevention. The Foundation is committed to supporting missing persons, assisting survivors, and working toward a future free from domestic violence.

gabbypetitofoundation.org

Gabby Petito Alliance:

A partnership to end domestic abuse and help find the missing. "The Gabby Petito Alliance is committed to offering a variety of resources all in one place. Our goal is not to reinvent the wheel. Instead, we focus on enhancing and streamlining access to existing programs, ensuring that individuals and organizations can easily find the resources and support they need. By collaborating with established organizations and experts, we strive to provide comprehensive assistance, including domestic abuse prevention and education, help in finding your loved one, and community educational initiatives. Together, we can

create a stronger network of care and empower those in need to navigate their challenges with confidence and hope."

To learn more, please visit the various avenues of education and advocacy that form the Alliance.

Gabby's Butterflies:

Focuses on creating easy access to domestic violence prevention education.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-butterflies

Gabby's Channels:

A multi-platform initiative dedicated to raising awareness and amplifying the mission of the Alliance. Through multiple media channels, this initiative will engage diverse audiences, delivering impactful messages that educate, inform, and inspire action across all aspects of domestic violence prevention and missing persons resources.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-channels

Gabby's Hive:

A community of partners, educators, service providers, and advocates.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-hive

Gabby's Light:

A blog focused on shining a light on domestic violence through survivor stories, informational articles, and resources for those with missing loved ones, including stories shared by families.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/blog

Gabby's Voice:

A collection of partner-led programs that provide critical information to help people make informed decisions and take action to prevent domestic abuse.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-voice

Gabby's Wings:

Offers a series of programs aimed at preventing domestic abuse and educating communities, youth, professionals, and more.
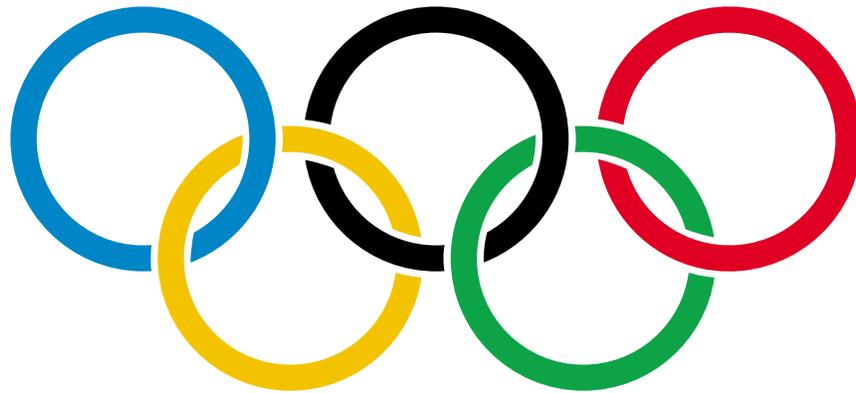
gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-wings

Gabby's Wish:

Provides insightful knowledge and resources to help the families and friends of the missing.

gabbypetitofoundation.org/gabbys-wish

DISPATCHING FOR THE OLYMPICS

LIGHTING THE FIRE WITHIN

In the freezing February air of 2002, the world descended upon Utah. The theme of the XIX Winter Olympic Games was "Light the Fire Within." For the millions watching at home and the thousands in the stands, that fire was a symbol of human resilience and athletic excellence. But for a select group of us working behind the scenes, that fire was something else. It was the professional heat of a high-stakes security operation.

I served as a volunteer public safety dispatcher for the Utah Olympic Public Safety Command (UOPSC). We were the "inner flame" of the security effort—the vital communications core that ensured field responses were manageable, effective, and secure during the first major international event held on U.S. soil after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. This is the story of that service, the brotherhood of the headset, and the technical challenges of securing the world stage.

THE DIGITAL GENESIS:
FROM MYSPACE TO THE MOUNTAINS

Our journey didn't start at a radio console. It started in the early days of social media. In the summer of 2001, long before the ubiquity of modern networking, thirty-five of us connected on MySpace. We were dispatchers from different states, large metropolitan communication centers, and small rural departments. We were strangers, yet we were united by a singular, ambitious goal: to serve at the XIX Winter Olympics.

UOPSC had begun its recruitment more than a year earlier, advertising through an internet website and a booth at the summer 2001 APCO (Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials) conference in Salt Lake City. The stakes were high: out of an estimated 1,200 applicants, only fifty were initially selected. By the time the Games began, thirty-five of us had officially made the cut. We were required to arrange our own travel, but once in Utah, we were integrated into a massive federal and state apparatus. We weren't just "volunteers" in the sense of handing out programs; we were professional telecommunicators tasked with a mission of national security.

THE POST-9/11 LANDSCAPE: A NATION ON EDGE

To understand the weight of our role, one must remember the atmosphere of early 2002. Only five months had passed since the 9/11 attacks. The XIX Winter Olympics were the first large-scale public event held in the US since the fall of the Twin Towers, and every public safety representative knew that the Olympics were a massive, visible target for terrorism.

The federal government had poured millions of dollars into public safety, creating a presence that included

every law enforcement department in the United States Federal Government. Security was heightened to a degree never before seen at an Olympic Games. This included a study in contrasts: a very visible presence of public safety personnel designed to reassure the public, and hidden assets tucked away in every corner of the state. Our main concern was the abundance of soft targets—the venues, the transport hubs, and the spectator areas—where the threat of another attack felt visceral and constant.

STATIONED AT SALT LAKE COMMUNICATIONS WEST

My job was two-fold. I served as the primary liaison between the UOPSC and the volunteer dispatchers, and I was stationed at the Utah Department of Public Safety Salt Lake Communications West in Salt Lake City. This facility served as a nerve center for the high-level coordination required for international security.

While many of my fellow volunteers were assigned to specific venues like Park City or the "Jerry Springer Trailer Trash Village" (the humorous nickname for the RV park in Heber Valley), I was assigned to a specialized role: Dispatcher for the United States State Department assets.

THE TACTICAL REALITY OF STATE DEPARTMENT DISPATCHING

Operating from within the State Department's Command Center, my daily rhythm was defined by high-stakes technical coordination. Unlike routine local dispatching, my headset was a conduit for international diplomacy and high-level security maneuvers. My tasks were divided into three critical areas:

TECHNICAL TROUBLESHOOTING AND INTEROPERABILITY

In 2002, radio interoperability was still a burgeoning field. We dealt with a ragtag concoction of various radio systems. I was tasked with troubleshooting technical issues with field radios, ensuring that the State Department assets never lost their lifeline. This often meant navigating complex trunking systems and federal frequencies that were prone to losing their codes and to poor reception in mountainous terrain.

THE NCIC GATEWAY

I was the primary point for running information through the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) computer system for agents with the State Department. Every asset, every person of interest, and every suspicious vehicle reported by field agents came through my console. In a post-9/11 world, the speed and accuracy of this information were paramount. I had to be the filter through which raw data was transformed into actionable intelligence for the command staff.

THE HUMAN RELAY

I functioned as the voice link between the field assets and the State Department's Command Center staff. Whether it was coordinating the movement of a foreign dignitary or relaying reports of a suspicious package, I was the bridge between the boots on the ground and the decision-makers in the center.

LIFE IN THE COMMAND CENTER: THE "UNIFORM" AND THE BOND

We wore our UOPSC uniforms with immense pride. They consisted of a blue-and-black Marker ski jacket with a UOPSC Communications patch on one sleeve. Following a long-standing tradition in public safety, many of us had our home agency patches sewn onto the other sleeve. This created a visual tapestry of American public safety—patches from Chicago, Nevada, Washington, and Pennsylvania all working in one room.

The camaraderie was the true gold medal of the experience. We were a family for thirty days. We spent our downtime together at the dining halls, explored the shops in Park City, and attended the opening and closing ceremonies. We marveled at the high-tech video surveillance that allowed us to watch Main Street from our consoles. The bond was so strong that we even pooled our money to present a specially-etched vase to our UOPSC representative—a small token of gratitude for the opportunity to serve during such a pivotal moment in history.

MANAGING THE CALLS: FROM MOOSE TO MAIN STREET

The success of the 2002 Games was measured by what didn't happen. Fortunately, the worst-case scenarios—a WMD event or a large-scale attack—were averted. However, the volume of work was relentless. We handled everything from medical emergencies at high altitudes (8,000 feet at some venues) to the constant influx of suspicious package calls.

One of the more memorable customers was a resident moose at the Utah Olympic Park, which was very territorial and frequently set off our trip wires. Despite the humor of a moose intruder, no call was treated as frivolous. Every unattended backpack was a potential threat, every vehicle without proper credentials was a risk. We lived by the philosophy that the backbone of the success of the Olympics started and ended in the Communication Centers.

REFLECTIONS: THE THIN GOLD LINE

When the Olympic flame was finally extinguished, we each left with more than just pins, citation bars, and diplomas. We walked away with the knowledge that we had held the world together for seventeen days in February. In the silence that followed the Games, the Thin Gold Line had proven its worth on the world's biggest stage. We proved that while the athletes were the stars, the safety of the world rested in the hands of the invisible professionals behind the console.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE 2028 SUMMER OLYMPICS (LOS ANGELES)

As the years pass, the torch of service is passed to a new generation. The 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (LA28) will be an event of unprecedented scale. The Thin Gold Line will be needed once again to manage a city of millions and a global audience of billions.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR LA28

Public safety professionals interested in volunteering for LA28 can begin the process now. Unlike the MySpace days of 2001, the recruitment is highly digitized.

Official Registration: You can register your interest at the official LA28 Volunteer Program page.

Timeline: While community volunteer events are currently underway, specific recruitment for professional roles in public safety, security, and communications is expected to ramp up in 2026 and 2027.

Agency Collaboration: Keep a close eye on recruitment bulletins from the LAPD and the LASD, as they will be the primary hubs for security communications.

THE RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINS: THE 2034 WINTER OLYMPICS

In a poetic turn of events, the Winter Games are returning to Utah. The 2034 Winter Olympics will be a homecoming for the spirit of volunteerism that defined the 2002 Games.

HOW TO VOLUNTEER FOR UTAH 2034

While the 2034 Games are still in the planning stages, the recruitment infrastructure is already being built.

Official Information: The portal for the 2034 Games is at slc-ut2034.org. You can sign up for their newsletters to be the first to know when public safety specialist recruitment begins.

The UOPSC Model: It is highly likely that the Utah Department of Public Safety will revive the UOPSC model, seeking experienced dispatchers from across the country to supplement local staff.

Proactive Engagement: Dispatchers interested in 2034 should look into the Utah Olympic Legacy Foundation. They host numerous World Cups and sporting events annually, which serve as the perfect training ground for the high-altitude, high-stakes environment of the Winter Games.

A CALL TO THE NEXT GENERATION

My time at the 2002 Olympics remains the proudest chapter of my professional life. It was an experience that demonstrated the resilience of American public safety in the face of fear. It showed that when we "Light the Fire Within," we do so through a commitment to protection and professionalism.

To the dispatchers of 2028 and 2034: the headset you wear is more than a tool. It is a symbol of stability in a chaotic world. The opportunity to serve at the Olympics is a chance to be the voice that keeps the world safe. The console is waiting. Will you answer the call?

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Jeremie Meyer, RPL, is a 33-year veteran of public safety communications leadership. He contributed to public safety during the Olympic Winter Games and established communications 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.

Photos courtesy of Jeremie Meyer.

FINDING OUR WAY BACK

REDISCOVERING JOY, PURPOSE, AND BALANCE IN 9-1-1

Creator: Jacob Wackerhausen | Credit: Getty Images

There was a time when many of us came into this profession feeling a sense of pride that was hard to explain to anyone outside of it. We felt useful, needed. We knew our voices mattered, even if our faces were unseen. Somewhere along the way, for many of us, that feeling got quieter. It didn't disappear overnight. It faded slowly, one mandatory overtime shift at a time, one hard call we carried home, one policy change that didn't make sense on the floor, one comment of "you're just a dispatcher" that landed harder than it should have.

If you're reading this and thinking, I don't enjoy this job like I used to, you're not broken. You're human. And you're not alone. The question isn't whether this profession has changed, we all know it has. The real question is how we, as frontline 9-1-1 telecommunicators, find our way back to enjoying the work again. How do we move past the constant negativity, contribute to a healthier workplace,

and protect our own mental well-being, without pretending everything is fine when it isn't? For me, the answer started with one simple but uncomfortable realization: I had to stop waiting for the job to make me happy again. I had to take ownership of what I could control.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE WEIGHT WITHOUT LIVING UNDER IT

This job asks a lot of us. We absorb fear, anger, grief, confusion, and chaos, and often back-to-back, shift after shift. We're expected to be calm when others are unraveling, decisive when information is incomplete, and compassionate without becoming emotionally undone. That alone is heavy. What made it heavier for me was pretending it didn't affect me. For a long time, I told myself, This is just part of the job. And yes, exposure to trauma is part of the job, but ignoring its impact doesn't make us stronger. It just makes us quieter about it. I learned that acknowledging the

weight doesn't mean I'm weak or unprofessional. It means I'm aware. Once I allowed myself to say, Some days are genuinely hard, I stopped fighting reality. That acceptance became the first step toward balance.

SEPARATING THE JOB FROM MY IDENTITY

One of the biggest shifts for my mental well-being was learning to separate who I am from what I do. This job is important, but it is not my entire identity. When my whole sense of worth was tied to how well a shift went, a bad call or a rough night felt like a personal failure. I had to remind myself that I can care deeply about my work without letting it define my value as a person. That meant finding things outside the center that had nothing to do with 9-1-1. Not hobbies I planned to start someday, but real things I actually did. Things that reminded me I could be creative, relaxed, or quiet. Things where no one needed me to be the calm one. When the job stopped being my whole world, the hard days didn't follow me home as easily.

REFRAMING HOW I LOOK AT NEGATIVITY

Negativity spreads fast in 9-1-1 centers. It makes sense–it's a pressure-filled environment, and venting is often how people cope. But there's a difference between healthy release and constant reinforcement. I had to get honest with myself about how much I was contributing to that cycle.

I wasn't always the loudest complainer, but I nodded along. I stayed quiet when conversations turned toxic. I let sarcasm become a default language. Over time, I realized that even passive participation was still participation. What worked for me wasn't calling people out or trying to "fix" the culture overnight. It was making small, intentional choices:

- Not piling on when a conversation turned negative.

- Redirecting discussions toward solutions when possible.

- Choosing silence over commentary when nothing productive could come from it.

This didn't make me popular with everyone, but it made my workdays lighter.

FOCUSING ON THE WINS WE RARELY TALK ABOUT

We are excellent at remembering the calls that went wrong. The ones that haunt us. The ones we replay in our heads at 2 a.m. What we rarely do is sit with the calls that went right. For me, learning to enjoy the profession again meant deliberately noticing the moments that mattered:

- The caller who took a breath because I slowed them down.

- The unit that said "good job" before clearing.

- The call where chaos turned into order because I stayed steady.

These moments don't make headlines. They don't always get recognized. But they are quiet proof that what we do matters. I started mentally bookmarking those moments. Sometimes I wrote them down. Not for praise, just as reminders on the days when it felt like nothing I did made a difference.

CONTRIBUTING TO A HEALTHY WORKPLACE STARTS SMALL

A healthy workplace isn't built only by leadership. Culture lives on the floor. It lives in how we treat each other at 3 a.m. when our patience is thin and the caffeine has worn off. I asked myself one question that changed how I showed up: What kind of co-worker would I want to work next to on a hard shift? Then I tried to be that person. That didn't mean being cheerful all the time. It meant being respectful. It meant not snapping when I was overwhelmed. It meant offering help instead of judgment. It meant remembering that everyone is carrying something I can't see. Small things matter more than we realize in this environment: tone, body language, timing. A simple "you good?" can go a long way.

GIVING MYSELF PERMISSION TO SET BOUNDARIES

For a long time, I said yes to everything: extra shifts, extra responsibilities, staying late, filling gaps. I told myself it was dedication. What it actually became was

exhaustion. Enjoying this profession again required learning to set boundaries without guilt.

That meant understanding that rest is not selfish. Saying no doesn't mean I don't care. Protecting my energy allows me to show up better when I am there. I stopped apologizing for needing time off. I stopped explaining myself. I trusted that I knew my limits better than anyone else. That shift alone improved my mental health more than any training or program ever did.

REDEFINING SUCCESS ON MY OWN TERMS

Early in my career, success meant being perfect, never missing a detail, never needing help, never showing doubt. Over time, that definition became impossible to sustain. Now, success looks different. Success is leaving a shift knowing I did the best I could with what I had.

Success is asking for support when I need it. Success is recognizing when I need a break and taking it before burnout makes the decision for me. When I stopped chasing an unrealistic version of excellence, I found more peace in the work.

WHAT WORKS FOR ME MIGHT NOT WORK FOR YOU—AND THAT'S OKAY

One of the most important lessons I've learned is that wellness is personal. What grounds me might not work for the person next to me, and that doesn't make either approach wrong.

For me, what works includes:

- Quiet time after shifts instead of jumping straight into noise.
- Physical movement to release stress.
- Limiting how much I replay calls in my head.
- Being selective about whom I process hard days with.
- Remembering why I chose this profession in the first place.

The key is not copying someone else's routine–it's paying attention to yourself and honoring what you need.

CHOOSING TO STAY ENGAGED, NOT HARDENED

There's a fine line between protecting yourself emotionally and becoming numb. I've seen how easy it is to slide from one into the other. Enjoying this job again meant choosing engagement over detachment. Caring without carrying everything. Staying human in a profession that sometimes rewards emotional armor. That balance takes practice. Some days I got it right. Some days I didn't, and that's okay. But the choices I made helped me stay in a profession I love dearly, and led me to my path today.

COMING BACK TO WHY IT MATTERS

At the end of the day, this job still matters–not because it's heroic or noble, but because it's human. People call us on their worst days. They trust a voice they'll never see. When I reconnect with that purpose, without romanticizing the trauma, I remember why I stayed and fought to survive another day. We don't have to love every shift. We don't have to pretend the system is perfect. But we can choose how we show up, how we care for ourselves, and how we treat each other.

Getting back to enjoying this profession isn't about ignoring the hard parts. It's about learning how to carry them without losing ourselves in the process. And for me, that's been enough to find my way back and continue my path forward.

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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 Marshalltown, Iowa, as Director in 2019. Rhonda holds a Master's in Emergency and Disaster Management and serves as a National Instructor.

AI AS A FRICTION ELIMINATOR

Kevin Ku / Pexels

It's 3:30 AM on a Tuesday. A 9-1-1 call comes in, and the voice on the other end is panicked and speaking a language the call-taker doesn't recognize. The dispatcher reaches for the language line, searches for the access code, mistypes it once under pressure, tries again, and finally gets through—five minutes later. For the person having the worst moment of their life, those five minutes feel like an eternity. We've normalized these friction points because they happen every day, but normalization isn't the same as acceptance.

My path to emergency communications technology came from an unusual combination—a background in fire service and a passion for coding. As a firefighter, I saw first-hand how technology could help or hinder emergency response. As someone who understands how to build software, I know that many of these barriers don't have to exist. That dual perspective taught me something crucial: the best technology doesn't replace human judgment. It eliminates the tedious, time-consuming barriers that get between professionals and the people they're trying to help.

THE HIDDEN COST OF SMALL FRICTION POINTS

At APCO 2025 in Baltimore, I had dozens of conversations about technology adoption in emergency services. When I mentioned that our interpretation service doesn't require access PINs, multiple visitors stopped mid-sentence with recognition. "We always screw those up," several professionals told me, sharing stories of delays during critical calls caused by scrambling to find access codes, and call-handling systems that couldn't process PIN entries properly. One telecommunications supervisor summed it up perfectly, "We've just accepted that language line connections are going to be a hassle. It's part of the job."

But these small friction points, when they occur during emergencies, can have significant consequences. An access PIN takes maybe fifteen seconds to locate and enter—unless you mistype it under stress, then it's thirty seconds. A language line connection averages five to ten minutes for non-English speaking callers. System switching between CAD, mapping, and communication platforms might only take a few clicks, but those clicks add up when you're managing multiple incidents simultaneously. Each barrier adds seconds. Seconds compound into minutes, and in emergency response, minutes can mean the difference between life and death.

WHY THIS MATTERS AT THE CONSOLE

From my fire service experience, I learned that equipment failures during training exercises are inconvenient, but equipment failures during actual calls can be catastrophic. The same principle applies to technology at the communications center. During vendor demonstrations, system integration looks seamless. But at the console, during actual operations, cognitive load matters. Every additional step, every system you must switch between, every code you have to remember, all compete for mental resources that should be focused on the emergency itself.

The people who answer 9-1-1 calls are among the most capable professionals in public safety. They're managing emergency situations, coordinating resources, and making critical decisions—often all at once. They're also doing data entry, remembering access codes, switching between systems, and manually documenting calls for compliance. The latter set of tasks doesn't require a highly trained professional. It requires reliable technology that works consistently, especially when fatigue and stress are high.

AI AS FRICTION ELIMINATOR, NOT JOB REPLACEMENT

In his excellent article in the first issue of The Commverse, Daniel Guttormson from Smart Response Technologies talked about approaching AI with curiosity rather than fear. He's absolutely right. The future of AI in 9-1-1 isn't about replacing dispatchers or call-takers. It's about reinforcing the skill and professionalism that already exist. Consider language interpretation. The traditional process requires recognizing that the caller isn't speaking English, initiating a connection to a language line, entering access credentials, waiting for an interpreter to join, and then managing a three-way conversation. The entire process typically takes five to ten minutes.

AI language detection can identify the language being spoken in under two seconds. Real-time transcription can provide immediate visual confirmation of what's being said. Automatic translation can begin immediately while a human interpreter is being connected if needed. The technology doesn't replace the interpreter—it eliminates the five-minute delay and provides transparency throughout the conversation. This is augmentation, not replacement. The call-taker remains in control. They see the transcriptions, can request clarification, and can seamlessly transition to a human interpreter at any moment with a single button press. The AI handles the tedious, time-consuming elements. The professional handles the judgment calls.

The same principle applies to documentation. Call-takers spend significant time manually entering information for compliance and training purposes. AI can automatically capture conversation highlights, flag location discrepancies, and identify emotional indicators. This doesn't eliminate the call-taker's role—it eliminates the manual data entry that distracts from the actual emergency.

WHAT OPERATORS SHOULD ASK ABOUT AI TOOLS

Not all AI implementations are created equal. When evaluating any AI tool for emergency communications, practitioners should be asking specific questions:

Does it make my job easier or add complexity? Technology should reduce the number of steps, not introduce new ones. If a tool requires extensive training or changes your workflow significantly, question whether it's truly solving a problem.

Can I override it when needed? AI should support decision-making, not dictate it. You should always be able to take manual control when professional judgment says it's necessary.

Does it integrate with my existing systems? The best AI tools work within your current ecosystem rather than requiring you to adopt entirely new platforms.

How transparent is the decision-making? You should be able to see what the AI is doing and why. Black-box systems that make decisions without explanation create liability and erode trust.

Who designed this—practitioners or programmers? Technology designed by people who understand emergency operations looks fundamentally different from technology designed by people who've never experienced the pressure of a real incident.

PARTNERSHIP, NOT REPLACEMENT

The future of emergency communications isn't about replacing the dispatcher. It's about making sure technology supports them when they need it most—when they're tired, when the call is complex, when language barriers exist, when multiple incidents are competing for attention. My background in fire service taught me to trust the people on the front lines—they know what works because they're the ones whose lives depend on it. My background in technology taught me that most barriers people accept as "just how things are" can actually be eliminated with thoughtful design. The best

innovations in our industry have always come from understanding operations, not just understanding code. They come from curiosity, collaboration, and a shared commitment to eliminating barriers that slow down emergency response. That's the approach we need as AI becomes more prevalent in public safety—not fear or blind adoption, but thoughtful evaluation guided by the people whose judgment we trust most: the professionals who answer when someone calls for help.

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Jeff Bruns is CEO and Founder of Convey911, a Baltimore-based emergency communications technology company. With a background in fire service and software development, Jeff founded Convey911 to eliminate language barriers in emergency response through AI-powered translation and unified communications platforms. The company serves nearly 100 PSAPs across North America, processing approximately 50,000 minutes of live interpretation monthly. Jeff believes the best technology makes the operator's job easier, not harder, especially at 3:30 AM.

"The people who answer 9-1-1 calls are among the most capable professionals in public safety."

STEERING THE SHIP OF SS 9-1-1

Image: Adobe Stock

Strangely enough, as professional communicators, the last thing we seem to be able to do is honestly and openly talk to each other. That's a shame, because we have so much good information to share! Whether you come from a big city center or a PSAP on the edge of the wilderness, you've likely had experiences relatable to all, or managed incidents that didn't show up anywhere in SOP manuals. I did a consulting job once where I had the solution to the day shift's biggest problem within 24 hours. Am I a genius? No. Ask anyone who knows me. So, what did I do? I talked to the night shift. They had the "issue" fixed months ago. To them it never was an issue. Be it success or turmoil, somebody else, somewhere else, has survived a similar experience to yours, although albeit at a slightly different level and another group of players. Sometimes, though, the answer rests right within your own center.

When I started this adventure called dispatching more than a half century ago, we looked up registrations in a file cabinet. That data was limited to in county-vehicles only, and came by way of a cardboard tab attached to the ownership files that were provided by the DMV. Out-of-county or out-of-state tags required a manual teletype to the appropriate jurisdiction, which in my case frequently included a bordering state, and guaranteed a two-day response to requests, weekends excluded. Hopefully, it was a slow pursuit.

Our radios were low band, not overly compatible with our hilly terrain, and when the gods were right they provided us with some interesting conversations of southern operations via the phenomenon known as "skip." These exchanges often came in more readable than the squad car down the street, which more than once caused problems.

There were no recording devices. We grumbled about them when they were first proposed, but once they started saving our butts, we welcomed them to the fold. To us, CAD stood for "Copy All Data" because that's what we did with our BIC pens and paper logs and nothing close to a computer. We updated our geo file by drawing a new line on the wall map. Training? You've heard the term "Plug and Play", right? We had "Plug and Pray". Here's the phone, there's the mic.

Pray you don't kill anybody before we get back, OK?

More than a half-century ago in the rear-view, reality was a little different. Once 0230 or so rolled around things quieted down. A call from a cop, open door or a wreck. When the fire phone rings, it's a good one at this time of night! Hope everybody's out. Get ready! Hours of boredom interrupted by minutes of critical chaos. Life ends when the bars close and resurrects when the normal folks head out to work. I once had a partner who habitually ate a cheeseburger and onion rings for breakfast because to him that's what you ate near the end of a shift. I know normal. It ain't us.

Had we known how simple things were back then, we might have charted another course. However, with a phone number that got answered 24 x 7 x 365, we became the community collective for people and government agencies who needed to connect on nights, holidays, and weekends. This almost worked when there were fewer callers and fewer services that were provided. Not anymore. So, how can we deal with the now seemingly perpetual imbalance between work-load and workers?

Would you apply for your current position based upon what you advertise? Does it come even halfway close to what your real job actually is? What would you change or add to your employment ads? Where and how do you recruit? Are you actually targeting the best persons for the job or are you reliant on friends of friends? You quality-control your calls–how about your onboarding process? Is it similarly reviewed? Do you have any current idea about where and how to best reach out to the best people and seamlessly welcome them to the fold, or are you simply throwing bread onto the water and hoping some fish will bite? What tactics actually pay off and which ones are flat-out duds? You have scripts for your call handling–how about for your recruiting? Are you targeting your best prospects based upon your proven successes, or just winging it? Do you have any defendable – and more importantly, usable – analytics that drive your onboarding in a more coherent manner?

In our profession, it seems we are always hiring. Just when you think you are making progress and closing the gap, another batch of vacancies appears. All too often those leaving consist largely of folks whom you just recently acquired. Whether you provide scheduled academies or hire ad hoc is of little import here. And regardless of whether your seat is in the office or at the console, gaps in staffing are not fun. Filling the schedule is a constant headache for administrators, and a pain in the other end for telecommunicators who spend much too much time on the floor and way too little with their families and friends. The current trend is toward providing firefighters a more balanced lifestyle. We're still hoping we have somebody to answer the phone when 9-1-1 rings.

The formal advertising, recruiting, and testing processes all have an impact on successful hiring. While conditions change, many elements that impact recruiting remain largely the same. So how do YOU get people? Better still, how do you KEEP them? Have you considered that dreadful "C word" (consolidation) to potentially pool resources? Do you currently bear any load that you can shed? And what about Artificial Intelligence? What does it mean to you? Why is it more frightening to some than are abandoned calls?

While this job doesn't work the same as it did when I entered the world of public safety, our primary mission remains saving lives and protecting property. Many of the ways we do this and the tools that we use have drastically changed, but this change likely pales in comparison to what lies ahead. So, what will these changes be? Will you be plotting the course or simply bobbing along with the waves? Be it smooth sailing or choppy seas and rocky shores, the helm is now yours. So where are you steering us, captain?

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

D. JEREMY DEMAR

INCIDENT-RELATED IMAGERY:

WHAT IT IS, WHY IT MATTERS, AND HOW IT'S CHANGING 9-1-1

If you've worked a console for any length of time, you've felt the shift: callers don't just want to tell you what's happening anymore, they want to show you. They'll say things like, "I want to send you a video," "I have a picture," or, "Can I FaceTime 9-1-1?" That expectation isn't coming out of nowhere. It's the natural result of how people communicate today. That's where Incident-Related Imagery (IRI) comes in.

WHAT IS INCIDENT-RELATED IMAGERY?

Incident-Related Imagery is a simple term for today's reality: photos, videos, live streams, screenshots, and other visual media connected to an emergency incident that can be shared with 9-1-1. It can come from a caller's smartphone, a bystander's video, a business camera's clip, a doorbell camera, a drone feed, a connected vehicle crash notification, or even an IoT device that captures visuals. In plain language: IRI is "the picture of the incident", and it's increasingly arriving alongside the 9-1-1 call.

WHERE THE TERM COMES FROM (AND WHY IT EXISTS)

The term "Incident-Related Imagery" was shaped through research and professional discussion as our industry began asking a new question: What happens when imagery becomes normal in emergency communications? My in-depth exploration of this subject began during graduate-level research at the Naval Postgraduate School in 2015, where I not only examined the policy implications of visual information arriving at the PSAP, but ultimately coined the term "Incident-Related Imagery" to give our industry a clear, practical label for this emerging reality. The intention wasn't to create a buzzword, but rather to capture the shift as visual media became a routine part of 9-1-1 workflows, bringing genuine operational, legal, and wellness considerations to the forefront. And now, that "coming soon" has turned into "already here."

WHY IRI IS BECOMING UNAVOIDABLE

Your callers are living in an image-first world:

• They document everything on their phones.

• They communicate in pictures and video messages.

• They use apps that let them instantly send media to private companies.

• They have doorbell cameras, baby monitors, and security systems that record 24/7.

• Their vehicles increasingly generate automated crash data, sometimes with supporting information that can include visuals from sensors or cameras depending on the ecosystem.

When they experience an emergency, the thought process is increasingly: "If I can send a photo to my insurance company, my bank, or a delivery driver, why can't I send one to 9-1-1?" It's not just curiosity. It's a belief that imagery will help you help them faster, and often, they're right.

WHAT IRI CAN DO FOR YOU ON THE CONSOLE

Effectively implemented, IRI can improve three things frontline personnel care about every day:

1. Faster, clearer situational awareness

Example: an image of a two-car collision with airbags deployed, a rollover, heavy intrusion, or a visible

hazard can quickly confirm questions you have about the situation or reveal what the caller doesn't know—how to effectively convey.

2. Better decision-making for response

Example: Imagery can help support response selection and staging decisions: number of patients (visible), hazards present (smoke/fire/wires), weapon visibility in some active incidents, or the scale of a scene.

3. Better responder preparation

Example: When responders can see what they're walking into (where policy and systems allow), it can increase safety and improve tactical planning. While your call-taking skills remain essential, IRI empowers you with enhanced situational awareness, providing clear visual information that helps quickly resolve uncertainty, supporting faster, more confident decision-making.

WHERE IRI COMES FROM
(TODAY AND TOMORROW)

Frontline personnel should expect imagery from multiple directions, not just a caller sending a video.

• Smartphone photos/video (caller or bystander)

• Live video calling (where enabled)

• Business/residential security cameras (shared by owners/managers)

• Drones as First Responder (DFR) programs (agency-controlled visuals)

• IoT devices (home cameras, smart devices capturing an incident environment)

• Connected vehicle events (crash-related data that increasingly shapes the initial picture)

The important operational takeaway: IRI isn't one workflow. It's a category of data that will enter your world through many doors.

THE REALITIES AND RISKS
(THE PART WE CAN'T IGNORE)

IRI is powerful, but it's not automatically "good." Bringing imagery into 9-1-1 introduces new pressures and responsibilities.

INCREASED COGNITIVE LOAD

Emergency call-taking is already multitasking under stress: questioning, typing, mapping, EMD/EFD/EPD protocols, radio coordination, unit safety, caller management. Adding video or photos can create attention competition: Do I watch, do I listen, do I type, do I dispatch?

VERIFICATION AND MISINTERPRETATION

A photo doesn't always tell the full story. Context is missing. Old videos get reused. People misunderstand what they're seeing. Imagery can clarify, but it can also confuse if treated as truth without validation.

LEGAL AND RECORDS IMPLICATIONS

Once imagery is received, questions come with it: retention, public records, chain of custody, discovery, redaction, and access controls. Those aren't frontline decisions, but frontline actions (how you handle and describe what you saw) matter.

WELLNESS, SECONDARY STRESS, AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

This is real: imagery can be graphic, sudden, and unfiltered. It can intensify cumulative stress and accelerate burnout if there aren't guardrails, rotation options, or support mechanisms in place.

WHAT FRONTLINE PROFESSIONALS CAN DO NOW

Even if your center isn't fully receiving IRI today, you can prepare in ways that reduce friction later.

1. Learn the language - Start using Incident-Related Imagery as a professional term. It helps frame the topic

in training, SOP updates, and leadership discussions.

2. Ask the right operational questions - When someone says, "I have a video," you can begin shaping expectations safely:

• "Is it safe for you to take that video?"

• "Tell me what you're seeing right now."

• "Stay focused on your safety and the immediate situation."

Even before technology is in place, these questions reinforce safety and maintain voice-first control.

3. Document what matters - If imagery is involved, your notes should reflect what is operationally relevant, not editorial:

• "Caller provided photo showing smoke from engine compartment" (objective)

• Avoid assumptions: "Vehicle is on fire" unless clearly confirmed by multiple indicators

4. Advocate upward - Frontline voices matter. If leadership is evaluating IRI tools, your input should shape:

• When and who views imagery

• How it's prioritized during peak workload

• How it's stored and accessed

• What wellness protections exist

5. Treat IRI as a tool, not a replacement. Your questioning, control of the call, and ability to calm and direct a caller will still be the backbone. Imagery should support your skills, not undermine them.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Incident-Related Imagery is not a futuristic concept anymore. It's the next natural step in how the public expects to communicate with 9-1-1, because it's already how they communicate everywhere else.

Community demand, device capability, and the broader shift toward data-rich emergency response are pushing IRI into the mainstream.

For frontline telecommunicators and dispatchers, the message isn't "get ready to become a video analyst." It's this: IRI is another form of incident information, and you deserve the training, policy, and support to integrate it without increasing risk to your workload, your cases, or your wellness. The future of 9-1-1 isn't voice-only. It's voice plus data plus imagery. And the professionals at the center of that evolution are the same ones who have always carried this job forward: the people on the console.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

My Masters Thesis, "Next Generation 9-1-1: Policy Implications of Incident Related Imagery on the Public Safety Answering Point" is available on the Homeland Security Digital Library or by visiting www.incidentrelatedimagery.com

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D. Jeremy DeMar, MA, CPE, ENP, is a thought leader and subject matter expert with more than 30 years in public safety, the last 20+ of which being in emergency communications. A former dispatcher and PSAP director, he now focuses on emerging and disruptive technologies impacting the 9-1-1 space, like Next Generation 9-1-1, Artificial Intelligence, Incident-Related Imagery, and Connected Vehicle/V2X integration. Jeremy has presented these topics at state, regional, and national conferences with an emphasis on advancing emergency communications policy, standards, and training for the betterment of the 9-1-1 profession. He serves as the Senior Manager of Government and Regulatory Affairs for Intrado.

WHY WE LOVE TRUE CRIME

Our lurid fascination with true crime is nothing new. Throughout history, there have been news articles and pamphlets released about the most heinous events, such as the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts, USA. The community boiled over with hysteria in the face of fear. That hysteria took hold and continued with the sensationalizing of the alleged crimes, and information on the supposed witches, which was shared in community pamphlets along with public trials and executions. During the time of Jack the Ripper in London, UK, not only was fear created by newspaper reports of the crimes, but it was further heightened by letters to the newspaper, allegedly written by Jack the Ripper himself. In the 1930s, the true crime genre in publishing became popular, and this fascination has endured to the present day.

The true crime genre has evolved from a specialized market to a widespread obsession. Over 50% of Americans consume true crime in some form, with women making up the highest percentage. Turn to any streaming service, podcast, or social media platform, and you will undoubtedly see various sources of true crime stories and crime drama. True crime is the most common topic among top-ranked podcasts (Nasser & Aubin, 2023). The more unnerving, psychologically fascinating, and bizarre a story is, the more followers crave additional information. The cases contain all the basics of great storytelling – interesting characters, a sense of urgency, and heightened tension that resolves at the conclusion.

What's driving this obsession? Examining the psychology behind the true crime phenomenon reveals five core psychological reasons for the fascination.

A STRANGE CURIOSITY

People are inherently inquisitive about predators, just as cavemen knew spotting a predator was essential for survival, the same is true for the modern person. There is an innate curiosity to glimpse the darkest parts of the human psyche, a fascination with that which is taboo in proper society, all in an endless quest to understand evil. People want to know what happens when an offender crosses the moral or ethical boundaries into deviant behavior. There is a fascination in understanding the complexities of offenders and the potential for cruelty. Followers of true crime also develop true empathy and an intense emotional connection to the victim(s), who can no longer speak for themselves.

According to neurologists, this human curiosity comes from the amygdala, the brain's fear-processing hub that evolved to keep us alive by fixating on threats, understanding the darkest parts of human nature, and being intensely fascinated by what is taboo.

A NEED FOR JUSTICE

Curiosity also brings forth our second psychological element, drawing people to true crime - the need to determine if justice was served, and if not, who failed whom? We have a craving to make sense of everything. The darker the crime, the more powerless the public feels, the more they seek to know that the perpetrators face punishment. Followers of true crime need to feel a sense of moral order as they peer into the realm of evil. The overarching themes of guilt, innocence, justice, and punishment resonate deeply, almost on a primal level, with the individual. The true crime follower may also benefit from reaffirming their personal values and moral compass.

A LOVE OF PROBLEM SOLVING

It is a well-known fact that human beings learn best when solving problems. Solving puzzles, like deconstructing a mystery, challenges the brain. People love trying to figure out patterns, behaviors, and analyzing why something happened. For that reason,
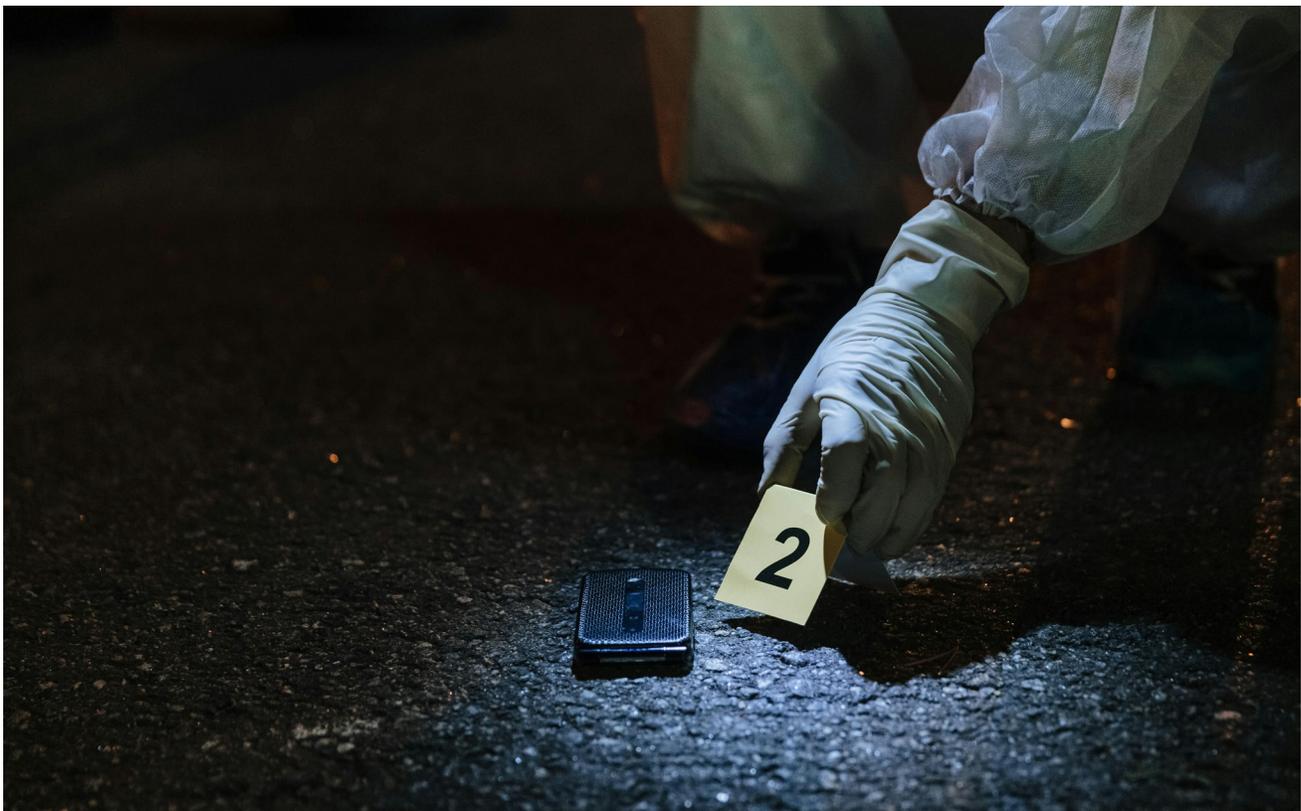
followers enjoy the challenge of piecing together clues, analyzing motives, and solving the crime before the investigators. In fact, many individuals find it very satisfying to solve the case and see justice done.

A CRAVING FOR ADRENALINE AND FEAR

We are all hardwired to be alert to danger, but there is a thrill in watching the situation unfold before you. Visiting haunted houses, riding roller coasters, and watching horror movies all give us the same dopamine rush. That exhilarating dump of adrenaline and the experience of the fight-or-flight response. Indulging in true crime allows the individual to experience that same fear, horror, and thrill, the same surge in a controlled, safe environment. The thrill without risk. Another part of this curiosity is catharsis – a way to be aware of the possible and become immune to it to reduce stress and anxiety.

This thrill craving equates to psychological exposure therapy, where the individual confronts fears and reduces their power, in a safe place with no real risk. This type of exposure also helps build emotional resilience by meeting the psychological need for a sense of control, safety, and emotional regulation. In fact, it might be considered a form of benign bravery to find enjoyment in experiencing something in a safe environment that would be unpleasant if it were really happening.

A SENSE OF CONTROL

The true crime follower may use affective forecasting not only to imagine the event but also to anticipate their emotional response to it, how they will feel in the moment, what emotions they may experience, and how they can overcome any adverse reactions. Unfortunately, this may include impact bias, in which they underestimate the emotional impact an event will have on them. They can overcome the fear in a controlled environment, thereby reducing its grip. In behavioral rehearsal, an individual imagines what they fear and practices their response to that event repeatedly, until they feel confident in their ability to handle the situation. We all want to understand the threats in our environment and feel confident in our ability to overcome them.

As the world seems to spiral continually out of control, people crave understanding of that which appears chaotic and unpredictable. They need a sense of safety through exposure to and knowledge of what happened to others, so they know what to watch out for in their own lives. According to a 2025 Edison Research report, 70% of female true crime followers find empowerment in following true crime and relating the events to real-life risks and precautionary safety strategies. Fear drives them to learn as much as possible about the cases so they can be more vigilant about their own safety. If the serial killer started by dropping drugs into a female victim's drink at a club, then once she was incapacitated, violated, and killed, the female true crime consumer may become more aware of their beverage when out at a club. If the offender entered a residence through an unlocked door, the female is more apt to secure her property at night or when home alone.

Whatever brought you to the world of following true crime, you are most certainly not alone. Fascination with the darkness and evil that lurks among us continues to hold many true crime followers tightly in its psychological grip.

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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.

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.

One Voice

a storytelling column
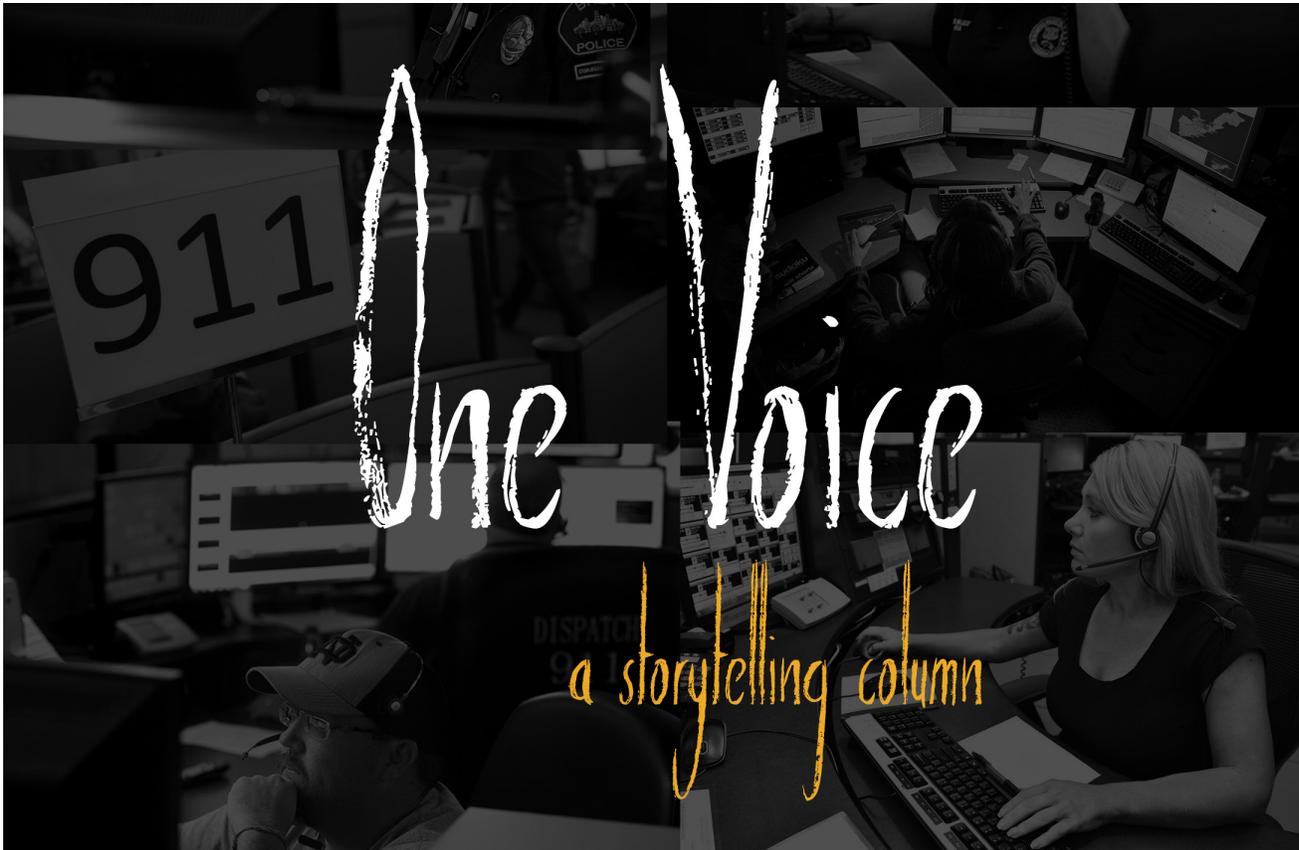
Would your 10-year-old self be proud of you, happy or excited, or even surprised if they could see you now? 10-year-old me... Sitting here at my desk, 10-year-old me would never have thought I would be in front of all this technology. He wouldn't even think any of this was possible.

I recently saw a post on social media that posed that question, which made me step back and reflect on my life and what I have accomplished, and I thought, "What would my 10-year-old self say?" As I mentioned in the first edition of this column, "One Voice", it's about the powerful stories that come from the heroes in 911, but it's not just about their 911 story, it is also about personal stories that will ultimately help you reflect on your career, all the good that you have done, and continue to do. Sometimes, however, we need to go back to the beginning and reflect on what has led us to where we are. For this edition of "One Voice," I want to reflect on the past.

So what was 10-year-old me doing during this time? I was either playing outside, hanging out with my cousins, doing chores, or playing video games with my siblings. Now, they were around 5 and 4 years old, but we still had fun. One thing that not many people know about me is that I used to write short stories. I would write all kinds of stuff, and yes, as many people do, I would take inspiration from TV and movies. Upon further reflection, I realized that years later, short stories and music are very much part of what I do for a living.

Back then, I listened to a ton of music. I love all kinds of music, but I was introduced to electronic bass music, and I fell in love with it. I would put my tape in and listen to it over and over. The specific album was called Techmaster P.E.B. - Bass Computer from 1991. I remember seeing it at my local movie rental store, "Mr. Music." I would walk in with my parents to rent a movie or a video game, and there was a glass case

on the left side where vinyl, tapes, and later CDs were kept on display. I would walk over every time to see if it was still there. I would ask my parents for it because the cover looked cool, and they would tell me no, but if I worked for it, I could get it. I mowed lawns and went above what was asked at home, and I finally got it.

I put that tape in when I got home, and I was in love. The electronic sounds, with a deep bass tone, tickled my eardrums and sent chills and goose bumps throughout my body. It was like nothing I had really heard other than the music from Breakin'. During that time, I was writing short stories. I would listen to the music and write at the same time. I would read it back, and something amazing happened. The music fit with what I was reading. I thought it was the coolest thing. I had two tape recorders, and I tried something. The recorders were sitting next to each other, and there was a specific song I wanted to use. I played the song on one end, and on the second deck I pressed record, and I read my story out loud.

I remember playing it back, and I was so proud of what I had done. My story matched the music in the background just as I had hoped. I remember showing my mom, and she thought it was the coolest. My grandma would tell me that one day I would use what I have learned or picked up throughout life, but I never thought this little project, where I was writing and recording my voice to music - would ever do anything beyond that. I just thought it was something cool that I had done. I recorded a few more stories over the years with characters named Black Ice, Fumu (Foomoo), Dr. Reborn, and Fatality. It was inspired by games like Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat. All of them had music in the background.

Years later, during my senior year of high school, I would write another short story, a much darker story set to the music of The Undertaker from WWE. I got an A, and the class and my teacher were blown away. I even had a friend who was at home sick for a few

days, who told me when she returned that she had heard about my story and how good it was. I was proud of what I did, but again, I never thought it would assist me in the future. Fast forward to the present day, and what started out as something cool I did as a kid became my passion, a passion for storytelling. I didn't realize back then that I was literally shaping my future. I don't think any of us realize until we have a chance to step back and reflect on where we have come from and how we got here.

So how does this relate to 9-1-1, the #IAM911 Movement, and Imagine Listening? It's our stories. It's our voices, and how what we have experienced can inspire others. I have said for years that I am a firm believer that some calls or situations are meant for us because of whatever experience we have lived in life. When you reflect on different aspects of life, you can find where some of that connects. For me, what I do for a living is help share powerful dispatch stories, provide peer support during Imagine Listening, and much more. I also take anonymous stories that have been submitted for the #IAM911 Movement, and share them in images, or I read them in my voice with music in the background.

So, would 10-year-old me be proud of me? As I sit here with tears in my eyes, I know for a fact that 10-year-old me would be not only proud of me, but over the moon. A few years back, I was telling my kids this story about 10-year-old me and Techmaster P.E.B. We made a stop and I looked up the album on Apple Music, and guess what? It was there. I quickly downloaded it and played it for them. They loved it, and it made me smile. Our experiences in life can shape us in different ways. What we experience can help us in the future too. And when it comes to 9-1-1, our experience, our story, our voice, is our superpower. Write down your wins. Don't be afraid to open up. Reflection is a powerful tool, and who knows, you might find something from your past that has helped you in 9-1-1 or shaped a project that

you have worked on. Your story, whether you know it or not, may have been someone's inspiration to consider a career in 9-1-1.

So let me ask you, would your 10-year-old self be proud of you? I would say yes. Without knowing anything else about you, the reader, I would say yes. Why? Because this is something you get to do. Someone told me recently, "Being a dispatcher is something I get to do. I don't have to do it, I get to do it." Sometimes we get caught up in everything, but 10-year-old you would be proud that you get to help save lives. That you are a First Responder. You get to work alongside those in the field, and you are an important part to those in need. To your 10-year-old self, you are a superhero.

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

THE VOICES WE
WHO'S MISSING FROM THE

There are voices in our profession that consistently get overlooked when the major conversations start. We talk about reclassification, staffing, mental health, and resources, but not everyone's voice is making it to the table. Trainees, night-shift telecommunicators, small-town centers, and even part-time or per diem dispatchers rarely get invited into the discussions that directly affect the work they do every single day. These are the people whose perspectives help shape this profession in ways we do not always recognize, yet their experiences often get overshadowed when the broader conversations begin.

DON'T HEAR:
9-1-1 CONVERSATION?

After a career beneath the headset that spanned nearly 11 years, 8 centers, and 7 states, I am more passionate than ever. Even now, serving on the commercial side, I care deeply about making sure we listen to every voice, perspective, and person we can as we shape new technologies and solutions for training, hiring, and retention.

There is a quote I came across recently that has stayed with me:

> "Don't just fight to get into the room. Lead in a way that holds the door open for others." —Chris Laping*

*Chris Laping is a leadership strategist and author known for his "people-first" philosophy. He is the co-founder of People Before Things, a consulting firm focused on change management and organizational health.

That sentiment speaks directly to where 9-1-1 is right now as a profession. For years, this industry and its heroes fought simply to be acknowledged. You pushed to be seen as essential. You fought to be included in the larger public safety spectrum and to show that your work is just as vital and high-stakes as any other part of the emergency response chain. Over time, you have made progress. You are being welcomed into more spaces. You are hosting your own conferences, building your own online communities, and developing networks and platforms that are rooted in your collective experience. But now that you have earned your "rooms" and created your own platforms, you have to pause and ask an important question: Are you keeping the door open behind you? Are you making room for new voices, fresh eyes, and perspectives that differ from your own? If you are not, then you are missing a powerful opportunity to grow, evolve, and strengthen this profession.

Let's start with trainees. Somewhere along the line, a belief formed that trainees should not share opinions until they finish training. That mindset is flawed. Trainees are living the training process moment by moment. They can see the gaps and the inconsistencies that you may have learned to overlook. Their perspective could offer valuable insight when you talk about staffing shortages, because they can describe exactly where training roadblocks happen, and what contributes to early burnout. They can also speak to the mental health strain of learning under pressure and how training culture shapes a new employee's sense of belonging. If we truly want to improve training programs and support retention, we should be asking trainees for feedback during their journey, not only once they survive it.

Now, let's talk about night shift telecommunicators. Night shift operates on its own rhythm. The culture is different. The expectations feel heavier in a quieter room where leadership is rarely present. Yet many major decisions are made based solely on day-shift experiences. Night shifters have critical insight on staffing challenges, because they are often the ones working through the thinnest staffing levels. They

can speak to reclassification from a unique angle, since they frequently carry the same workload with fewer resources and less immediate support. They also understand the mental health demands of working through long, isolated hours when stress hits differently. If their voices are not in the room when you craft policy, write SOPs, plan training, or consider workload distribution, you are only telling half the story.

Then there are the small-town centers. These agencies are often overlooked in industry conversations, but they hold a wealth of knowledge. Small centers may not have large budgets or the newest tools and technology, but they understand community in a way that big centers cannot always match. When we talk about reclassification, their input is essential because they can highlight how limited resources do not reduce the complexity of the calls they handle. When staffing is discussed, they can speak to what it means to operate with skeleton crews for weeks or months at a time. When mental health comes up, small-town telecommunicators can share what it feels like when there are only two or three people in the room, and each call hits a little closer to home. Their experiences should be shaping national conversations, not sitting on the sidelines of them. Recently, I spent two days on-site with one of our partner agencies, immersing myself in their culture in the charming city of Emporia. It was an invaluable opportunity to learn, connect, and collaborate with my friend and Lyon County Emergency Communications Director, Roxanne Van Gundy. Centers like hers are doing incredible work implementing AI-powered solutions in their center, but also helping us think creatively about how to make these innovations more accessible for even smaller, two-seat centers.

There is another group we often forget to invite into these conversations: the part-time and per diem telecommunicators. These are the people who fill in gaps, take extra shifts, and often balance dispatch with full-time work somewhere else. Their perspective is crucial in discussions about staffing, because they understand what it means to step into a center that is stretched thin and try to be the glue that holds a shift together. They see firsthand how frequent overtime, mandatory holdovers, and inconsistent relief contribute to burnout across the entire agency. Their insight on mental health is also valuable, because they often experience the emotional weight of the job without the same level of day-to-day support that full-time employees receive. Their contribution to the center is real, and their voices should be part of the conversation, too.

So where do we ALL go from here? Expanding the conversation means remembering that leadership is not only about having your voice heard. It is also about making sure others are heard, as well. You have earned your rooms and your platforms; you've earned your space, and you should be so proud of this! The real test now is whether you keep the door open and invite in the voices that have not always had a chance to speak. The trainee. The night shifter. The small-town telecommunicator. The part-time or per diem dispatcher. The people whose experiences shape this profession every day in ways you cannot afford to overlook. These are the voices we do not hear enough, and it is time we all work to change that.

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Samantha Hawkins is a passionate 9-1-1 instructor, speaker, and former telecommunicator with over a decade of experience behind the headset. She has supported and trained professionals in eight emergency communications centers (ECCs) across seven states. She is also a former Chair of APCO International's Editorial Committee, and has written and published articles in leading industry publications, including The Journal of Emergency Dispatch, APCO's PSC Magazine, and NENA's The Call. Today, Samantha serves as the ECC Engagement Lead at ThisGen 911, a technology firm specializing in voice-AI training simulations designed to strengthen the instinctive, life-saving skills of 9-1-1 telecommunicators. She still frequently teaches on-site at ECCs across the country and presents virtually, covering topics such as effective training techniques, leadership development in 9-1-1, CTO preparation, and wellness in the ECC.

ThisGen 911

SIMULATE ANYTHING.
TRAIN FOR EVERYTHING.

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- Realistic AI Callers + Real Locations
- Automated QA + Coaching
- Recruiting & Pre-Hire Screening
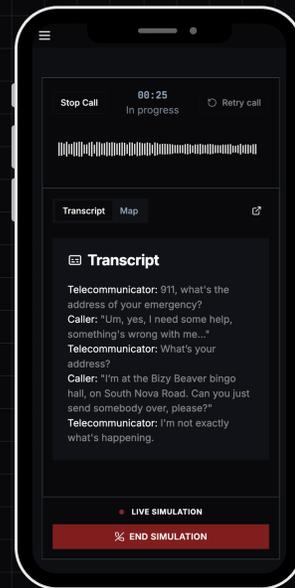
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