THE COMMVERSE MAGAZINE

COVER STORY:

A WORLD CUP LEGACY FOR 9-1-1 COMMUNICATORS

PLUS:

CALM IN THE CHAOS
WELLNESS THROUGH CONNECTION
DISPATCHING AT BURNING MAN

AND MUCH MORE

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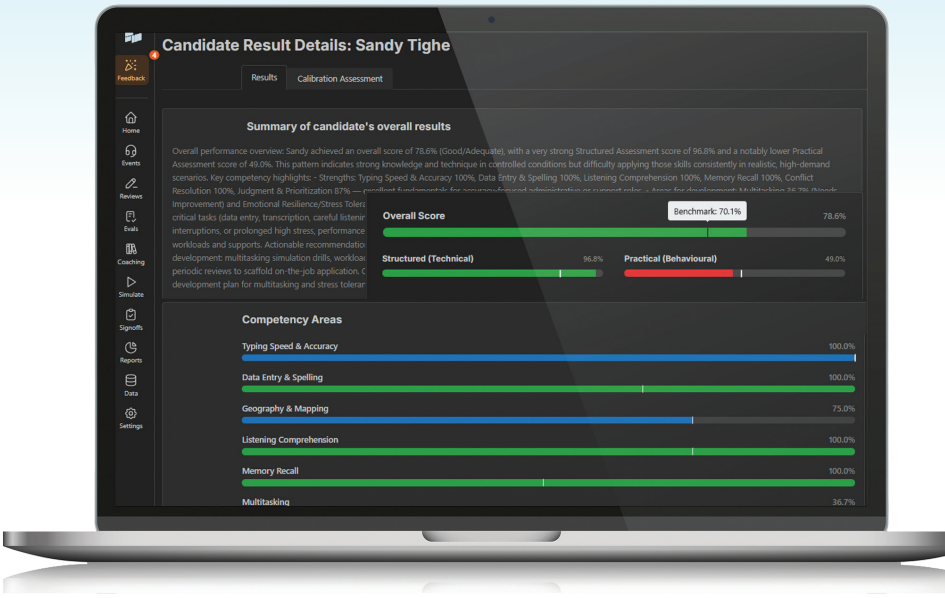

Retention doesn't start on Day One. It starts at Day Zero.

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THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE SUPERVISOR CONSOLE

Adobe Stock Photo

All of us enjoy a good view. Whether you're a hiker, beach, or mountain goer, or have enjoyed the view of a city or landscape from a tall building or an airplane window, it offers perspective, a sense of wonder, and lasting memories. Often, the overwhelming feeling of something larger and greater than ourselves can bring about a sense of calm or allow us to see the world in a different light. I do my best to enjoy the view of lots of places and try to stay mindful in the moment to stop and look around, to take it all in.

For myself, it's the ocean and beach. I have great childhood memories of going to the beach on summer vacations, and as I grew older and had a family of my own, I cherish those times at the beach together. There was always something about the ocean and being able to see something so large and so great, all the way to the horizon. The associated sounds, smells, and activities were always what brought on the sense of vacation, relaxation, and perspective. As I grew older, I went from being the kid who rode in my parents' car, full of excitement and enthusiasm, to being the parent myself, understanding the responsibility and pressure of that role, and gaining the satisfaction of seeing that same excitement through someone else's eyes with a new understanding.

Building a life while having a career in a 9-1-1 Center, and the various roles I have been fortunate enough to hold, have provided a similar viewpoint and outlook.

One of the major ways to view the environment for me has been centered around the supervisor's console—from both sides. As I started out, there was one view looking towards the supervisor's console. At first, I may have been in awe of them or viewed them out of respect for their knowledge, experience, or authority. Through duty, responsibility, and professionalism, we may work hard for that supervisor we respect and who has our back. We are doing the essential, hours-long, meaningful work of being emergency call-takers and dispatchers, and, rightly so, we focus on our needs, stressors, and concerns.

Through tough times or varied leadership styles, some supervisors might teach what to do or what not to do. They might lead the way or step back when adversity hits, and some might inspire. We all have times where, from this viewpoint, we don't understand why something was handled a certain way, think we could have done it better, or we can't see the pressures and demands the supervisor or manager might be facing. Through some more years and experiences, trainees, projects, upgrades, and implementations, we learn, grow, and discover more. Older generations retire or move on. We find ourselves moving towards leadership roles, or we look around one day and realize that viewpoint has shifted, and we are sitting at that supervisor's desk we once observed and critiqued from the other side.

This is a challenging and rewarding view. The responsibility is now yours; operations management, personnel praise and concerns, and administrative duties become new things to learn. We must balance the requirements of our role to not micromanage but promote respect and accountability. At the same time, it's important to remember that the authority this role affords should avoid ego and self-promotion and work for what's best for those in your care. Although the critical nature and fast pace of the center is happening around you, this is the time, even for a few seconds, to stop and take a perspective from the view. From the supervisor's console, you can see great work happening all around you, the skill and finesse of your call-takers, the attentiveness and dexterity of your dispatchers, and the virtual symphony that's taking place to make organization out of chaos.

Getting numbed by repetition, interpersonal interactions, holding on to past experiences, and our internal culture may obscure the view for everyone at times. Every now and then, when the shining highlights and truly extraordinary efforts of dispatchers are dulled with some shades of grey, we need to take stock. Those on the operations floor can remember that everyone contributes to the culture; it is literally a choice. Choose positivity and support, and make it safe for a co-worker to ask a question, say they need help, or know you have their back. Welcome new-hires and be mindful of what they see, hear, and experience as they begin their careers. Keep in mind how much of a daily impact you have on so many people; that you're a force for good in the world, and what you do matters. Those behind the supervisors' console should practice leadership with responsibility and humility. Check your ego, but remember accountability, structure, clearly communicated goals and expectations, and your delivery all matter. Protect and promote a positive culture. Keep a watch from your viewpoint, being alert for those who need a little guidance, support, or mentorship. Plan for succession, train, familiarize, and encourage others to become supervisors, or at least better understand your role, and allow them to be able to help you when things get thickest.

Although the work is full of responsibility and the stressors are great, the small group of people who provide access to public-safety services in their communities is nothing short of amazing. Keep up the great work, stay mindful of the impact you make, and regardless of which viewpoint you are currently seeing your center from, try to understand the other one. Work as a team. Respect that everyone is going through something in their lives while doing a job that helps others. Give each other support and some grace.

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Ryan Niessner is a 20-year emergency communications veteran. He currently serves as an Emergency Communications Supervisor and Training Coordinator in Howard County, MD. He is an enthusiastic advocate for emergency dispatchers and the 9-1-1 industry. He has experience as a shift supervisor, is a certified instructor, and NENA CMCP.

DISPATCHING ON THE PLAYA AT BURNING MAN

In the late spring of 2015, I received a message. “Hey Will, it’s Poppe, 301. Please give me a call”. A little while later, I called back, and he said, “I have an opportunity that you might be interested in. I know you’re into a lot of different things,” (I am a Roller Derby Announcer, among other interests). As the conversation progressed, I learned his wife worked for another LE agency and that her supervisor had an outside business and was looking for dispatchers for this thing called “Burning Man.” To be honest, I had no clue as to what it was all about, but I agreed to call the owner. Meanwhile, I start researching (hey, it’s what I do).

Fast forward about an hour, and I returned his call. The pitch was intriguing. Go to Nevada, spend about 3 weeks in the desert, and get paid. Close to all-inclusive. There were many unknowns for this event. He did not know what the conditions would be. But it’s a federal contract, so it was legit.

With my wife’s encouragement, I agreed and jumped in with both feet. Actively recruiting candidates for a desert adventure. So how do you prepare for an adventure in the middle of the desert? Well, for me, my prior military experience in Desert Storm preparations started kicking in, and I’m envisioning we would be sleeping on cots in a big tent in the

desert. I anticipated no AC, water from a canteen, and porta-potties or a hole in the ground. So in good soldierly fashion, I packed a solar charger, a 2-quart canteen, and a few other necessities. None of which were needed (except the canteen for hiking during my downtime).

Pre-training was Zoom meetings and YouTube videos of a CAD system I had never seen. It wasn't intense, but it was sufficient. Training occurred over several weeks to ensure all the information was clear.

Travel time arrives, and off we go.

Arriving in Reno, we (others from the Tallahassee area) start meeting our cohorts in this adventure.

First, we checked into our hotel (just for the first night), then went out for dinner as a meet-and-greet. The next day, we had a meeting, then headed off to the center of the known universe, the darkest and fastest town in the United States, that's right, I'm talking about Gerlach, Nevada. Population- wanted (sometimes). How do you describe a town that is almost locked in time? I believe it can best be described by one of their mottos, "Where the pavement ends, the old west begins".

When we pulled up in front of Bruno's restaurant, bar, and casino, the largest and most prominent business in town, a large SUV rolled up behind us. Out comes the sheriff of Pershing County, who we will also be working with. His imposing frame and polite manner helped us to feel a bit at ease. He then helped us to get the lay of the land.

Picture this: you arrive in a desert town knowing that you will be here for almost 3 weeks. The next question that comes to mind is lodging. We were escorted to a mobile home park with homes from maybe the 80's. They were not great, but not horrible. Better than sleeping in a tent, as we had hot water for showers, beds, stoves, and refrigerators too. Some were in better shape than others, but livable.

Later that day, we met our federal contact, who escorted us out to "The Playa," which we later learned is not a sandy place but a dusty one with completely different challenges. We learned about the different entrances to the event and arrived at our dispatch center. A double-wide construction trailer surrounded by other trailers, each with a specific function. A full operations center in the middle of nowhere. The center was divided down the middle, with LE on one side (us) and EMS/Fire and other services on the other (both operated by Burning Man volunteers). Our side of the center was long and narrow, with all the consoles on one side.

The area in and around the Playa is desolate, but stunningly beautiful.

After a few days of on-site training, we started Pre-Burn. From nothing (well, maybe 500-1000 people building the structure of the city and the more complicated large buildings to a high of 67,500 people that would be in attendance during the event.

The training days were filled with everything from tours of Black Rock City, which covers approximately 6 square miles and is surrounded by a 7.1-mile-long trash fence, to discussions about the city's rules and regulations. It is not a city until it is, and then it becomes the 4th-largest one in the state. It is complete with its own airport, NV88, public works, and even a non-law enforcement peacekeeping group to help de-escalate conflicts. We spent time learning to orient using a clock system in which The Temple, The Man, and Center Camp form a line that represents 1200-0600 (north-south), no matter which way the city is oriented. The naming of the roads is the most bizarre phonetics based on the theme of the year. A fun example was B-Bigfoot and C-Chupacabra for the year-themed Animalia.

Actual operations were basic, with no aliased radios and no expectations beyond doing the job. Prior to this year, it was all in-agency volunteers and light-duty units that weren't primarily law telecommunicators who provided the dispatch services. Some of the differences were the number of foreigners that you ran from all over the globe. Also hearing "playa names," which participants used in place of their government names. The level of creativity is incredible.

The time passed by with a lot of novelty (camp names that you couldn't legally say on terrestrial radio), descriptions of people and mutant vehicles (aka art cars). Not looking at the specific stats, but it felt like we handled more drug-related calls in that short span of time than I had in 24 years of dispatching.

There were, and continue to be, challenges with high winds, white-out conditions, and multiple raves (including mobile raves) so loud that you can hear them across the Playa, all the way to the dispatch area.

One thing we were warned about and remain cognizant of is rain. As mentioned, the Playa isn't sand, it's alkaline dust. When it rains, the conditions change rapidly. Initially, when everything is dry, there is a thin shell across the Playa that breaks up and crumbles as you walk or drive over it. However, when rain comes to Black Rock City, the ground becomes what can best be described as a combination of wet clay, wet concrete, and WD-40. Everyone and everything is instructed to stay in place, as vehicles, including bicycles and other battery-powered forms of transport, can sink to their axles and get severely stuck. While people can accumulate multiple pounds of Terra Firma around their legs and feet, they can also slip and fall in slick conditions.

Other challenges that we adapted to were different phonetics over the radio, aside from the street names. Where I was used to a military alphabet, the common language "out west" used some variations that were different but understandable. Learning and adapting to the way things were called in over the radio proved to be a challenge. Radio coverage is surprisingly decent; however, environmental conditions, such as HIGH winds and the ever-present dust, sometimes make transmissions difficult to understand.

As I write this, it seems I talk a great deal about the challenges or difficulties, but I would be remiss if I didn't tell you about the rest. Specifically, the absolute beauty of the area. Sunrise over the mountains, skies at night so black that you see what feels like billions of stars, hiking on nearby mountains (Sierra-Nevada's), or taking a walk on Guru Road and reading all the words of wisdom carved with great care into rocks by DeWayne "Doobie" Williams during the 80s and 90s.

The town of Gerlach has a water tank used to fill the steam engines of cattle trains. The wooden tower dominates the view as you enter the town. Of course, it's red and the tallest structure around. The wonderful people in this small western town are a bit eclectic and are rather self-reliant, as one would expect. I've been blessed over the years to become friends with the town matriarch, "Skeekie," who is the daughter of Bruno, who was mentioned earlier in this article. She is tough as nails but has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met.

Just whatever you do, don't call her ma'am.

So what's the work like? Well, you work every day of the contract except for travel days. My usual routine may help you to understand. Wake up and get ready to go to the Playa. Our entrance was 13 miles from where we slept. After getting ready, I'd go for a walk around town to get some light exercise. At a casual pace, it takes 20 minutes to walk basically the perimeter of town. The shift then loads up, and we drive to Playa, park, drop off our backpacks in the communications trailer, then walk across the compound to the dining facility. There we had breakfast and checked in. Finished and walked back to the communications trailer to relieve the previous shift. Like any other comm center, we log in and start the day. Units check on and off; other field-initiated activities, like traffic stops, public contacts, or other violations, are called in. The activity ebbs and flows, then before you know it, the day has ended, and the new shift has arrived. After the shift, grab dinner to go and go back to Gerlach. After getting "home," change clothes and depending on shift either chill out or go for a hike. There isn't much to do in town, which has basically 4 bars. No movie theaters or exciting things to do. That's the point, though. This isn't the big city; it's an old west town on a whole different level. Where you don't need to be occupied every moment, you get to slow down and take it in.

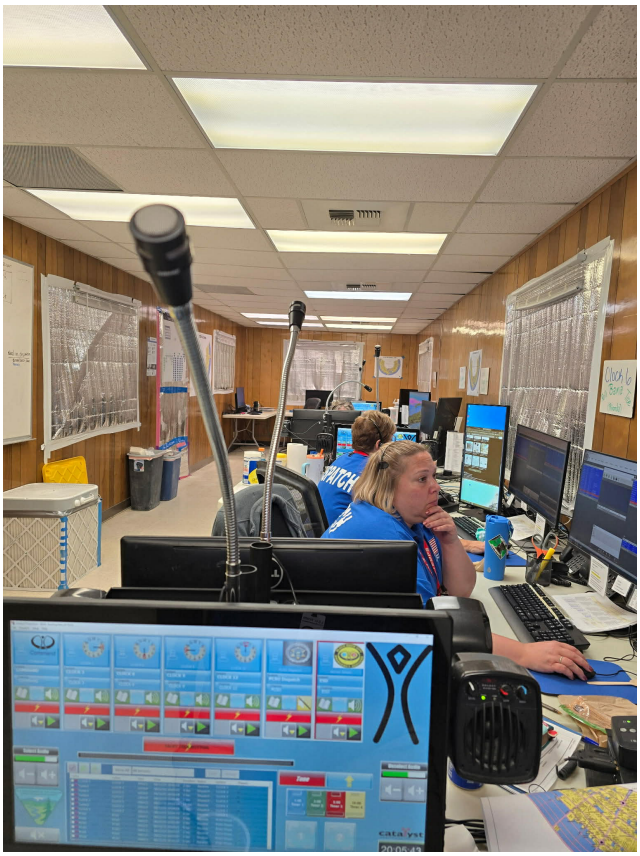
Over time, there have been changes in the communication trailer. The largest by far was the new CAD in the last few years. Faces come and go for not only the dispatch crew (nicknamed Smurf Team 6) but with the officers, too. You make friends and connections that hopefully will last a lifetime.

What does it feel like to dispatch in this environment? Dusty at times, crazily chaotic when the gates open up for the event, amusing with the descriptions, and fascinating with the vast number of people from other countries that you document for the officers.

When it's time to go back home, you are definitely ready. However, the oddest thing to me is that after a week or two of being back home, there is a little mental itch, a feeling that tugs at you. That feeling is best described as a yearning to return to your other dusty home, where the pace of the town is slow, the land is barren, the sky is beautiful, and your spirit feels at peace.

Dispatching for Burning Man was and continues to be a fascinating experience.

William "Will" Blanton, a proud US Army Desert Storm veteran, dedicated over three decades to public service with the Tallahassee Police Department and later the Consolidated Dispatch Agency, leading public outreach events at schools and events throughout Tallahassee, Florida, and the surrounding area. Guided by the philosophy "I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing I can do or kindness that I can to do any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall never pass this way again". Will is also a dedicated Upkudo Karate instructor and a vibrant roller derby announcer on the side. He firmly believes, "you may know where you are, and God may know where you are but if your dispatcher doesn't know where you are then you and Gob better be on good terms"—underscoring the critical role of public safety telecommunicators.



All photos provided by William Blanton.

CALM IN THE CHAOS

LEADERSHIP WHEN SYSTEMS DON'T COOPERATE

Recently, we went through one of the most challenging situations you can face operationally in a 9-1-1 center. If you thought I was going to say something very specific, like a mayday call or an officer-down situation, that is not where this is going. I am talking about something designed to make life easier, and usually does, but in the beginning, it can become one of the most difficult scenarios to work through–a software upgrade. During upgrades, there is a process that must be followed. Think of it like a dance. It is choreographed by professionals, but sometimes not executed by the most seasoned performers. In this case, I am not talking about people. I am talking about the technology itself. Plans are drawn out, steps are laid out, testing happens–sometimes multiple times–to make sure everything works the way it is supposed to. Then the day comes, the switch is flipped, and something goes wrong–sometimes several things.

The question becomes very clear–what do leaders do when that happens?

Leadership is one of those things you can read about forever. You can listen to people talk about it, you can attend training about it, but the real test is not what you know about leadership. The real test is how you show up when things stop going according to plan. That was the question we faced. Our center was going through a phone system upgrade. Our call-handling software was being brought forward to the newest version available. The technology was impressive. Some of the features were things we had only seen in demonstrations, and now they were about to become part of our daily operations. I have always enjoyed the technical side of communications, so seeing how systems interact to improve service to the public is something I genuinely find interesting. What I saw that day, and what I was responsible for doing, was exactly what we train for.

When you are on the phone with someone who has experienced trauma, you remain calm for them. When you are on the radio and an officer is in distress, you remain calm for them. When systems start acting unpredictably during an implementation, leaders must remain calm for everyone. Did everything go perfectly when the update launched? No. Some components did not function the way they should right away, and stress levels rose across the room. You could see it on the faces of the specialists on the floor. You could hear it in the voices of the technical teams working on the problem. In those moments, when people start asking, "What do we do now?" leadership is what they look for. This is not written to pat anyone on the back. It is written to reinforce something we all know but sometimes forget: technology will fail you when you least expect it. The real question is whether you can stay calm when it does. That same calm is usually what helped you earn your position in the first place.

As the upgrade moved forward, multiple conversations were happening at once. Specialists were asking if they should be doing anything differently. Executive leadership wanted to know whether we needed to stop or roll anything back. Implementation teams were asking questions to verify testing steps and narrow down where issues were coming from. In the moment, it can feel like everything slows down and all eyes are on you. In reality, the whole sequence might only last minutes.

The switch to the new system happened early in the morning, before the commute hours, specifically so that call volume would be as low as possible. During test calls, we noticed degraded audio quality coming from two consoles. The specialists sitting right next to them had perfectly clear audio. Almost immediately, concern started to spread. If audio sounded like that on a test call, what would happen if a real caller came through? Instead of assuming a system-wide failure, we looked for patterns. The same two positions were affected each time. I asked the specialists at those consoles to move to different positions. As soon as they logged in elsewhere, the audio issue disappeared. That information went straight to the implementation team members, who were able to quickly isolate and correct the problem. At the same time, executive leadership was updated that the issue was localized, not widespread, and service capability was not compromised.

Moments like that are where communication proves its value. A small issue can look catastrophic if information is incomplete or delayed. Clear, steady communication keeps problems in their proper size and prevents unnecessary escalation. The solution, like it is in most situations, was communication.

It took communication with the floor staff to reassure them that they were doing exactly what they should be doing. It took communication with executive leadership to confirm that service to the public was still operating. It took communication with technical teams so that troubleshooting could be focused instead of scattered. In situations like this, communication is often the first thing that starts to break down. Ironically, it is also the thing that stabilizes everything else when used correctly.

Strong leadership during a technology transition does not mean having every answer immediately. It means being steady, it means being clear. It means being the person in the room who slows things down instead of speeding up the panic. It means translating technical language into plain language for your team, and translating operational impact into useful information for decision-makers. System upgrades are not just tests of equipment. They are tests of preparation, trust, and leadership presence.

When teams see steady leadership during uncertainty, their confidence grows. When executives receive calm and accurate updates, their trust grows. When technical partners see organized communication, solutions come faster. None of that depends on technology being perfect. All of it depends on how people respond when it is not. Upgrades will always introduce unknowns. That is part of the process. What is controllable is how we respond when those unknowns show up. In communications, we often say callers borrow our calm. The same is true inside the room. During difficult moments, your team borrows yours, and that may be the most important system you will ever be responsible for maintaining.

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Jeremy Serio is a public safety communications professional and shift administrator with extensive experience in high-stress dispatch environments. He specializes in leadership, culture, and team performance under pressure, and provides training focused on practical strategies that strengthen communication, decision-making, and operational confidence in emergency communications centers.

Strong leadership during a technology transition does not mean having every answer immediately. It means being steady, it means being clear.

An Unexpected Journey from the Comm Center to the International Stage

There is something surreal about standing at a podium in front of an audience from across the UK, talking about the future of public-safety technology. A few years ago, I would have told you that was someone else's story, not mine.

Just a few years ago, I was a 9-1-1 center director for a Sheriff's Office in a small county in Upstate New York, focused on the daily grind that every comm center leader knows well: staffing challenges, aging technology, relentless call volume, and the quiet but constant pressure of knowing that every second matters when someone is in crisis. I loved that work. I still do, but five years ago, I made the leap into the private sector, with one straightforward goal — to help 9-1-1 centers leverage technology in ways that actually move the needle for the people on both ends of the line. I wasn't thinking about industry influence or speaking engagements. I was thinking about dispatchers who were burning out, directors who were stretched thin, and communities that deserved better outcomes when they called for help.

What I didn't anticipate was how much the journey itself would teach me, and where it would eventually lead. Starting at RapidDeploy in the start-up world, transitioning to the opposite at Motorola through an acquisition, and most recently back in the start-up world at Aurelian have all been incredible opportunities.

This past March, I had the privilege of attending the British APCO conference for the second time. This time, not only as an attendee but also as a speaker. It was my first time presenting at a conference outside of the United States, and I won't pretend that wasn't a meaningful moment. Standing in front of an international audience, speaking about how 9-1-1 centers in the U.S. are using conversational AI to handle non-emergency calls, work that Aurelian is doing every day, felt like a full-circle experience I didn't see coming. I also had the honor of joining a panel discussion alongside two colleagues on a topic I care deeply about: the future of 9-1-1 here in the States, 112 across much of Europe, and 999 in the UK. The challenges facing these systems are more universal than many people realize. Overwhelmed call centers, non-emergency call volume crowding out true emergencies, workforce strain, and the enormous pressure to do more with less. The conversation was rich, and the perspectives from our international counterparts were both humbling and energizing.

The part I keep coming back to isn't the speaking itself, though- It's the path that made it possible. I came into this space simply wanting to help customers leverage technology for better outcomes. It was as simple as that. What grew from that focus on the work, rather than on any personal ambition, has genuinely surprised me. The customers I've had the privilege of working alongside — many of whom have become not just partners, but friends are the ones who encouraged me and helped carry those lessons to broader audiences. Whatever voice I've found in this space was shaped by every one of them.

Going from a small comm center director to speaking on an international stage is not something I take lightly. It's a reminder that this industry is full of people who

are genuinely willing to lift each other up, and that if you stay focused on the mission rather than the spotlight, the opportunities have a way of finding you. I'm already looking forward to British APCO next year.

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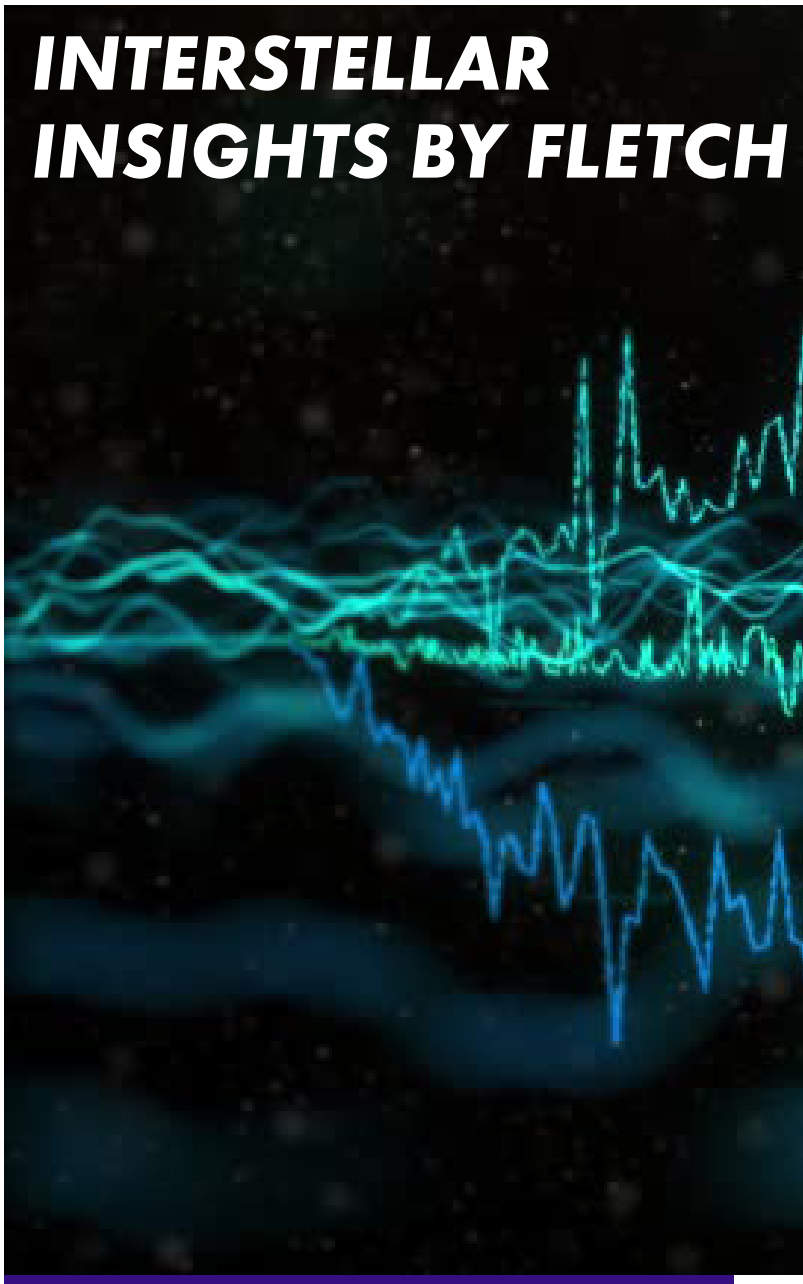
Wes Jones is a public safety professional with over 30 years of public-private collaboration. He spent more than 25 years in leadership roles in 9-1-1 and emergency management. Wes currently serves as Public Safety Engagement Lead at Aurelian, building awareness of tools that help ease the burden on telecommunicators.



MARK "FLETCH" FLETCHER, ENP

Getty Images

A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO PUBLIC SAFETY:

SIGNALS FROM THE FLOOR

Between the tones and the chaos, the signal is human.

Incoming Transmission: Welcome to the Floor

Cadet, step away from the nebula charts for just a brief moment. This quarter, we are leaving the comfort of diagrams, acronyms, and vendor holograms behind and heading somewhere far more unpredictable: the console floor. Out here, there are no clean demos. No perfectly structured datasets. No simple “just click next” workflows to deal with. Out here, it is just voices. It is chaos. It is humanity at its absolute best and absolute worst… often within the same 30 seconds.

You can build the most advanced Starship PSAP in the galaxy, but at the end of the day, it still comes down to one thing: A human being answering another human being on what may be the worst day of their life.

In Quarter 3, our mission is a bit different:

Log the stories that don't show up in the architecture diagrams. Debrief the moments that shape careers, for better or worse. And, because we are still who we are… laugh a little along the way.

Headsets on. Screens up. Just listen for the signal.

1) Field Log Entry

Captain's Log: "The Call That Didn't Fit the Script"

Stardate: Every shift, eventually

Location: Console 4, right when you thought it might be a quiet night

Incoming call. Open line. Background noise. Nothing unusual, until it is. The caller is talking, but not in sentences. Not in a way that fits your protocol tree. Not in a way that lines up with your nice, structured CAD fields.

You try your questions. You try to use your calm voice. You try your training. Then you realize something every experienced call taker eventually learns: Not every call follows the script.

• Some callers cannot answer questions the "right way."

• Some callers do not know the answers you need.

• Some callers are scared, confused, or simply overwhelmed by the moment.

And that is when the real skill kicks in.

• Not the checklist.

• Not the system prompts.

• Not the "click here for next question."

Judgment.

You pivot. You listen differently. You ask sideways questions. You pull fragments out of noise and start assembling a picture that no system could have handed you neatly.

And somewhere in that chaos, you find it.

• The location.

• The situation.

• The urgency.

Units get dispatched.

The call ends.

And you sit there for a second, staring at the screen, knowing full well that what just happened will never show up correctly in any report. Because the system captured the data, but you navigated the moment.

Log Conclusion:

Technology supports the mission.

Humans complete it.

2) Mission Debrief

Burnout, Bandwidth, and the Myth of "Just One More Call"

Let's talk about something the manuals do not like to include in bold print:

This job takes a toll.

Not all at once. Not in a dramatic explosion.

More like a slow drain on the system.

One more call.

One more shift.

One more "you good?" followed by "yeah, I'm fine."

Until you are not.

Burnout in a PSAP is not just about long hours. It is cognitive overload. Emotional accumulation. The constant context-switching between crisis after crisis, with no real reset in between.

You go from a structure fire… to a lost dog… to a cardiac arrest… to a noise complaint… to a domestic… to a child whispering on the phone.

And the expectation?

Handle each one perfectly. Instantly. Without hesitation.

The problem is not that call takers are not strong enough. The problem is that the system often assumes they are infinite. They are not.

Lessons from the Debrief

• Cognitive load is real.

• You are not just answering calls. You are processing, translating, prioritizing, and documenting simultaneously. That is not "just talking on the phone." That is mission-critical decision-making at speed.

• Silence is not recovery.

• A quiet console does not mean your brain reset. It means it is still catching up.

• Leadership matters more than policy.

• You can write all the wellness policies you want, but if supervisors and leadership do not actively support breaks, rotations, and real decompression… the policy is just decorative.

• Peer support is not optional.

• The best PSAPs are not just operationally strong. They are culturally strong. They create environments where "I'm not okay" is a valid transmission.

The Reality Check

You cannot remove stress from this job. But you can design systems, cultures, and leadership approaches that prevent that stress from turning into damage. Because the cost of ignoring it? It shows up later, in turnover, in mistakes, and in people quietly deciding they cannot do this anymore.

3) Commverse Café

Dispatch Stories You Can't Make Up (But Somehow Did)

Welcome to the Commverse Café, where the coffee is questionable, the stories are legendary, and the CAD notes… well… they deserve their own archive.

Today's submissions from across the galaxy:

"Caller states: 'There is a suspicious raccoon… and he looks like he knows what he did.'"

Units dispatched. Raccoon declined to comment.

"RP reports loud banging. Turns out to be upstairs neighbor assembling furniture… aggressively."

Assessment: IKEA-related incident. No injuries reported, but emotional damage likely.

"Caller whispering: 'I think someone is in my house.'

Background check reveals… caller is in the wrong house."

Plot twist: confirmed.

"CAD Note: 'Patient is conscious, breathing, and arguing with everyone.'"

Status: stable.

Why This Matters

These moments are not just comic relief. They are pressure valves. They are reminders that even in a profession defined by urgency and consequence, there is still room for humanity, absurdity, and shared experience. Because if you cannot laugh at least a little, this job gets a lot heavier, a lot faster.

Closing Transmission

This quarter, we stepped away from the systems and into the signal. The real signal. The voices. The decisions. The moments that do not fit neatly into a report, a workflow, or a vendor demo.

In Quarter 2, we talked about Ensign AI and the expanding universe of technology. But here is the truth that carries forward into every upgrade, every system, every "next big thing":

Technology does not answer the call.

You do.

And no matter how advanced the galaxy becomes, no matter how fast the data flows, no matter how many acronyms get added to the constellation, that part does not change. Because between the tones and the chaos, the signal is human.

Until next transmission:

Don't panic… just answer the call.

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

NICHOLAS GRECO, M.S., B.C.E.T.S., C.A.T.S.M., F.A.A.E.T.S.

CIT Training is Not Just for Law Enforcement Officers

Many years ago, there was a commercial that said, 'Orange juice is not just for breakfast anymore.' While you can eat or drink anything, anytime you want today, back in that time, there were "rules" that orange juice was a breakfast drink only. Luckily, times change, tastes evolve, and we drop arbitrary rules of when we can eat or drink something. The same principle is at play when we consider who goes through Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training.

Historically, CIT training has only been offered for sworn law enforcement officers. Despite the team- model approach, there are individuals who have not benefited from this exceptional training. Besides co-responders such as fire and EMS, it is often our unsung heroes, our dispatchers, who are first responders handling more than just 9-1-1 calls. Every day, dispatchers are de-escalating callers, using active listening skills, getting vital information, and trying to build rapport in a matter of minutes to get the caller the help they need. When one considers that CIT is a team approach, would it not be more beneficial to involve and train those people who get the initial call for service? Would it not make sense to have dispatchers get the same or similar training that officers are going through so they can appreciate the complexity and challenges? Would it not make sense to give our dispatchers every advantage in working with the public in a crisis situation?

Many CIT programs have just recently begun to see the value of having dispatchers train alongside police officers in a 40-hour CIT class. Dispatchers who go through a 40-hour course are not observers. They are encouraged to interact, ask questions, and get the same benefits as a sworn officer. Notably, on scenario day, they are "dispatching" the call to the responding officers and are in the room handling follow-up, requests for EMS, etc. More importantly, they are getting the benefit of seeing what is actually happening, a sight they normally don't get. As a CIT coordinator and trainer, we have had a number of dispatchers attend our CIT courses with excellent results as well as positive reviews. Many dispatchers have not only appreciated being included in the classes and scenarios, but they have also gained an appreciation for what is happening in the field and how important their role is. This has also opened up discussions in and out of class with officers and agencies to better serve the community. In Wisconsin, we have a unique program called Crisis Intervention Partners (CIP). This 16-hour CIP program started several years ago to meet the needs of agencies that may not need a full 40-hour course, cannot afford to send their personnel for a 40-hour course, or simply want to give their people more training. The CIP course is open to dispatchers, fire, EMS, security personnel, hospital staff, university and college staff, probation officers, and anyone who works with behavioral health. This is not a watered-down version of CIT. The 16-hour curriculum is a carefully-designed course which covers major mental illness, substance use, anxiety disorders, PTSD, suicide assessment, trauma in children and adolescents, local community resources, dementia, developmental disabilities, and autism, a hands-on voices exercise, peer stories, and active listening and de-escalation. Interestingly, attendees who are co-responders regularly attend CIP, and then many of them sign up for CIT later.

CIT International offers an online, 8-hour course titled "CIT Support Training for 9-1-1," which provides an informative, interactive, and, more importantly, convenient training option for busy communication centers. In addition to an overview of CIT, mental health disorders, suicide, and active listening skills for call management, attendees participate in scenarios with seasoned trainers. This is yet another way to hone skills for seasoned dispatchers as well as build those skills necessary for newer dispatchers.

Equally important in this training is the topic of wellness. Often, we do not realize or simply overlook how important wellness is for first responders. As in a full 40-hour CIT course, the topic of wellness is discussed, not as an afterthought, but as an essential part of the dispatchers' physical and mental health. One cannot be expected to help others if they are suffering in silence themselves.

The three training options discussed above are available for dispatchers--CIP specifically in Wisconsin, and the other two available across the country for agencies that see the value in training their dispatchers. Whether serving a single community, a regional dispatch center, a university, or a college, dispatchers serve a unique role in the initial triaging of a crisis. They are the backbone, the foundation of public safety. Our dispatchers benefit the most when they have the skills to identify the signs of mental illness, understand the importance of responding with empathy, compassion, and understanding through active listening and de-escalation skills, and know when to offer diversion to appropriate mental health resources such as 988 and 211. Dispatchers benefit from this specialized CIT training, which teaches them the importance of gathering vital information from the callers to pass along to those first responders arriving on scene.

If we follow the sequential intercept model of CIT, the dispatcher is also part of the CIT team, and our team members need training to answer and respond to the community's needs confidently and professionally. This training also helps to improve safety for both the caller and our responders. These individuals need to have the option to both build and hone skills, which in turn creates a stronger, more confident dispatcher, a dispatcher who not only takes care of the community and other first responders, but who cares for themselves as well.

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IN THE WAR ZONE:

WHEN PREPAREDNESS MEETS LIVED EXPERIENCE

Image provided by Dr. Andre Jones.

I'm writing this from Doha, Qatar. As this article comes together a week into the attacks, I'm also coming off a call, hoping for a brief reset after being activated at the onset of the most recent regional escalation. Living here, working here, and serving in the healthcare sector means moments like this are not distant headlines; they are part of the environment we navigate together. They are the sights and sounds of intercepted aerial threats: seven cruise missiles, 118 ballistic missiles, 47 drones, and two SU-24 aircraft.

For those less familiar with the geography of the Gulf, Qatar sits on a small peninsula in the Arabian Gulf, just across the water from Iran, at some points less than 200 kilometers away. Nearby neighbors like Manama, Bahrain, and Dubai in the UAE, cities many people know as business and travel hubs, have also found themselves within the broader arc of regional tension. Qatar is also home to Al Udeid Air Base, the largest U.S. military installation in the Middle East and a central hub for regional operations. In moments like this, geography suddenly becomes more than a map. It becomes the context for the decisions leaders must make. Professionally, that reality intersects directly with my role.

As part of my responsibilities with the Ambulance Service at Hamad Medical Corporation, I serve within the National Healthcare Incident Command Center, where I was activated as a Tactical Advisor during the initial phase of the escalation. The center serves as the coordination hub for Qatar's healthcare response

during major incidents, bringing together ambulance services, hospitals, and other health sector partners to ensure situational awareness and continuity of care. The purpose of this structure is simple: when uncertainty rises, coordination and clarity must rise with it.

In those early hours, years of experience and training take over. The Incident Command System (ICS) is designed for exactly this purpose. Roles activate. Communication structures tighten. Leaders focus on situational awareness, operational continuity, and the safety of both patients and personnel. Preparedness systems exist for a reason. They allow organizations to move quickly from awareness to action. But leadership during moments like this is not only operational, it is also deeply human.

Showing Up When the Environment Changes

In previous articles and presentations, I've written about SHOWUP leadership, the responsibility leaders carry to be sincere, honest, optimistic, well-informed, upbeat when appropriate, and procedurally grounded when decisions must be made. Moments like this test whether those ideas are simply concepts or lived behaviors. When a region enters a period of tension, leaders experience the same emotions as everyone else. We think about our families. We check on loved ones. We absorb the same news alerts and uncertainty as the people around us. Yet leadership requires something more: awareness of how our presence affects others. People look to leaders not necessarily for perfect answers, but for signals. Signals about whether the organization is prepared, about the seriousness of the situation, and about how they themselves should respond. In those moments, self-awareness becomes operational discipline.

Anchors Under Pressure

Earlier this year, I wrote about the importance of anchors - those internal reference points that help leaders remain steady when external conditions shift. For me, those anchors align with the principles captured in THRIVE. They are not slogans. They are reminders of how to think and behave when pressure rises.

• Trust in the systems and people around us.

• Health and well-being are priorities, even when the tempo increases.

• Resilience, not the absence of fear, but the discipline to keep moving forward.

• Intentional leadership that communicates clearly and calmly.

• Vision that keeps the mission in view even when uncertainty grows.

• Empowerment that ensures people feel supported rather than isolated.

Anchors do not eliminate uncertainty. They help leaders stand steady within it.

The Calls Behind the Scenes

While operational leaders focus on coordination, my dual role also had me thinking about another group of professionals quietly navigating the moment: Emergency Medical Dispatchers. Even during regional tension, the calls continue, medical emergencies, public concerns, questions about safety, moments of anxiety from members of the public seeking reassurance. Dispatchers, like all healthcare professionals, must process those calls while also managing their own thoughts about the broader environment. Like ambulance crews and hospital staff, they are both citizens and essential workers. They hear the uncertainty. They feel the same human

concerns, and yet they continue performing their duties because the mission requires it. Leadership must never forget that dual reality.

Looking Out for Our People

For healthcare systems, moments like these reinforce an important responsibility: protecting both operational continuity and the well-being of the workforce. Clear communication becomes critical. Staff must understand what is known, what remains uncertain, and what procedures are in place to protect them. Guidance around safety, such as shelter-in-place protocols, must be communicated calmly and clearly. At the same time, organizations must ensure that mental-health resources remain accessible, recognizing that prolonged uncertainty can affect individuals differently. The goal is not to create alarm—it is to create assurance. When people feel informed and supported, they are better able to focus on the work they have been called to do.

Leadership When the World Feels Loud

Moments like this remind us that preparedness is not only about plans and procedures. It is also about presence, the tone of a briefing, the clarity of a message, the steadiness of a leader's voice when uncertainty rises. Even when systems are functioning, and plans are in motion, people are still watching quietly, carefully, carefully, looking for signals about whether the organization is steady and whether the leaders around them are prepared to guide them through uncertainty. In emergency services, we often say that training prepares us for the incident. That is true, but what training cannot fully prepare us for is the human dimension of leadership during uncertainty, the moment when professionals must continue serving others while processing their own concerns for family, safety, and the unknown. That is when anchors matter most.

• The anchors that remind us why we chose this profession.

• The anchors that help us remain steady for the people we lead.

• The anchors that allow us to move forward with clarity rather than fear.

For dispatchers answering calls, for ambulance crews responding into the unknown, and for healthcare professionals keeping systems moving, these moments test more than operational readiness. They test composure, they test trust, they test leadership. Sometimes the most important reminder we can give ourselves in those moments is a simple one: I may not control what is happening around me, but I can control how I show up within it. Preparedness gives organizations the ability to respond. Anchors give leaders the ability to remain steady. Together, they help professionals continue the work, even when the headlines are outside their own window.

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PART ONE OF A FOUR PART SERIES

HERE'S THE THING:

THE SECRET TO TAKING A COMPLIMENT

"How many of you have a hard time taking a compliment?" Three-quarters of the hands go up. It's always this way. Every time.

"Why?" I ask.

They respond, "It's embarrassing." "It's awkward." "I don't like the attention."

"When you do get complimented, how do you communicate your thanks?"

"I stumble over my words."

"I mumble something."

"I change the subject."

"I tell them the reasons why the thing I did wasn't that great."

Dispatching, of course, is a helping profession, and many dispatchers don't want to be the center of attention, so when the spotlight swings their way, they'd rather find a place in the shadows.

In their minds, they find any reason not to truly accept the compliment. Deflecting and dismissing are common. "They're just being kind." "They probably just didn't want to hurt my feelings." "I didn't do anything exceptional. It's not that big a deal." Often, the dispatcher's self-perception doesn't align with the way others see them. Imposter syndrome rears its head. This prevents them from fully embracing the positive impact of the compliment.

Interestingly, dispatch is largely made up of women, and research shows that women are, in general, socialized to focus outwardly on others, instead of on themselves. They're supposed to put others first. Self-care is selfish, and it has a direct impact on how they think about themselves, how comfortable they feel being the center of attention, and how they receive compliments.

I get it. My mom was a classical pianist, artist, calligrapher, and poet. When someone complimented her work, she would invariably say, "It could have been better." "I really didn't have enough time." "It wasn't my best work." And on and on. You could see her face cringe with the discomfort of being complimented. Her perfectionism reared its head. I inherited all of that. I didn't learn to say thank you in a healthy way until I was 35.

Here's what happened: A college friend introduced me to a young kid who was a really great guitarist. I play the harmonica, and the two of us hit it off. I met his parents, and we arranged for me to visit their home. The kid and I jammed for a while; his father observed from the couch. At the end, his father said, "Sounds great, guys! I really enjoyed that!" I slipped into the default mode inherited from my mom. "It wasn't that great. It could have been better. We didn't play that good." I fumbled around saying ridiculous things and then stopped and said, "What I'm trying to say is 'thanks.'"That night, I realized what I was getting wrong about compliments.

Here's the thing: When someone gives you a compliment, it's about them, not about you.

Sounds strange, doesn't it? Regardless of what you thought of your performance, the person giving the compliment got some satisfaction from it--they enjoyed it. Maybe they got a new insight, maybe it sparked a fond memory. Your performance—whatever it was—had a positive impact on the compliment-giver, so much so that they felt compelled to mention it to you. When you downplay, deflect, dismiss, or deny the compliment, you are in effect saying to the compliment-giver that they are mistaken, that they have poor taste, that they don't know what they're talking about. There's no need to subject the compliment-giver to the voices in your head. You don't need to try to explain why you think your performance fell short of whatever mark you were thinking of. Be gracious, be kind, be understanding.

A compliment is a gift given to you by the compliment-giver for the gift you gave to them. Someone is saying, "I see you. I value you." Wouldn't it be strange (and rude) to shove someone's gift back in their face? That's what happens when you find ways to diminish a compliment given to you. Looking at it this way means you don't have to get tongue-tied, turn red, or try to hide. It means you don't have to start thinking about all the ways your performance was imperfect or inadequate. And it means you don't have to make the compliment-giver feel awkward.

Here are two more benefits of receiving a compliment well:

• It helps to build a connection between you and the compliment-giver.

• It helps rewire how you think about yourself. It can help relieve a bit of the stress around self-doubt. You no longer need to repeat the negative voice in your head that says you weren't good enough.

One great way to make taking a compliment easy is to have what I call a "back pocket phrase" ready at all times. Here it is:

"Thank you for saying that. I appreciate it."

You don't have to think; it's always right there in your back pocket, ready to use when someone compliments you. Simple. Easy.

"Thank you for saying that. I appreciate it."

Other simple language that makes the point includes:

"Thanks. That means a lot to me."

"That was very kind of you to say."

"Thanks so much for saying that. I really appreciate it."

"Thank you. I'm glad you found it valuable (interesting, useful).

You can come up with your own back-pocket phrase that you're comfortable with. After delivering your back pocket phrase, reflect on what the compliment-giver said. You might just find that you're bringing more to other people's lives than you thought.

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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.

SHANNON POLITO, ENP, RPL

It Was Never About the Program: WELLNESS THROUGH CONNECTION

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For so long, dispatch has been the proverbial red-headed stepchild of the first responder world. We are the first to engage with the emergencies of the world, but the last to be thought of when it comes to our health and well-being.

Dispatchers were not even included in research until Dr. Michelle Lily began studying our experience in earnest. Even then, progress was slow, with information trickling out to those doing the job, much less to those in charge of these responders. This catalytic information spread largely through individuals who recognized its power and worked to share it. Information about how this job impacts our bodies, minds, and hearts began making its way around the 9-1-1 world. At times, it ignited new fires within those who heard it; at others, it was met with disbelief or outright denial.

And yet, those of us passionate about dispatchers' mental and emotional well-being kept pressing on. As widespread education emerged around law enforcement's struggles and high suicide rates, information for dispatchers was still just a whisper. Finally, persistence led to the wellness movement within 9-1-1. The race was on, the fires were lit, the motivation was high—we must help our people became our battle cry. Somewhere along the way, we started believing that programs would fix what only people can.

Agencies began implementing well-intentioned wellness programs, often without direction or focus.

Initiatives appeared, emails were sent, posters went up on walls, and promises of caring for those who care for the public and field responders echoed across social media. Conferences introduced wellness tracks, signaling a genuine desire to educate and support. We were excited. We were hopeful. Someone heard us. Someone cared. Maybe we could finally be honest about the weight we carry in this job—the weight we have always been expected to bear simply because it's what we do. Then came the next, seemingly inevitable, wave.

The message became: we want to help you be well—but we are understaffed, and we'll address it when we have more staffing. Other familiar refrains followed: we don't have the budget, we don't want to make too many changes too fast, do we really need this, we've always done it this way, and everyone seems fine. Or worse—why do dispatchers even need wellness support? All they do is answer calls. The echoes of hope faded through control rooms. Once again, we were overlooked.

Even conferences began to shift away. One stated, "We did a lot of wellness last year, we're focusing elsewhere this year." And just like that, it was back to business as usual, only now with a poster on the wall that read, "Wellness starts with you—sleep 8 hours, eat healthy, and exercise six times a week." Complete with a smiling person who clearly has work-life balance and isn't bearing the weight of being present for so many last moments on the phone.

Considering the reality of our schedules, often without even eight hours between shifts, this message doesn't just fall flat. It highlights how deeply the mark was missed, how little is understood about our job. Honestly, we might have responded better to a picture of a kitten hanging from a tree branch that says, "hang in there." Most of us returned to business as usual—now carrying the added weight of having believed things might be different. As fans of a beleaguered soccer team, in Ted Lasso says, "It's the hope that kills us."

Then came the next wave of hope: peer support.

We saw the science. We heard the stories. We believed in its power. Once again, we allowed ourselves to hope that maybe this time, the forgotten helpers would receive the help we have been silently crying out for. Because asking for it out loud still feels impossible. That would mean we are weak, out of control, unable to do the job, exactly the kind of crisis peer support is meant to address. Agencies committed—on paper. Policies were drafted. Plans were discussed. "Hang in there, we're working on it," we were told. Months passed. Then a year. Then two, and still no program. Worse, programs that were underdeveloped, under-supported, or untrustworthy were being presented as the solution to everything. This isn't about blaming leadership, many are trying within real constraints. However, when those same agencies later assess morale and well-being and find them still low, the response becomes: "Well, we tried. This must be a dispatcher problem."

Now we are not only unsupported - we are blamed.

Meanwhile, the individuals who stepped up to help their peers, who poured in time, energy, and emotional capacity they didn't have to spare, begin to burn out. They become real-life Sisyphus figures, pushing the rock of wellness up the hill, only to watch it roll back down again. "We don't have the budget. We don't see the need. We don't have the time… we don't, we don't, we don't." And over time, we lose them too. Not because they stopped believing, but because systems so focused on process and structure ended up crushing the very people trying to make a difference.

There absolutely are agencies doing this well, putting action behind their words and prioritizing their people. That matters, and it deserves recognition, but they are still the exception, not the rule.

So the question becomes: when did wellness stop being about people, and how do we course-correct? We have to start by recognizing something critical: we do not need programs, initiatives, or policies to create meaningful change in people's well-being. What we need is people - for people.

Those of us in training and education often focus on building programs, securing leadership buy-in, creating implementation plans, and designing timelines. While those things can be powerful when done well, they are not required for real change to begin. Real change happens in connection. Connection is one of the most powerful tools we have—and it costs nothing.

Are you a trainer frustrated with your program? Shift your focus to the person in front of you. How are they doing? What are they experiencing? How are they managing stress? How is shift work impacting their life and their family?

Are you a peer supporter in an agency that doesn't support the program? Shift your focus from the program to the individual. How are they sleeping after that call? How are things going with their family? What matters to them outside of this job?

Are you the wellness-minded dispatcher trying to push initiatives that never seem to gain traction? Shift your focus from what the agency isn't doing to what you can do. You can connect. You can lead by example. You can bring awareness into the room without permission.

It is that connection that creates the shift.

I speak as one Sisyphus to another—rolling that rock of dispatcher well-being up the hill, again and again. I had to learn where my power truly lies. It is not in endlessly pushing the rock. It is in how I show up when I walk into the control room. Instead of retreating into my console, I choose to engage. Do I do this perfectly? Not even close. There are days I want my hood up, earbuds in, and nothing breaking through my bubble. But the connections I have built by shifting my focus have created the most meaningful and fulfilling experiences I've had in years. More importantly, it builds trust, not just when things are critical, but all the time.

When systems fail you, do not lose hope.

Yes, as Ted Lasso says, "It's the hope that kills you." But his counterpoint is what I choose to hold onto: "I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief."

We need to believe in our people, not just our systems. This is not about abandoning programs or walking away from the work. It is about shifting our primary focus. Take the energy we do have and invest it in connection, in belief, in showing up for each other.

Connection—not programs—is what truly changes culture.

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Shannon Polito has been a dispatcher for 17 years and loves the job itself. Her passion goes beyond helping those who call 9-1-1, which led to her founding Help For the Headset. She believes that with the right training and information, dispatchers can be the best and healthiest people they can be.

SAFETY CHECKS

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Whether we call them safety checks, time checks, or PAR checks (Personnel Accountability Report), these checks are a critical part of what we do and should be recorded.

Most agencies are likely doing this function at some level, so a brief reminder of its importance is warranted. They not only affect the incident as units respond, but also as it unfolds. They increase safety, decrease liabilities, and can be used as time-stamped evidence. Doing time checks may sound like a lot of extra work, but it really isn't compared to the benefits to crews, the appreciation they generate from responders, and the tie-in to the CAD system.

Having well-researched, well-written, and well-trained SOPs on this is well worth it.

Time checks can or should be implemented for law enforcement tactical operations, standby with allied agencies, or routine calls lasting longer than expected. They are also beneficial for fire service working incidents, structure fires, HazMat, and technical rescue, and can be requested by Incident Command at any time. They can also be used for EMS incidents of longer duration where safety is a concern, or MCI incidents. These checks should be adjusted to fit your agency's needs.

This entire function supports incident comments and crew safety!

Decent working incidents with multiple crews or companies, life-threatening operations, potential spread or exposures, and environmental hazards can be a lot to handle for Incident Command and/or Sector Officers. As Emergency Communications Specialists, this is where we shine by providing reminders of time lapses, crew accountability, changes in environmental conditions, and recording them in CAD.

Safety starts and ends with Communications.

Time flies when we are having fun, and it can get away on Incident Command and Sector Officers when they are dealing with serious issues right in front of them. Ensure they are armed with great response information, updates, pre-plans, or location incident history.

Points to consider:

Start Time:

• Time of call or time of response: This gives Incident Command an idea of duration so they can have a time mark for how long it has been burning to estimate structural integrity, fire spread, heat/smoke, etc., and not limited to the interior crew time or attack time.

10-Minute Time Checks:

• Dispatch notifies Incident Command at 10-minute intervals. There is no action taken or required by Dispatch other than recording it. This is simply a time check to assist Command, as they can get very busy in large incidents. When we lose track of time, we can lose track of operations and crews.

• It may be reported to Incident Command, but all crews on scene hear it and can do a quick mental check of their SCBA air time, burn time, interior sector working in the fire, in the hot zone, divers in the water, or crews entering a trench or cave-in, etc.

• The time check is entered into CAD and time stamped as a 10 min time check, 20 min time check, 40, 50, 70, 80, etc. Communications calls Command, waits for a reply and then announces “Command, 40 min time check” or “Command, 80 min time check” and records it in CAD.

• It becomes a part of the incident documentation for incident review/critique, liability protection, and NFIR reports to the Office of the Fire Commission.

• If you noticed that 30, 60, 90 were missing… good!

30-Minute Accountability Checks:

• Communications also calls Incident Command at 30-minute intervals and calls for an Accountability Check or PAR Check. In turn, Command calls each company officer to physically account for their company and report back to Command.

• Since everyone heard the 30-minute notification from Communications, each company officer is expecting to hear the request from Command. Command asks Company or Sector officers for an Accountability Check. Each Company/Sector officer physically accounts for their crew and reports it back to Command. As each officer reports back to Command, communications records it in CAD.

• Communications will announce which accountability check it is: 30, 60, 90, 120, etc. “Command, this is your 60-Minute accountability check,” and record it in CAD. Command can track times not only for accountability but also if crews need to be switched out, if there are any structural issues, and, of course, if anyone is missing. Remember, hindsight is 20/20 and “Oops” is a four-letter word.

Think about adding the following:

Weather Report:

• A weather report should not be something Command should have to ask for. Take the initiative and provide it. For these types of incidents, dispatch can include a weather report in the CAD notes as close to the start of the incident as possible. However, if it's a HazMat incident, the wind speed and direction should be provided in the dispatch, if possible, and at least in the post-dispatch update, and certainly before the responders arrive.

• A weather report should be recorded in CAD at the start of these incidents, including the time, wind speed and direction, temperature, and humidity.

• A weather update can be added to your CAD notes at each 30-minute accountability check, but should be updated to Incident Command if there are any significant changes.

▪ If the crews are doing a high-angle rescue on a metal tower, they need to know that lightning storms are moving in or if the wind is picking up.

▪ SWAT/ERT teams should be informed of weather changes or Watches and Warnings.

▪ Fire crews fighting a grass fire need a warning that the temperature or wind is increasing or changing.

▪ HazMat calls with vapor clouds or flowing liquids can also be affected by weather changes.

• A crucial benefit is that if you ever have to deal with liability or presumptive legislation issues, proper checks can be a real lifesaver to the department, the crews, and their families. You track incidents where crews were exposed to hazards, but more importantly, dispatch proves it was tracked, including the time, accountability checks, weather reports, and documentation. You know the saying, "if it's not written down… it never happened."

THE COMMVERSE

We provide more than just service to the public and our communities. We protect the crews regardless of agency or discipline. We protect our department and our division.

We are an invisible crew. They may not see us, but we are there.

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Mike Reschny 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.

Adobe Stock Photo

KEELY HEYMAN, CPE, ENP, PMP

THE SPACE BETWEEN:

The Human Interval Before Help Arrives

Emergency response is often defined by arrival. That moment when lights appear, sirens cut through traffic, and help reaches the scene.

But for the person who calls 9-1-1, the most profound part of the emergency happens before anyone gets there.

It is the space between crisis and response.

The space between knowing something is wrong and seeing someone arrive.

And it is in this interval, compressed, uncertain, and deeply human, that emergency communications has always lived.

Those who work in this profession know this space well, not as an abstract concept, and not simply as elapsed time on a call screen. It is the interval we enter with the caller and remain inside until help reaches them.

For those moments, there are only two people in it.
The one experiencing the emergency.
And the one holding the line.

No responder stands there yet.
No scene has stabilized.
No outcome is known.

There is only shared voice, responsibility, and uncertainty, contained in seconds that rarely feel short from either side.

We do not pass through this space. *We inhabit it.*

Many in emergency communications spend entire careers inside this interval, moving from one instance of it to the next: the parent counting breaths, the caller describing smoke thickening in a hallway, the witness unsure whether the person on the ground is alive, the driver after impact trying to understand what just happened.

Each time, the same threshold: someone alone in crisis, and someone else entering that aloneness through a headset.

Before responders arrive, before family is reached, before events begin to transition toward resolution, the communications professional shares the rawest portion of the emergency with the caller. It is held in real time. Without distance. Without context and often without a witness.

No one else occupies that interval in quite the same way.

Others will enter the incident. Many will shape its outcome. But the space between first fear and first arrival belongs, for a time, only to the caller and the one who answers.

To work in this space is both a privilege and a weight.

It is an honor to be the first steady presence someone encounters in crisis. The voice that brings structure to chaos and direction to panic, that translates confusion into action, that holds attention on what matters while the rest of the world narrows.

We often describe this time with our caller as providing instructions or controlling the call, language shaped by protocol and performance metrics. But inside the interval, the work is more elemental than that. It is the act of remaining with another human being at the moment their sense of safety fractures, and staying until it is restored or transferred.

There is no physical presence to offer. No visual confirmation. No ability to touch, move, or intervene directly. Everything must travel through voice: reassurance, urgency, authority, care. Everything received travels back the same way: fear, pain, confusion, grief, sometimes silence.

This is the environment we operate in. A cognitive and emotional space where decisions, empathy, and responsibility converge in real time.

It is also where many of the profession's quiet psychological battles are fought.

Because while responders arrive and scenes transition, the communications professional remains in that interval repeatedly, call after call, shift after shift, inhabiting fear, urgency, grief, and relief in rapid succession. The incidents change. The interval does not.

Because this interval is so familiar, it can become invisible to those who live within it. We move from call to call, shift to shift, entering the space between almost automatically, focused on what must be done, rarely pausing to consider what it means to be there at all.

Yet each time we enter, it is by invitation.

Someone, somewhere, in the first moments of fear or confusion or realization that something is wrong, chooses to reach outward and reaches us. When they do not know what to do or who else to call, they call 9-1-1, they call us. They bring us into the space between onset and arrival and ask, in essence, *"Stay with me until help gets here."*

To sit in that interval with another human being, to listen, to guide, to steady, to bear witness while their world narrows and waits, is a profound professional trust.

It is an honor to be allowed into someone's crisis while it is still unfolding.

Many in emergency communications carry the weight of this work. It is equally important to recognize its privilege. In the most uncertain minutes of another person's life, *we* are the ones with them.

Remembering that truth does not lessen the strain of accumulated intervals. But it can restore meaning to the space we continue to inhabit and to the role we hold within it.

This responsibility is rarely visible outside the profession, because the work itself leaves little trace. There is no scene, no apparatus, no physical marker. Only a conversation that existed for a few minutes and then ended, leaving its imprint primarily in memory.

And yet this interval is foundational to emergency response.

Responders enter scenes already shaped by what occurred within them: hazards identified, care begun, actions taken, attention directed. Technology now extends its reach, location, video, data, translation — but still across the same human bridge first established by voice.

Emergency response does not begin with arrival. It begins the moment someone is no longer alone.

That transition, from solitary fear to shared experience, is the true start of intervention. And it happens inside the space between.

For those who work in emergency communications, this interval becomes familiar terrain. We learn its contours: how time distorts within it, how callers move between panic and focus, how presence can be conveyed without proximity, how calm can be transferred without minimizing urgency.

We also learn its boundaries. We cannot remain in it indefinitely. Eventually, responders arrive, scenes take shape, and outcomes begin to unfold. The interval closes, and we release the caller into the next phase of care.

Then, often within seconds, another interval opens.

Another voice.
Another fracture.
Another entry into shared uncertainty.

Across years and careers, these intervals form a continuous landscape, one that many communications professionals continue to live and thrive within, even as they carry its cumulative weight. It is work defined not only by what happens, but by where it happens: inside the human space between crisis and arrival.

Emergency communications has often been described by what it supports: response, coordination, and outcomes. But its most defining work may be something quieter and more exacting: to enter the space between crisis and arrival, to remain there with another human being, and to ensure they are not alone until help reaches them.

Many in this profession have spent entire working lives inside that interval.

It shapes them.
Sustains them.
And at times, strains them.

It is shared space.
Held space.
Remembered space.

And it is where emergency response truly begins.

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Keely Heyman is a public safety leader, writer, and strategic communications consultant with more than 25 years of 9-1-1 experience. A former emergency communications director, she now works with organizations across the safety ecosystem to translate real-world response into meaningful stories, bridging technology, leadership, and the human side of emergency response.

THIS IS NOT A TOY

TRAINING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH LEGOS

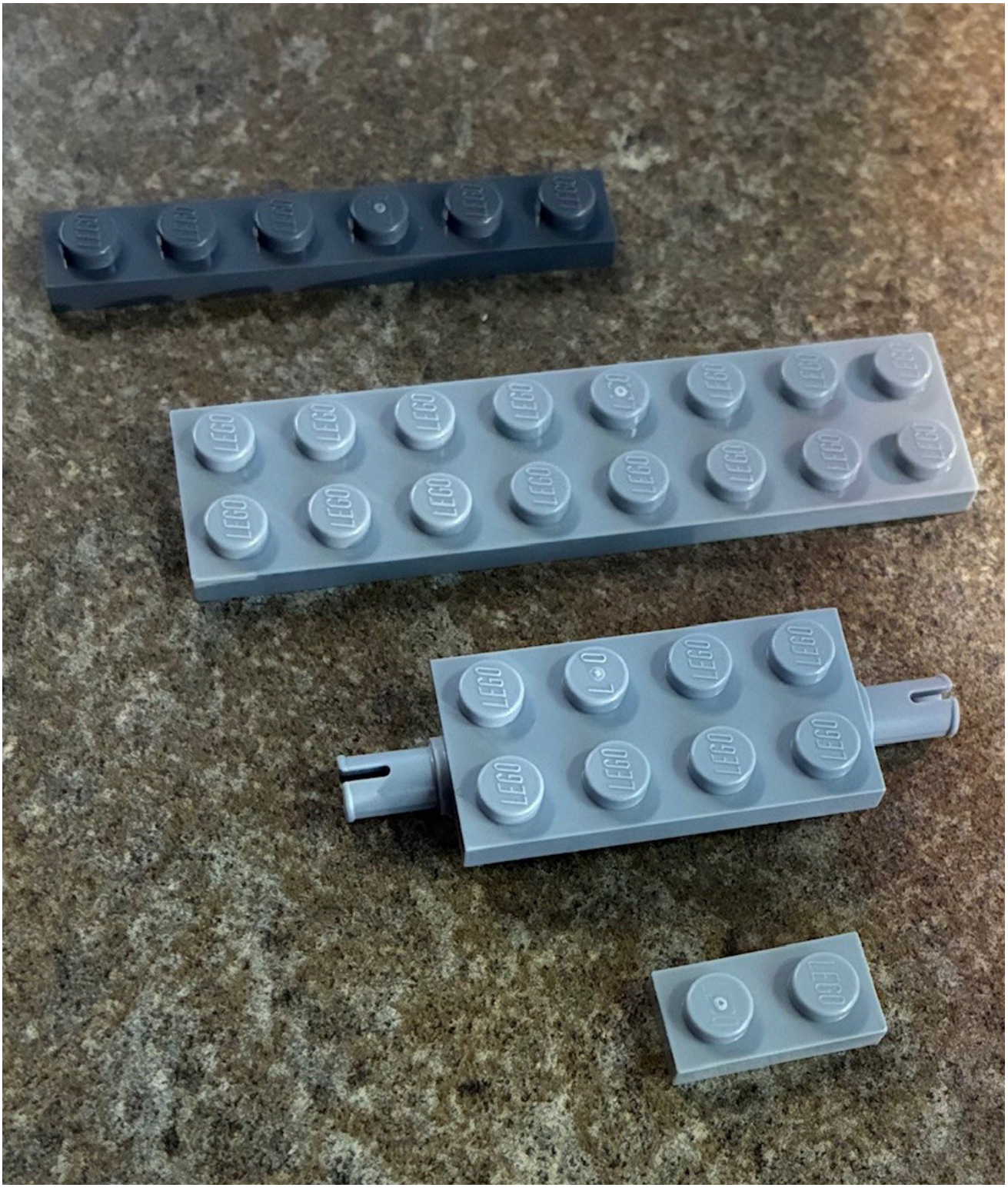

Photo provided by Jeremy Sparks.

The first time I dumped a pile of LEGOs onto the training room table, I got the look. You know the one. Seasoned dispatchers, arms crossed, eyebrows raised, silently wondering if their supervisor had finally lost it. These were professionals who manage heart attacks, shootings, structure fires, and officer emergencies, and here I was handing them toys.

It's actually one of my favorites and most effective outside-the-box training exercises. Not because it's flashy or trendy, but because it exposes communication breakdowns so clearly that no one can miss them. LEGOs don't argue, don't assume, and don't fill in the gaps for you. They simply reflect the quality of the information they're given. And that makes them a surprisingly powerful training tool for a profession that lives and dies by words.

The beauty of the exercise is how simple and accessible it is. You don't need a massive training budget or specialized equipment. A $10–$15 LEGO set, the small kits with about 60 to 80 pieces, can easily provide an hour of high-impact training. Ironically, many of those sets are police cars or fire trucks, which never fails to get a laugh from dispatchers. I've found that groups of three to four participants work best. One person receives the instruction booklet, while the rest of the group gets the LEGO pieces. They cannot see each other's materials, and they cannot use gestures or visual cues. Their only option is verbal communication, either by phone or radio. They can use any terminology they want. They can ask clarifying questions. They can slow down or change strategies midstream. The only rule is that they cannot ask or say what they are building, although it eventually becomes obvious. That single constraint eliminates shortcuts and forces true descriptive communication instead of guesswork.

One of the strengths of this exercise is how easily it scales based on experience level. It mirrors multiple real-world interactions at once: the exchange between caller and call-taker, where one person has critical information, and the other must extract, clarify, and confirm it; the handoff between call-taker and dispatcher, where accurately "painting the picture" is essential; and the communication between dispatcher and responder in the field.

For new hires, I keep it simple. The person with the instructions sits with their back to the group, speaking over their shoulder. This removes the added pressure of radio and allows participants to focus on describing, clarifying, and confirming understanding. For more experienced dispatchers, we increase the challenge by using portable radios. Now they're dealing with clipped transmissions, interference, stepped-on audio, and background noise. If multiple groups are running at once, even better—each team gets its own channel while still hearing the ambient noise of others nearby. Send someone outside on a windy day, and it becomes even more realistic. In fact, on one occasion, people in the surrounding community were listening to scanner apps and became convinced we were running some kind of undercover operation. There was even a Reddit thread dedicated to decoding our "LEGO terminology," with adults debating whether "two-by-four red with studs" was code in a police sting. It was the best accidental validation of the exercise I could have asked for.

Before the building begins, I always set the tone with a simple demonstration. I hold up a small gray square brick and ask the group to describe it. Inevitably, someone says, "It's a gray square." Then I pull out a slightly larger or slightly different gray brick and hold it next to the first one. The lesson lands immediately. What felt clear a moment ago is suddenly vague. That quick demonstration shows how easily language creates false confidence and why precision and clarification matter.

Once the activity begins, familiar patterns emerge. Teams usually start fast. Pieces snap together

confidently. Progress feels good—until it doesn't. One misunderstood instruction or missed detail sends the build in the wrong direction. That's when real learning begins. To succeed, dispatchers are forced to ask better, more intentional questions; give clear, concise, usable descriptions; slow down and confirm understanding; and separate critical information from unnecessary detail. These are the same skills required on a chaotic medical call or a working fire, just without real-world consequences.

Watching how each team approaches the problem is half the lesson. No two groups ever work the same way. Some immediately stop and organize, sorting every piece by size and color before the first instruction is given. It's methodical and deliberate, prioritizing structure before action. Other groups jump in quickly, trying to work ahead because they believe they know where the build is going. Wheels get assembled early. Pieces are grouped based on assumptions. "This is obviously a car," someone says, and momentum takes over. Sometimes they're right. But sometimes, just like in real life, the call takes a hard left. A single clarification changes everything. Early confidence turns into rework. Pieces have to be removed. Progress is undone. The group has to reset. That moment is gold. It mirrors exactly what happens in a communications center. Dispatchers rely on experience and pattern recognition. Most of the time it works. But when it doesn't, moving too fast creates more work and more risk than slowing down ever would have.

Other teams strike a balance, building steadily and verifying constantly. They may not finish first, but their final build is often the most accurate. None of these approaches is inherently wrong, but seeing them play out side by side sparks powerful discussion about habits, assumptions, and adaptability. The LEGOs don't judge the strategy; they simply reveal it.

Over the years, I've kept about six LEGO kits together in a training bin and added a few extra pieces that don't belong to any of the sets. Those pieces represent something dispatchers deal with every day--information that isn't actually helpful. Inevitably, someone tries to use one of those extra bricks, and the build goes sideways. The group has to stop and reassess what information matters and what doesn't. It becomes a tangible reminder that more information isn't always better information. And yes, I keep a few of those LEGO wrenches nearby, because sometimes, you need to back up and undo a few steps.

The bricks may be the hook, but the debrief is where the learning sticks. That's when participants connect the dots. "That's exactly what happens when I assume the caller understands me." "I realized I didn't actually confirm anything." "I talk a lot, but I don't always say what's needed." Those insights don't come from policy manuals or PowerPoint slides. They come from experience, even if that experience involved plastic bricks on a table.

Sometimes the best way to train life-saving communication skills isn't more emails, more acronyms, or more checkboxes. Sometimes it's getting back to the basics. A $10 LEGO set can expose communication gaps that years on the job have quietly built, and just as quietly ignored. It creates a safe place to fail, adjust, and improve. Plastic bricks make invisible communication failures visible. And in our world, clarity saves lives.

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Jeremy Sparks is an Emergency Communications Supervisor with the Howard County Police Department's 9-1-1 Communications Division and Chair of its Training Committee. With 17+ years in dispatch and two decades in public safety, he develops practical training that strengthens dispatcher performance, teamwork, and decision-making while supporting statewide initiatives across Maryland.

GOLD LINE SUPPORT

Gold Line Support was never created to be just another organization—it was built to fill a gap that has existed in public safety for far too long. Behind every siren, every response, and every life saved, there is a voice. A calm, steady, often unseen professional who carries the weight of chaos while guiding others through it. That voice is the 9-1-1 telecommunicator, and for years, that voice has been overlooked.

Gold Line Support exists to change that.

Founded on the belief that recognition, wellness, and professional identity should not be limited to one week out of the year, our mission is simple but powerful--to elevate the people behind the headset. We are here to ensure that telecommunicators across the country feel seen, supported, and valued—not just during National Public Safety Telecommunicators' Week, but every single day. One of our core initiatives, the Sunshine Dispatcher Recognition Program, reflects exactly what we stand for. This program highlights individuals across the nation who bring light into their centers—those who go above and beyond, who lift others up, and who embody what it truly means to serve. These are the voices that keep teams strong, even on the hardest days.

But recognition is just the beginning. We are actively building programs that go deeper—programs that focus on long-term wellness, peer support, and sustainable growth within the profession. This includes the development of our national scholarship initiative, designed to provide telecommunicators with access to training, conferences, and leadership opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. Recently, we've taken a significant step forward through our partnership with 9-1-1 Chaplain Initiative, Inc. This collaboration brings together missions that naturally align—supporting the mental, emotional, and professional well-being of those in public safety communications. Together, we are working toward building stronger support systems, expanding access to resources, and creating new pathways for care that extend beyond the console. This partnership represents more than just alignment—it represents action.

Gold Line Support is also focused on building a national community. Through social media campaigns, storytelling initiatives, and outreach efforts, we are giving telecommunicators a platform to share their experiences, their pride, and their identity. We want the public to understand who they are—and we want telecommunicators to feel proud of the role they play. As we continue to grow, we are doing so intentionally. This is not about moving fast for the sake of visibility.

It's about building something that lasts, something that can scale, something that can truly make an impact across the entire profession.

What makes this mission even more meaningful is the people behind it. Gold Line Support is led by individuals who have lived this profession—who understand the demands, the pressure, and the responsibility that comes with the headset. This includes me and our Vice President, Savanna Fettig, who shares with me a deep commitment to changing the culture of how telecommunicators are recognized and supported. We are not speaking from the outside looking in. We are part of this community, and we know what needs to change.

The future of public safety communications will not be built on recognition alone. It will be built on structure, support, and intentional leadership. Gold Line Support is committed to being part of that future—creating programs, partnerships, and opportunities that move this profession forward in a meaningful way. Because before the lights, before the sirens, there's a voice--and it's time the world hears it.

The future of public safety communications will not be built on recognition alone. It will be built on structure, support, and intentional leadership.

John Barney is a public safety leader and former 9-1-1 Director known for building and transforming emergency communication centers. With over a decade of experience, he now focuses on advancing telecommunicator recognition and wellness as the Founder of Gold Line Support, driving national initiatives that elevate the voices behind every call.

Adobe Stock Photo

RODGER MANN, ENP

A WORLD CUP LEGACY FOR EMERGENCY COMMUNICATORS

INSIDE NORTH TEXAS' 9-1-1 PLAYBOOK FOR THE 2026 WORLD CUP

As North Texas prepares to host multiple matches during the 2026 FIFA World Cup, one of the busiest players won't take the field at AT&T Stadium. Instead, it sits quietly behind the scenes: North Central Texas Emergency Communications District, better known as NCT9-1-1. Over the past year, NCT9-1-1 and its partners have been quietly overhauling how emergency calls are taken, translated, routed, and coordinated – all with the World Cup's unprecedented influx of international visitors in mind. Below is an overview of the key preparations now underway, based on internal planning and coordination meetings in 2025 and 2026.

Tackling the International Caller Problem

One of NCT9-1-1's focus areas is how foreign visitors reach help in an emergency. Voice calls are still the best path to reach 9-1-1 for international visitors. However, NCT9-1-1 proactively carried out testing with several international roaming devices to ensure potential issues were addressed and mitigated.

NCT9-1-1 and regional partners have taken the following steps:

- Testing foreign SIMs and roaming behavior from multiple countries to see how calls from overseas carriers behave once they land in the USA networks.
- Exploring "over-the-top" emergency solutions that can provide better caller location and callback information than traditional roaming paths alone.
- Working with carriers and national groups to standardize how international numbers and location data appear to local call takers, so dispatchers can reliably reconnect with callers if a call drops.

The World Cup is the catalyst, and these efforts are intended as long-term fixes for the realities of global travel and tourism, not just a one month event.

AI-Powered Translation and Transcription at the Console

With visitors expected from dozens of countries, language barriers are a central risk. Many PSAPs in the region rely on traditional third-party language services, which can slow response and strain call takers during surges. NCT9-1-1 is therefore suggesting and implementing an aggressive rollout of:

- Real-time AI transcription, turning spoken calls into text on screen in English to help call-takers follow complex or noisy calls.
- AI translation, so speech or text in other languages can be translated on the fly for call-takers, and responses can be translated back for the caller.

For NCT9-1-1, the end goal is that a tourist with limited English, whether calling about a medical emergency or a lost child, can be helped without delay or confusion.

Interoperability: Making Agencies Talk Like One Team

The World Cup will cut across city, county, state, and even federal jurisdictions. NCT9-1-1 is deeply embedded in a series of interoperability subcommittees and technical showcases focused on exactly that problem.

Across dozens of meetings, planners are working on:

- Shared 9-1-1 and radio interoperability plans so calls, incidents, and radio traffic can be moved between local 9-1-1 centers, transportation agencies, law enforcement, and FIFA-contracted security teams.
- Evaluating and piloting secure messaging and incident management platforms that will let hundreds of responders and partners share updates in real time.
- Building formal 911 interoperability subcommittees under regional World Cup planning structures to ensure call centers are represented alongside police, fire, EMS, and transportation.

The planning goes well beyond technology; there is sustained work on governance, data sharing agreements, and policies to ensure that these tools can actually be used under game day pressure.

Mapping, Traffic, and "Big Event" Situational Awareness

World Cup matches and fan events create a moving footprint: stadiums, training facilities, fan fests, watch parties, and transit hubs. To keep up, NCT9-1-1 and regional partners are engaged in:

- GIS and mapping projects that map all FIFA-related venues, auxiliary facilities, and likely fan-gathering spots so that 911 centers can quickly locate incidents and route responders
- Integrating transportation data, including road closures, bus routes, and highway incidents, into public safety systems, tying traffic conditions directly into dispatch decisions.
- Integrating video streaming and other feeds that can be available to 911 and operations centers during major World Cup movements.

Funding, Pilots, and a Long Runway to 2026

None of this comes free. A parallel track of work focuses on securing and aligning funding:

- Pursuit of homeland security, transportation, and other regional grants targeted at translation, AI, and interoperability, often justified explicitly as World Cup readiness projects.
- Structuring contracts and pilots so they can be deployed quickly enough to be battle-tested before June 2026, but also sustained as long-term capabilities rather than one-off experiments.

Throughout these discussions, officials stress that the World Cup is both a deadline and an opportunity. It forces overdue investments in translation, data integration, and interoperability that will benefit North Texans long after the final whistle.

Training, Exercises, and Public Education

Technology alone doesn't save lives. NCT9-1-1 is therefore weaving World Cup scenarios into:

- Board and management briefings, ensuring local leaders understand the scale of the event and the operational changes required.
- Multi-agency exercises like the MetroX complex attack simulation and transportation tabletop exercises, which explicitly use World Cup-style scenarios to stress 911, emergency management, and transit partners together.
- Early plans for public education and messaging around how to call 911, what to expect, and what tools (including apps) will be available to international visitors

A World Cup Legacy for Emergency Communications

Taken together, the preparations underway in North Central Texas represent one of the most ambitious 911 modernization efforts tied to a sporting event in U.S. history. From AI translation in the call center to complex cross-agency drills and new mapping and data sharing infrastructures, NCT9-11 is positioning the region not only to handle the World Cup's unique demands, but also to emerge from it with a stronger, more resilient emergency communications system. For residents and visitors alike, the goal is simple: when someone dials 911 during the World Cup in any language, from any phone, at any venue – help arrives just as fast as it would on an ordinary day.

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Rodger Mann has been involved in GIS and public safety technology since 2001, with a dedicated focus on advancing 9-1-1 solutions since 2007. As a passionate innovator, he thrives on developing cutting-edge technologies that enhance emergency response and improve mission-critical systems. With expertise in geospatial intelligence and emergency communications, Rodger collaborates closely with public safety stakeholders to pioneer next-generation solutions that push the industry forward. Currently serving as the Chief Innovation Officer at the North Central Texas Emergency Communications District (NCT9-1-1), he leads strategic initiatives that modernize and optimize emergency response technologies. Rodger is an ENP and holds a Master's in Geographical Information Systems and Science.

BEHIND THE CALL

The Engineer Keeping It Alive

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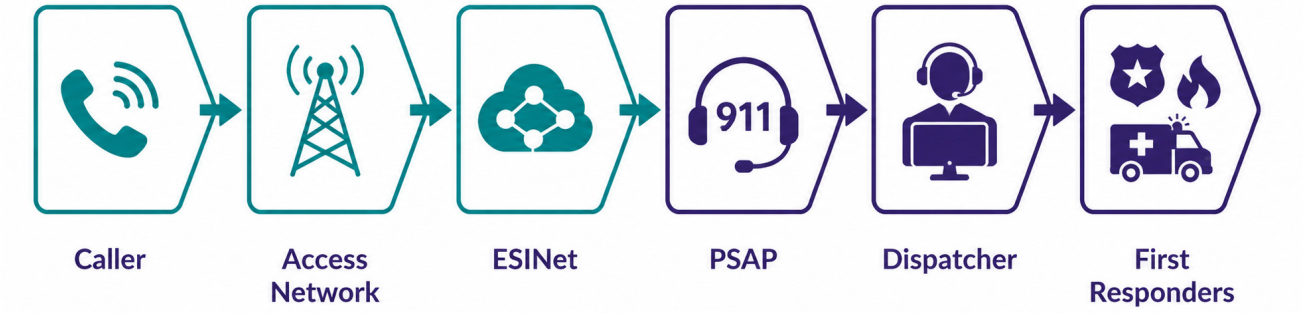

Every 9-1-1 call starts the same way: a shaky voice, a location, and a demand for help. What most callers never see is the invisible partner on the other side of the line—an engineer who keeps that call alive, second by second, from the moment the digits are dialed until the first units arrive. Behind every "Stay on the line, help is on the way" is not just a dispatcher's calm, but a network built, hardened, and monitored by professionals whose names the caller will never know.

For public-safety and control-room teams, this isn't abstract technology talk. It's trust. When a caller hears "We're sending someone now," they're also trusting an engineer who designed the routing, secured the data paths, and ensured that one failing node doesn't turn a 9-1-1 call into a missed call. Dispatchers are the human face of the response; engineers are the backbone that lets that face stay steady under pressure.

The Call Flow: From Caller To First Responders

To understand what the engineer is doing, it helps to see the journey of a 9-1-1 call in broad strokes:

Caller → Access Network → ESINet → PSAP → Dispatcher → First Responders

Caller

A mobile or landline user dials 9-1-1. With modern NG9-1-1 and ESINet-style architectures, the network captures not just the call, but location, device type, and sometimes even initial video or text. Even in hybrid environments, ALI/ANI lookups still occur, bridging legacy systems with IP-based routing.

Access Network

The call enters, then accesses network cell towers, DSL, fiber-to-the-home, or VoIP gateways that carry the signal from the caller's device into the carrier's backbone. This layer must be fast, reliable, and able to prioritize emergency traffic. If the caller is mobile, GIS-based routing replaces legacy MSAG boundaries, ensuring the call is steered based on actual geospatial coordinates rather than static address tables.

ESINet (Emergency Services IP Network)

The call is routed across the ESINet, a secure, IP-based backbone that connects carriers, PSAPs, and emergency-services agencies. Here, Policy Routing Functions (PRFs) determine which PSAP receives the call based on location, service boundaries, and real-

time network conditions. ESINet handles voice, data, and rich-media flows, passing the call to the correct PSAP based on location and routing rules.

PSAP (Public Safety Answering Point)

The ESINet delivers the call to the right PSAP, which may be a local PSAP, a regional hub, or a statewide backbone. Legacy T1 circuits, SIP trunks, and SIP-enabled gateways translate the call into the control-room environment. The PSAP's call-handling platform merges caller location, ALI/ANI data, and any supplemental information into a single view for the dispatcher.

Dispatcher

The dispatcher at the console sees the call pop up with the caller ID, location, and any associated data. They answer, gather information, and send the call to the appropriate responder unit while keeping the caller on the line. Behind the scenes, CAD systems, GIS layers, and radio networks all depend on the same engineered backbone.

First Responders

Through the same underlying network, the dispatcher sends units, shares location data, and sometimes video or text to first responders. The loop is closed when help arrives, but the engineer's work continues in the background, watching for the next failure.

Every one of these steps is the product of engineers who spent years asking, What if this fails? And how can we keep it alive? That's not just network engineering - it's life-support engineering.

A real-world scenario: When the Network Is Tested

To see this in action, imagine a real-world storm event: A severe coastal storm sweeps through a metro area. Winds shear a fiber cable that runs along a main highway, cutting a primary ESINet link between a regional PSAP and two county PSAPs. At the same time, cell towers begin to lose power as backup generators struggle to keep up. Call volumes spike as people report flooding, downed power lines, and medical emergencies.

Here's What Happens Behind The Scenes:

At the carrier's end, engineers monitor the storm-affected fiber and detect a sudden loss of signal. Automated failover scripts reroute traffic to a secondary fiber path, while the main cable is rerouted via a wireless microwave link. The ESINet control layer shifts capacity dynamically, keeping 9-1-1 call traffic at the top of the priority queue.
At the PSAP, the network operations team sees alerts on their dashboards: "Primary ESINet path degraded," "Secondary link activated." The PSAP's core-switching gear automatically shifts to the backup path without dropping active calls. Redundant SIP trunks and virtualized call-handling platforms keep the console servers running.

At the control room, the dispatcher notices a brief flicker on the radio screen, but the call they're on doesn't drop. The caller, sitting in a darkened living room listening to the wind, hears only the dispatcher's calm voice: "Stay on the line, we have your location and are sending units."

Behind it all, an engineer is at a NOC console, validating the routing, checking that the backup path has enough bandwidth, and ensuring that location data and CAD (Computer-Aided Dispatch) feeds still

flow. If the storm worsens, they're ready to trigger a PSAP failover, shifting responsibility to a neighboring PSAP that can temporarily handle the overflow of calls.

In that moment, the engineer isn't just patching a network; they're patching the city's lifeline.

Why Public-Safety Teams Should Care About The Engineer

For public-safety and control-room professionals, understanding the engineer's role isn't academic; it's operational survival.

For Control-Room Managers

Knowing what the network can and cannot do helps you plan for outages, prioritize upgrades, and communicate risk to leadership. If you know your PSAP has only one fiber path into the ESINet, you can push for a second fiber path. If your SIP-trunk provider has a history of outages, you can demand redundancy or reconsider your architecture.

For Dispatchers

Recognizing that your screen is backed by a carefully engineered ecosystem lets you trust the tools, even when stress is high. When a call flickers on the screen, you aren't seeing a
"glitch" so much as a live failover in progress, designed by engineers to keep the call alive.

For Leaders

Investing in the "engineers behind the call" means investing in fewer dropped calls, fewer misrouted units, and faster response times. It means building PSAPs that can handle storm-driven surges, cyberattacks, and routine maintenance without missing a beat.

The Engineer As An Unseen Guardian

Engineers don't wear uniforms or bodycams. They work in data centers and NOCs, staring at dashboards where a red line can mean a hospital's emergency line going down or a city's PSAP losing a primary route. Their job is to ensure that when a 9-1-1 call lands, the network behind it is secure, redundant, and fast enough that the only thing the dispatcher worries about is the human on the other end, not the technology.

When a storm knocks out power or a fiber cable is severed, it isn't speeches that restore service; it's engineers rerouting traffic, activating backups, and patching vulnerabilities in real-time. Behind every "We can still hear you" is that person, or team, quietly fighting to keep the system breathing.

Who Really Keeps The Call Alive?

Behind every 9-1-1 call, there is a chain of humans working under pressure. Dispatchers guide. Responders race. Callers hope. But none of it works unless the network holds, and the network holds because an engineer made sure it would.

Behind every answered call is an engineer who made sure the call could be answered at all.

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Shashwat Srivast is an NG911 systems engineer supporting nationwide E911 operations, specializing in NG911 reliability, ESINet routing, Text to 911, and real time troubleshooting for PSAP and carrier networks.

Daniel Koenig, ENP, CMPC

BEYOND THE FIRST CONVERSATION:

BRINGING LEGISLATORS BACK TO THE REAL 9-1-1 CENTER

In the last article, we talked about getting out there—building relationships with legislators, inviting them into your world, and helping them understand what 9-1-1 really does. That first step matters. It gets you on the radar, but the follow-up is where it actually starts to stick.

National Public Safety Telecommunicators' Week was only a short time ago, and the legislature is often on break during the summer months.

That Was the Celebration… This Is the Job

Telecommunicators Week is great. It should be. There's food, themes, decorations, and maybe a few lighter moments in an otherwise intense environment. It's recognition that's long overdue—and well-deserved. But let's not kid ourselves--that's not a normal week in the center. If a legislator visited during that time, they got the "highlight reel" version of your operation. Now's your chance to follow up with something like: "We'd love to have you come back and see a typical day—no themes, no balloons, just the real thing." Say it with a smile. It lands because once they see the difference, it clicks.

The "No Balloons" Tour (aka Reality)

A follow-up visit doesn't need to be fancy. In fact, the less polished it is, the better. Work through your chain of command, loop in your leadership or legislative-affairs folks, and set up something simple:

- A walk-through during a regular shift
- Time on the floor to observe call-taking and dispatch
- A chance to ask questions while things are actually happening

What they'll notice right away:

- The constant flow of calls
- The juggling act between phones, radios, and screens
- The focus it takes to keep everything moving

And what they won't see this time:

- A taco bar
- A themed dress day
- A quiet, staged environment

That contrast? That's the message.

Keep the Conversation Going (But Keep It Real)

If you've already had that first conversation with a legislator, don't overthink the follow-up. You don't need a formal presentation. You just need to connect the dots for them.

Simple, real-world comments go a long way:

- "This is what we were talking about when we mentioned call volume spikes."
- "Here's how we prioritize when multiple calls come in at once."
- "This is a pretty typical staffing level for us."

You're not teaching a class—you're giving them a window into your day.

Stay Visible in the Community

The article before this discussed community engagement—and it doesn't stop after one event. If anything, this is where you build momentum.

Keep showing up:

• Public safety events

• Open houses

• School visits or senior outreach

• Community-specific events where trust and education matter

Be intentional about reaching different populations:

• Seniors who may need reassurance about when to call

• Non-English-speaking communities that may have concerns about access

• Neighborhoods that benefit from seeing the people behind the system

When you can, invite legislators to tag along. Not to speak—just to see. When they watch you interact with the public, answer questions, and represent the system, it reinforces everything you've been telling them.

Quick Reality Check: Know Your Policies

As you get more comfortable with this, it's easy to slip into casual conversations. That's fine, but don't forget the basics.

Make sure you know:

• What you're allowed to share

• Who speaks officially for the agency

• How outside communication is handled

Nobody's trying to trip you up—but it's always better to stay aligned than to have to walk something back later. When in doubt, check with a supervisor or your PIO. It's a quick step that saves headaches.

Use Your Chain of Command (It's There for a Reason)

If you're continuing to engage with legislators, keep your leadership in the loop.

Supervisors, managers, and legislative affairs teams can:

• Help coordinate return visits

• Keep messaging consistent

• Make sure everyone's on the same page

For supervisors and managers reading this—this is your lane, too. Encourage your team to get involved, but give them some guardrails to keep it productive.

Why the Follow-Up Is What Matters

Anyone can do a one-time visit. What makes an impact is when legislators:

• Come back more than once

• See different shifts

• Talk to different people on your team

That's when it stops being a "tour" and starts becoming an understanding--and that's when better decisions happen.

Final Thought

The first article talked about starting the conversation. This is about continuing it. You've already shown them the appreciation week version of your center. Now show them the other 51 weeks. Invite them back. Let them see the pace, the pressure, and the professionalism that defines what you do. If they walk in and look around for decorations, just tell them: "NPSTW was the party… this week is the job."

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Dan Koenig is the President of the Florida 9-1-1 Coordinators' Association. He is a Past President of Florida NENA and serves as their Legislative Affairs Chair. He has worked the majority of his career in the public sector, starting at age 14 on the beaches of New Jersey during summer break. He understands the need for a strong relationship with government leaders and elected officials.

NPSTW was the party... This week is the job.

IT'S OKAY TO CRY

For years, people have been afraid to open up and share what they are truly feeling. It happens everywhere, in every situation. It especially happens in public safety, in 9-1-1. This is a place where you are expected to be mentally strong, push forward, and do what you need to do to help those in need. We are masters at this, but we are not always masters at taking care of ourselves or talking to each other. But why? We are the only ones who know what this profession is like, the calls we take, and how it feels. We are afraid to open up and share. This happened more in the past. Don't get me wrong, people are still struggling, but we have come a long way from the old way of thinking. 9-1-1 professionals continue to connect and learn from each other.

9-1-1 Leadership Training Event
Mayan Ranch, March '26

The 360 Dispatcher, led by Joe Serio, hosts a 9-1-1 Leadership Training event at the Mayan Ranch in Texas about three times a year. It is a week-long, unique experience where 9-1-1 professionals from all over the country come to learn about communication, leadership skills, and more, but it's deeper than that. What they are really doing is learning about themselves. They learn how to get out of their own way, communicate with each other, and communicate what they feel.

It may seem easy, but for many people, this is the hardest thing to do. Most of it is because of the fear

of judgment from others. Also, no one wants to look in the mirror and have that moment of realization that they themselves might be the cause of their problems. What happens is that throughout the week, each group bonds and becomes comfortable with each other to the point of leaning on one another and connecting through their stories. The last class that the attendees experience is one that takes them on a roller coaster of emotions. Everything they have learned and shared has led to this final class, before their final night together.

The attendees come back from their break. Some notice that more issues have been placed on their tables.

“Ricardo… are you going to make us cry?” asks an attendee.

“There is a possibility that you will, “ I respond.

“Oh man, I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

The attendee is reassured that everything will be okay. Some of them have attended this session, Imagine Listening, before others have been informed that it is a peer support session and that it can get emotionally intense, but that it ends on a lighter note. This session has been presented all over the country for almost ten years. The first 30 minutes allow the attendees to share a hard story or a save story, either out loud or written down. The following 30 minutes are where the attendees share funny or outrageous 9-1-1 stories. Laughing is good medicine, and once they go through the first half, they need something light-hearted.

So what made this one different? This Imagine Listening session was one in which every story, except for one or two, was spoken aloud. The attendees broke while sharing their stories, but what was amazing to watch and experience was the first-hand camaraderie between them.

Some of these attendees only know each other from this event. To see them get up from their seats, walk over, and hug the person breaking down in front of them was powerful. People saying things like, “take your time, we are here for you,” to “you’re in a safe place,” was simply incredible. You could feel a weight lifted in the room during that session, and more so when we had the chance to laugh and meet up after class for dinner and karaoke in the saloon.

“It’s okay to cry.” – NAVIGATOR ‘26

The ballroom where Imagine Listening was held was fully packed, standing room only. I had spoken to many people leading up to that class about what we would be doing, and many had already signed up for it. They were excited to experience this peer support session. Some attendees told me that they had been in the class before, but they felt like they needed it again. They needed to feel the energy in the room and let go of some of the stress and stories that they have been holding onto. Others were in there for the first time, and once I explained what we were doing, it was obvious that they had no idea what they were in for, but in the end, they loved it.

The majority of the stories shared during this session were hard calls, but there were also good moments that were shared. One such moment was when an attendee, whom I had met a couple of days earlier, shared a story through tears. She apologized for being emotional and needed a moment to regain her composure, but she was also told it was okay and to take her time. This is what the session is all about. After she finished, she ended with something that everyone could relate to.

She said, “I just want all of you to know that it’s okay to cry. That it is okay to remember things that hurt, and it’s okay to cry about them.”

She not only said this through tears, but also with a smile. In the end, there was not a dry eye in the room. It was almost as if everyone took one deep breath and exhaled together. It was okay. We were okay, and we were doing this together. Times have truly changed, and that is exactly why I share both of these experiences. The old mentality continues to fade away, but more work must be done. We need to continue to open up, when you're ready, of course, but also let people know that they are not alone in what they are feeling. We need to continue to provide a safe place and build a culture where people can share and connect. We need to continue to let people know, just like the attendee at NAVIGATOR, that "it's okay to cry."

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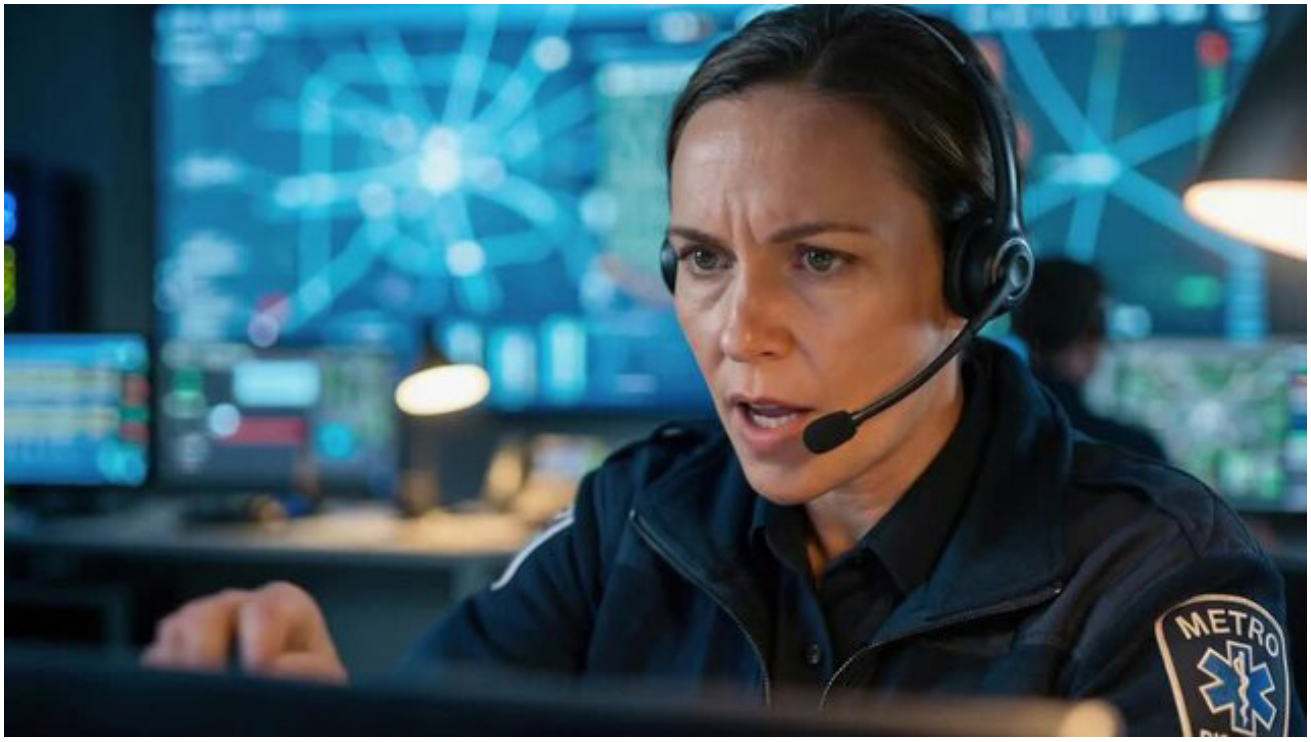
One Voice is written by Ricardo Martinez II, Founder of the #IAM911 Movement, creator and host of the Within the Trenches podcast, and creator of Imagine Listening - Your worst day is our everyday, a peer support session that allows for a safe space for 9-1-1 professionals to share their stories. For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

BRAD FLANAGAN, ENP, RPL, MPA

SEE THE CALL



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"I'm stuck on a mountain."

Five words. And somewhere in your center, right now, a telecommunicator is building a response picture from them.

What does that actually tell you? It tells you someone needs help. It does not tell you whether they are on a cliff face or a gentle ridge, whether the terrain allows a ropes team or demands a helicopter, or whether they are ten yards from the trail they cannot see and just need someone to guide them back to it.

Five words, and you are still guessing.

This is not a new challenge. It is the original challenge of 9-1-1. Callers are not trained observers. They are scared, overwhelmed, and giving you the world through an emotional filter that strips out exactly the details that would change your response. They tell you what they see. They cannot tell you what you need to know. And for decades, we have accepted that gap as the cost of doing business.

We should not accept it anymore.

What Is Incident Related Imagery, and What It Isn't

In 2017, D. Jeremy DeMar completed graduate research through the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security that should be required reading for every center leader. His paper, Next Generation 9-1-1: Policy Implications of Incident Related Imagery on the Public Safety Answering Point, introduced the term Incident Related Imagery (IRI) to describe the photos, video, and streaming media that callers can transmit to a 9-1-1 center during an emergency. The framework he built is the right starting point for any center serious about this conversation.

I know where your mind goes; your telecommunicators glued to a screen while someone's worst moment plays out in real time. That is not what this is, and if that is the policy your center builds around IRI, you have missed the entire point of the capability. This is not surveillance. It is a targeted look at the information that changes your response, used when it matters, governed by the policy you build around it.

The research complicates that fear. The two largest drivers of peritraumatic distress in 9-1-1 work are ambiguity and helplessness. Today's telecommunicator operates at the maximum of both. They hear the scream, the fragment, the silence, while imagination supplies a worst case with no ceiling. In 2022, Dr. Michelle Lilly published How NG911 Technology May Positively Impact Mental Health in 9-1-1: Evidence from Research and Theory on PTSD and argued that bounded visual information may reduce the variables that drive trauma, not amplify them. Video bounds it. The researcher who put dispatcher trauma on the map is pointing toward the remedy.

IRI is actionable visual intelligence. The difference between a caller's description of an event and an actual picture of it. That distinction is the difference between the fear we have and the answers we are seeking. Emergency Communications Centers that have been running this technology since 2019 will tell you the calls that change outcomes are rarely the dramatic ones. They are the everyday calls. The ones that seem routine right up until the moment you realize you were operating without the entire picture.

Four Calls. Four Different Responses. One Tool.

A vehicle goes off the roadway. A panicked caller who just experienced something new and emotional for them calls 9-1-1 and says it's bad. They always say it's bad to them. But is the car resting safely on a flat shoulder, or teetering on the edge of an embankment in a blind curve where the next driver won't see it until impact? Video answers in seconds. Your response changes. So does the approach of every field responder heading that way.

A bear is downtown. This happens more than you might expect in certain communities. The caller tells you there's a bear. That's it. That's all they've got. But where exactly is the bear? How is it behaving? Is it cornered, or moving toward a crowd? Is it a situation for animal control with a tranquilizer, or is it eight hundred pounds of challenge about to walk into a restaurant? Video tells you. The caller won't be able to provide that information without time-costly interrogation.

Two men are in a verbal altercation outside a business. The caller says it's getting heated. Through video, your telecommunicator can see exactly how heated: body language, proximity, whether this is two guys blowing off steam or something about to turn. More importantly, your team can capture a screenshot. Not a caller's description passed to a call-taker, passed to a dispatcher, passed to a field unit, like a game of telephone. An actual image, sent directly to field responders en route to that location. They are looking for this person, not a quasi-description assembled across three handoffs from a scared caller who did their best.

Now back to our five words: I'm stuck on a mountain. With video, you can see the terrain, assess real ingress and egress options, and make a resource decision grounded in reality rather than five words of fear. Sometimes that means a helicopter. Sometimes it means calmly telling someone to look ten yards to their left. Without video, you are rolling the dice on which one it is. Sometimes those dice land on a body recovery that didn't have to be one.

The Bigger Question: What Are You Building?

The telecommunicator who can synthesize a live video feed alongside caller audio, location data, call history, and radio traffic is not performing the job we originally designed. They are doing something more sophisticated. They are functioning as an Intelligence Analyst.

This is not hyperbole. Right now, the most forward-thinking leaders in this industry are pushing to reframe the Public Safety Answering Point as a Public Safety Intelligence Center. The idea is not cosmetic, but rather, it is structural. It asks a direct question: are the people sitting in your center call-takers reacting to

information, or analysts synthesizing it into actionable intelligence for the field? That is the dichotomy of where we are vs. where we are going. Different skills and different culture. An entirely different standard of what we owe the people doing them.

Twenty-five states have reclassified or resolved to reclassify public safety telecommunicators as first responders. The Bureau of Labor Statistics still classifies the role under Office and Administrative Support, the same family as receptionists and taxi dispatchers. The work has changed. The classification is catching up.

Video into the PSAP is not the entire transition, but it is one of the cleanest first steps toward it, and it is stable, vetted, and available right now.

Your telecommunicators are already doing extraordinary things with incomplete information. Five words in, they are building a world. They are making life-and-death resource decisions from fear, fragments, and whatever a scared caller can hand them through a phone.

Give them the whole picture.

Not because the technology demands it. Not because NG9-1-1 is coming and you need to check a box. Because the people sitting in your center have already outgrown the tools you gave them, and they have been quietly doing Intelligence Center work inside a Communications Center framework for years.

They deserve the infrastructure to match what you already expect from them. The technology has been ready for seven years. The only thing still missing is you.

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Brad Flanagan, ENP, is the PSAP Ambassador at Axon 911 and 911 Futurist. With 15 years working in 9-1-1 centers in Grand Junction and Aspen, Colorado, he now spends his days envisioning what's the future for emergency communications — and pushing the industry to get there faster.

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