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The Police Communications Officer: Part One

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Part one of a three-part series

Imagine sitting in a small room talking to a coworker on a two-way radio. Now imagine that suddenly, and with no warning, the person you are talking to is in the midst of a life-threatening situation ten miles away and crying for help. You are now their lifeline. You are the one person in the world who has the ability to summon help, direct the responders to the scene, and coordinate what will hopefully be a successful resolution. Imagine further that at the end of your shift you have had no contact with the person you assisted and no one has bothered to call and say “thank you” for a job well done.

Imagine that you have a job where most of the people you talk with on the telephone are in the middle of a personal crisis. Their house is on fire. They have just been involved in an accident on the highway and need medical help. They are victims of a criminal act. They are suicidal and are reaching out for help. They are traveling on the interstate and want to know why YOU have closed the road and when will it be reopened.

Imagine that throughout your work day, you are expected to simultaneously answer six incoming telephone lines and two radios, enter information into two computers, look up telephone numbers, check for active arrest warrants, fill out reports and make sure the coffee pot doesn't run dry.

Sounds like a stressful way to make a living doesn't it? It is, but hundreds of people across the state of Alabama and thousands across the country do it every day. They are Police Communications Officers (PCOs) and the good ones make the juggling act look easy. They casually answer the radio calls while holding a phone to each ear and typing at the same time. They recognize dozens of voices and can read an officer's stress level almost instantly. They are the ultimate multi-taskers. They are also burning out at a tremendous pace.

The state of Alabama currently has no standardized training format for PCOs, often called dispatchers. With no uniform way to train these employees, and little attention paid to them by the organization, it is little surprise that job related stress is becoming a serious problem.

Unfortunately it is problem that many departments do not recognize or choose to ignore. What are the major stressors and how can an organization take steps to reduce them?

- PCOs are isolated physically and emotionally from many of the day's events. They are sequestered in the radio room or dispatch area and are seldom allowed to leave their immediate work area. This limits their ability to participate in many of the basic socialization activities afforded most workers. This physical isolation also keeps them from gaining any type of emotional closure following critical incidents. They are often left out of the information loop following the calls they participate in. They leave at the end of the day often not knowing the results of their efforts.
- Many law enforcement supervisors and managers do not appreciate the value and the contributions made by these employees because they do not fully understand the demands placed on them. This leads to PCOs feeling like second-class citizens within their own organizations. This problem is made even worse by supervisors who distinguish arresting officers from PCOs by using language and phrases like "you people" and "mere civilians." While it is true that a special bond exists between police officers, there is nothing to be gained for the organization by degrading valuable people just because they perform a different function.
- The lack of formal training adds to the stress felt by these employees. A person who is adequately trained and has a solid support base will perform better and in a shorter time frame than one who is thrown into the fray to "sink or swim." Immersion can be a valuable training tool, but new employees need the security of a lifeline if they do get in over their heads. Formal, documented training programs also make it easier for managers to identify a new employee's strengths and weaknesses and to identify potential problem areas before they become unmanageable.
- It wears on PCOs when they spend their entire shifts listening to people with problems and complaints. Manpower shortages mean longer waits for service. Accidents block roads and stop traffic. Weather (particularly snow, in Alabama) forces road closures. Most cars now are equipped with cellular phones and drivers are not averse to using them to express their displeasure while traveling. Who has to hear these complaints? The PCOs. Can they do anything about manpower shortages or accidents or weather? The answer is obviously that they cannot, but the general public and many police managers often forget that fact. Spending eight or ten hours a day having people blame you for things beyond your control leads to stress that is difficult to reconcile.

Now that I have identified some of the stressors faced by Police Communications Officers, what can be done to alleviate them? In part two of this series, I will present specific types of training which will enable PCOs to better manage their daily work induced stress and to perform at higher levels. I will also outline a program undertaken by one agency and discuss the results of their training and how it can apply to other departments.

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