



ICJE, P.O. Box 293, Montgomery, AL 36101 * 334-280-0020

ICJE Feature Article, December 14, 2001

The Police Communications Officer: Part Two - Effectively Managing Stressors

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In part one of this article I gave you a little insight to the duties of Police Communications Officers (PCOs) and identified four major job related stressors which adversely impact their performance. In part two I will briefly describe several ways to combat these problems. In part three I will outline a training program designed by one Alabama agency specifically for PCOs and report on its effectiveness.

To recap from part one, four of the problem areas include:

- Physical and emotional isolation from coworkers and from many of the day's events.
- Managers and supervisors who do not understand the role of the PCO and its importance to the department's overall mission.
- The lack of formal, standardized training.
- Constantly being on the receiving end of complaints and problems, many of which the PCO can do nothing about.

What can be done?

The physical separation of PCOs is most often done for reasons of privacy and efficiency. The radio room can be a very hectic place and distractions from outside can hamper employees from hearing the radio or the telephone. Some of the information in the radio room is sensitive and cannot be shared with the public. This includes criminal histories and other information relating to open, active investigations.

While the radio room or dispatch area does not need to turn into a general assembly area, supervisors and field officers must remember that the people answering the phones and giving out the calls are stake holders in the events just as much as the officer who is physically responding to the call. It doesn't take much time for a supervisor to periodically update PCOs on recent events and make them feel that they are making a positive contribution to the department's mission. Field officers should remember to call the radio room from time to time and say "thank you," particularly after

stressful events. This bonding process between arresting officers and civilian employees is vital and should be encouraged by management.

Managers and arresting officer supervisors must accept the fact that the PCO or dispatcher is a crucial part of the operation and should be treated as such. Officers in the field must rely on information obtained by the PCO and act on it in good faith. The PCO must be trusted to ask the right questions and gather enough information for the officer to make informed decisions. This trust can only come when managers and field officers know that the dispatch staff is well trained and part of the team.

Most PCOs or dispatchers receive no formal training before being allowed to handle the radio room on their own. There are currently no standards in place in Alabama, which require departments to ensure that new hires are ready and able to handle the situations common to police dispatch rooms. Most departments will require new employees to spend time with a veteran PCO and learn by doing, what we often refer to as "on the job training." This can be a valuable tool, but should be supplemented by formal, documented training to ensure that the new employee has the skills needed to perform at a high level when the routine suddenly becomes an emergency and lives are at stake. The formal training is also valuable to the manager by revealing an employee's strengths and weaknesses early in their career, allowing time for remedial or advanced training. Documentation should accompany any formal training and should be thorough and objective. This can be worth its weight in gold in the event of a lawsuit alleging misconduct or inadequate training.

Another consideration relating directly to training is supervision. Managers, both civilian and those in arresting officers status, must know enough about the PCO's job to effectively supervise them on a daily basis. Putting an arresting officer in charge of a communications center when he or she has no training or experience as a dispatcher can lead to problems, particularly when grading time comes around. How do you objectively and fairly grade an employee if you do not know what they do?

How do you deal with being on the receiving end of complaints all day? The emotional stress of dealing with other people's problems every day can be tremendous. PCOs are like everyone else in that they report to work with their own private demons and personal situations to deal with. Then they get to answer the telephones all day and listen to other people blame them for things they have no control over. The PCO didn't cause the accident that is blocking the highway. They didn't make it snow. It's not their fault the department is short of officers and the response is delayed. They didn't make the tire on your car go flat. Part of the problem is that most callers have no idea what is going on outside their own little world and believe that their call is the most important. Dispatchers must listen to each call and prioritize it based on the nature of the "emergency" and the availability of officers.

This is, perhaps the most daunting challenge facing managers and supervisors. How do you keep morale up? How do you debrief and de-stress people who deal with frightened, angry, or irate, callers all day? This is where managers must earn their keep.

Lines of communications must remain open. Supervisors should talk with those in the communications role following critical incidents. Counseling and incident debriefing should be made available to them just as it is for arresting officers. Supervisors in the office should monitor dispatchers during times of high stress and provide for periodic relief. Formal stress management training classes can be helpful by acknowledging that the stress exists and learning ways to deal with it effectively. It also helps by allowing dispatchers to talk among themselves and reinforce that their experiences and feelings are normal and healthy.

The key to managing a communications staff is a clear understanding of the challenges they face and a willingness to support them as vital members of the department. The reward for this effort is a team of employees who will work hard for you and your officers and do everything in their power to keep you safe on the street.

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