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## **The Police Communications Officer: Part Three - Outline for a PCO Training Program**

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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. Part two described several ways to combat these problems.

In this part I will outline a training program designed by one Alabama agency specifically for PCOs and report on its effectiveness.

### *Introduction*

In part one of this article, I outlined some of the major stressors of those in the emergency dispatch field. In part two, I offered ways to alleviate the stressors in an effort to make those same employees more efficient and to increase morale among their ranks. This final installment will describe briefly a program now in place which strives to put the theory into practice. I will examine the program's implementation and an overview of its preliminary results.

### *The Program*

The Police Communications Officer training now being conducted by the Alabama Department of Public Safety is made up of 32 hours of classroom instruction and practical exercises. Classes begin at 9:00 AM on Monday and end at 3:00 PM on Friday. They are held at the Alabama Criminal Justice Training Center in Selma, Alabama and are taught primarily by Department of Public Safety personnel. All trainers involved have attended an Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission approved method of instruction class and receive updated training as the budget and schedules allow.

The classes are highly interactive and the students are encouraged to ask questions and participate openly. The belief among the trainers is that the networking and bonding that take place during each session is as valuable as learning the actual mechanics of the job. The staff also believes that a relaxed atmosphere is more conducive to learning and strives to create an environment where people want to come to class each day.

The current curriculum includes the following classes:

NCIC/ACJIS Overview, History of The Alabama Department of Public Safety, Overview of the Job Description and the Department Policy and Procedure Manual, Legal Liability, Criminal and Traffic Law Overview, Interpersonal Communication, Written Communication, Communication Forms Procedures, Equipment Operations, Basic Radio and Telephone Procedures, Information Gathering, Routine and Emergency Operations, and Stress Management.

On Thursday of each week, the staff administers a 40 question multiple choice written examination. The primary purpose of the exam is to ensure that the trainers are doing an adequate job of getting the information across. The test currently has no pass/fail score.

Thursday night is always reserved for a cookout at the Training Center. This allows the students and trainers to interact in an informal setting and continue the day's training over hamburgers, chips, and soft drinks.

The four-hour Stress Management Class is saved for Friday and the subject matter it covers is not test material.

Earlier this year, the Alabama Department of Public Safety conducted 4 classes and trained approximately 80 Police Communications Officers. The next class is scheduled for the week of November 12 and is for new hires.

### *Preliminary Results*

Since this is a fairly new program it is difficult to quantify the actual performance changes it has caused among the communications staff. In light of this observation, I will provide anecdotal information only and let you draw your own conclusions.

The primary areas of improvement seem to fall into 3 areas.

- For the first time in years, members of the communications staff feel like part of the department. They are involved in training designed to make them more efficient and to increase their contribution to the daily activities of their local posts. They are now being told publicly what they have known all along. They are a vital part of the operation and their efforts assist in meeting the department's goals and carrying out its mission. This newfound pride has made many members of the group work harder in an effort to live up to their newly perceived status.

Following this year's training, the communications training staff received numerous "thank you" cards from participants and the overwhelming consensus among the classes was that the training was beneficial.

- Because this year's training was the first in many years, many of the PCOs were able to put faces with names and voices. Our PCOs work in offices scattered all across the state and seldom interact face to face. Since the training, it seems that they are far more likely to call each other when they have problems and need a helping hand. This bonding has made the group stronger.
- The Stress Management class gave the PCOs an opportunity to learn that the stresses they face daily are not unique to them and that their responses to the stress are normal. While we made no great strides in reducing the amount of daily stress, the fact that the department has at least recognized the problem and is addressing it through training is a big step.

### *Conclusion*

By any objective measure, the Alabama Department of Public Safety's Police Communications Officer Training Program is still in its infancy and is evolutionary in nature. While some of the classes are department specific, much of the information taught would apply to any agency's communications staff.

Once we train all members of the department to a basic level, we hope to begin advanced training and to create an ongoing yearly training cycle. This will allow us to stay abreast of changes in technology and procedures and will provide us with a communications staff which performs at a high level, thus increasing the margin of safety for the officers on the street.

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