

Minimum Mandatory Training and Certification for Florida Public Safety Telecommunicators

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Abstract

Public safety telecommunicators fulfill a vital role within the American criminal justice system. Tasked with receiving, classifying, and dispatching requests from the public for emergency service, telecommunicators are the first-line of contact between citizens and law enforcement officers, fire departments, or ambulances. In Florida, public safety telecommunicators provide this vital service without the benefit of standardized training. Tragic events in recent years serve as examples of what can happen when telecommunicators fail to perform as expected. Given these facts, the state of Florida needs to take a serious look at the issue of minimum training standards for public safety telecommunicators. As Florida's population continues to grow, so too will the need for competent, professional telecommunicators increase. The cost associated with continuing to ignore this need may well be tallied in lost lives.

Introduction

In April of 1995, a convenience store clerk in Tampa, Florida made a frantic call to 911 in an attempt to report a kidnapping in progress. Rather than reassuring the caller and directing police officers to the scene of the crime, the police dispatcher who received this call argued with the convenience store clerk. The dispatcher never sent the police. The kidnap victim was found murdered minutes later in the driveway of a Tampa residence. Homicide detectives investigating the murder didn't know for two days that the kidnapping and murder were connected (Shaver, 1995).

On August 18, 1995, again in Tampa, Florida, 28-year-old Sara Rodriguez, was shot to death in the convenience store where she worked the night shift. One of her last acts before dying was to trigger the store's panic alarm in a desperate attempt to summon help. As death claimed Sara Rodriguez, a Tampa Police Department dispatcher received the panic alarm. For the next 13 minutes that dispatcher did nothing to send help in response to the panic alarm. When help finally arrived on the scene 21 minutes after the panic alarm had been received by the dispatcher, Sara Rodriguez lay dead on the floor. Although later investigation revealed that a police cruiser was just three blocks from the spot where Sara Rodriguez lay dead, it was help she did not receive in time to save her life (Shaver, 1995). Cases where police dispatchers failed to respond appropriately to citizens' calls for help are not unique to Florida. In fact, the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was the scene of one of the most widely reported such cases.

On November 11, 1994, frantic citizens made more than 20 calls to Philadelphia's 911 center over a 45 minute period as they attempted to summon help for a young man whom they could see being beaten to death by a group of men. This time the police dispatchers weren't just slow. They were rude, argumentative, and insensitive to the pleas of the callers who dialed 911 to report the beating. One dispatcher went so far as to tell a caller that if they did not calm down, their friend would get no help. More than 20 emergency calls, 45 minutes, and 11 dispatchers later, police arrived on the scene and found 16-year-old Edward Polec's savagely beaten body (Woestendiek, Goodman, & Parmley, 1994).

These incidents serve to underscore the importance of the role played by public safety telecommunicators in law enforcement dispatch centers around the country and across the state of Florida. When a dispatcher fails to perform as expected, field units aren't sent to the scenes of crimes, fires, accidents, and other crises. When those units fail to arrive in time -- or simply fail to arrive at all -- people suffer; people die.

In view of the fact that telecommunicators serve such a vital function in the public safety system, why hasn't the state of Florida done something to ensure that these critical positions are filled by competent, well-trained professionals?

The Case for Certification

The roots of certification for law enforcement officers can be traced to London, England in the early 1800's. At that time, Sir Robert Peel believed that law enforcement was in need of standards and training in order to become more efficient and effective. Peel set about realizing his goals for the police officers under his direction (Rose, 1995).

The United States was slower to adopt the concept of minimum training standards for police officers. According to Rose (1995):

The need to "professionalize" law enforcement became apparent in the 1930's, as two early pioneers -- A. Vollmer and O.W. Wilson -- instituted some major law enforcement reforms. Standardization, specialization, synchronization, concentration, maximization, and centralization dominated law enforcement during this era. (p. 96).

Florida embraced the concept of minimum training standards and certification for law enforcement officers in the late 1960's. Since that time, Florida's police officers, deputy sheriffs, and corrections officers have had to attain -- and maintain -- basic levels of training and proficiency before being entrusted with the authority of their positions. In the nearly three decades since this system of minimum training standards was enacted, Florida law enforcement agencies have realized a significant improvement in the overall quality and professionalism of the men and women employed to fill these vital roles. While officers and deputies -- and the communities they serve -- have benefited from these mandated standards, another important segment of Florida's law enforcement community has been largely ignored: public safety telecommunicators, or dispatchers.

Public safety dispatchers are generally civilian employees tasked with supporting the overall mission of their respective public safety agencies. These agencies can be police departments, sheriffs' offices, or practically any other emergency response or public safety agency. The focus of this paper will be upon those telecommunicators who are employed by police departments and sheriffs' offices. The information presented, however, pertains equally to nearly all public safety telecommunicators, regardless of the mission of their respective employers.

Present State of Telecommunications

It is readily apparent that only a small percentage of the calls for service handled by a law enforcement agency are initiated by the officers patrolling in the field. Instead, the vast majority of citizen demands for service made upon law enforcement agencies

originate over the telephone. Law enforcement agencies receive those calls in their communications centers. These centers are areas set aside for the receipt, documentation, and radio dispatching related to the emergencies, crimes, or crises brought to the attention of law enforcement by the public.

Put simply, public safety telecommunicators staff the communications centers, answer the emergency telephone calls from citizens demanding police service, and dispatch the appropriate law enforcement resources to the appropriate locations. This simplification of the role of telecommunicators belies the true complexity and importance of this critical element of the public safety system. Along the way to accomplishing the three functions previously stated, telecommunicators gather detailed, descriptive information of the events, actions, and persons involved in each and every dispatched incident. They process, categorize, and prioritize the collected information to determine: 1) the nature of the incident; 2) the type of units needed at the scene; and 3) the speed with which those units will be sent. The role of the public safety telecommunicator does not end when the information is collected. Instead, once field units are en route, and even after they arrive on the scene, telecommunicators provide informational support to those units by collecting and relaying additional information as the need arises. In many agencies, the telecommunicator is the only person with the resources necessary for determining whether a subject is wanted, dangerous, or reported missing. Telecommunicators are the people who can send help to a police officer in trouble, the fire department to a burning home, or an ambulance to the baby who just stopped breathing. Telecommunicators are expected to make decisions regarding critical incidents on a regular and routine basis; decisions which are routinely a matter of life and death. In Florida, public safety dispatchers make these decisions without the benefit of minimum training standards.

While most law enforcement administrators, managers, and supervisors -- not to mention the general public -- think first and foremost of sworn officers when evaluating services, it is actually the telecommunicator who stands between the public in need and the officers capable of providing needed services.

In a system where most service providers are required to obtain and maintain minimum training standards, telecommunicators have been largely ignored or overlooked. Given the importance of public safety telecommunicators, one might expect them to be well-trained, highly skilled professionals. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Florida's public safety dispatchers are not regulated by any state agency, and there are no minimum training standards which relate to employment for these positions. Even in communities with 9-1-1 systems, training standards are little more than recommendations offered by local oversight committees which receive little or no guidance from the state or any other regulatory body regarding training standards for 911 operators. In fact, Florida State Statute 365.171 Emergency telephone number "911," addresses training only by stating that a portion of the fees collected to fund 911 may be used to cover the costs of training call takers in the proper methods and techniques used in taking and transferring 911 calls. The statute does not define "proper methods and techniques," nor does it tell the reader where to find that information.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Division of Criminal Justice Information Systems specifies that telecommunicators be certified in the operation of criminal justice information computer terminals. This 8-hour training requirement relates solely to the use of a computer-based information network capable of accessing

registrations, wants, warrants, and administrative messages. This training requirement does not impact the issue of minimum training standards for public safety dispatchers due to the fact that it does not address any of the basic skills required of a telecommunicator.

No Florida governmental body or agency prescribes, provides, regulates, or supports training of public safety telecommunicators in the basic functions of their job. Instead, police chiefs and sheriffs must establish their own criteria for training telecommunicators. This lack of regulation leaves individual agencies and administrators to set their own standards and provide whatever training they deem necessary. As one might expect, this absence of direction results in each agency setting a different standard. While some Florida agencies have developed comprehensive training programs consisting of hundreds of hours of training divided between the classroom and the communications center, others provide training that consists of little more than an overview of the job to be done.

No matter the level of training received, well-trained telecommunicators and their poorly-trained counterparts answer the exact same types of emergency calls, deal with the same kinds of hysterical, emotional, disabled, injured, or hostile callers. They each must make the same decisions and judgment calls that eventually determine the level and type of service a caller will receive.

Telecommunicator Training in Other States

Public safety telecommunications is a complex and demanding job generally filled by civilians with little or no law enforcement experience. Burke (1995) offers this synopsis of the duties of a public safety telecommunicator:

Dispatchers must be able to handle incoming calls, dispatch officers, transfer calls to appropriate agencies, coordinate multiple units for emergency calls, record computer requests by field units, and in some cases, process written reports. Frequently, they must provide immediate emergency care instructions to panicked, distressed, and highly emotional callers. They must perform all of these functions while remaining calm and reassuring. Additionally, dispatchers often play a vital role in ensuring the safety of others, not only callers but also officers on the street. (p. 1)

Even telecommunicators themselves realize the problems inherent with the manner in which telecommunicators are trained in most jurisdictions as the following quote from an electronic message posted by Clede (1995), who describes himself as an experienced police dispatcher, serves to illustrate:

Those of you who must suffer with inept, poorly trained, and poorly qualified communications personnel should not stand for it! The sworn masses should stand up and scream for more selectivity in the hiring process, more concerted indepthness in the training process, etc. It is you all on the street who will benefit most from an efficient and effective dispatcher. (p. 4)

In addition to the performance problems already discussed, the lack of training for telecommunicators has also been cited as one of the major causes of stress for persons in this occupation. This link to stress was identified by Burke (1995):

Dispatchers cited the lack of formal training as another significant source of stress and burnout. While many occupations require advanced educational degrees and provide formal training to employees, dispatchers often learn

their trade on the job. Although their high level of responsibility would suggest proper training, this is rarely the case. Academy and on-going inservice training programs for dispatchers are extremely rare. (p. 4)

A few states have realized the importance of the role of telecommunicators within the public safety system and have implemented mandatory requirements for the training and certification of public safety telecommunicators. Texas, Connecticut and Oregon are three such states and provide examples for Florida to follow. A summary of the telecommunicator training programs in effect in these states follows.

Texas

Telecommunicator training and certification in the state of Texas is administered by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education under Chapter 415 of Texas Government Code. This code specifies that each public safety telecommunicator shall receive a minimum of 40 hours of training which has been approved by the Commission. Section 415.066(a) of that code clearly prohibits the state or any political subdivision of the state from employing a person to act as a telecommunicator unless the person has had the minimum training for a telecommunicator prescribed by the Commission.

Waivers of this training requirement are allowed only under three specific conditions: 1) the person who performs duties as a telecommunicator works for a law enforcement agency with fewer than 20 employees, or which does not provide law enforcement services on a 24-hour basis; 2) the person was serving as a telecommunicator under permanent appointment on or before September 1, 1987, when the requirements were enacted; or 3) a person may serve as a telecommunicator on a temporary or probationary basis in the event of an emergency.

While Texas law sets the minimum training hours for telecommunicators at 40, the Commission has developed a basic training program consisting of 74 hours of training. These hours are used to cover basic telecommunicator functions and tasks. A list of the training topics and hours devoted to each appears in Appendix A.

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education has not conducted a formal study to measure the impact of that state's minimum training standards for telecommunicators. No one in that office could provide any information regarding the advantages or disadvantages of the Texas training program (K. Faldyn, personal communication, May 10, 1996).

Connecticut

Telecommunicator training and certification in the state of Connecticut is administered by the Department of Public Safety's Division of Fire, Emergency and Building Services through the Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications. This office has created a basic training and certification program consisting of approximately 100 hours of training. The elements of this training are listed in Appendix B.

Similar to the approach used by Texas, Chapter 518a, Section 28-30(c) of Connecticut law states that no person may be employed as a telecommunicator by any public safety agency for a period exceeding one year unless that person has 1) completed the training program prescribed by the Office of Statewide Emergency

Telecommunications, 2) demonstrated proficiency in the performance of the telecommunications training standards, or 3) passed a written or oral examination developed by the Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications. Connecticut laws pertaining to the training and certification of telecommunicators also apply to persons employed as telecommunicators by private safety agencies.

Connecticut made these training and certification requirements for telecommunicators effective on January 1, 1990. Several factors are believed responsible for the changes made by Connecticut, including an influx of civilian dispatchers, concern over civil liability lawsuits, and the advent of computerized dispatching systems. In addition to the training detailed previously, telecommunicators in Connecticut must also pass a state-administered examination. (Sheehan, 1995)

Connecticut's Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications has not conducted a formal study to measure the impact of the minimum training standards for telecommunicators. However, feedback received from the 108 E9-1-1 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) affected by those standards indicates that the standards have resulted in an overall improvement in those operations. Specific improvements include (1) an increased level of awareness of proper procedures and methods amongst telecommunicators, (2) new ideas and innovative approaches to problems are being communicated to the PSAPs, (3) noticeable improvement in the job performance of formerly marginal telecommunicators, (4) a reduction in the number of civil lawsuits filed as a result of telecommunicator negligence, and (5) an increased level of recognition of telecommunicators as professionals (G. Pohorilak, personal communication, May 10, 1996).

According to Pohorilak, the only criticisms of the training standards and supporting programs have been leveled against individual training modules. One of the most criticized modules of the Connecticut training program has been that which addresses radio communications technology. Pohorilak advised that there has been much resistance to this module because telecommunicators feel that they do not need in-depth technical knowledge in order to operate a radio system.

Oregon

In 1989, the Oregon Legislative Assembly directed the Oregon Emergency Management, Communications/911 Program to develop minimum training standards for public safety telecommunicators. The Oregon Legislative Assembly also directed Oregon Emergency Management to develop a system of training to deliver the required training and to establish testing mechanisms to ensure that those who were affected by the new requirements were in compliance. This system was revamped when House Bill 3302 passed the Oregon Legislative Assembly and was signed into law on August 1, 1991, by Governor Barbara Roberts. The new law transferred responsibility for the 911 Standards and Training Program from Oregon Emergency Management to the Board on Police Standards and Training (Gabliks, 1991).

Under Oregon's training system, all newly hired telecommunicators have one year to meet all of the requirements for certification. In order to be certified, each telecommunicator must 1) complete an 80-hour basic training course, 2) complete a field training program, 3) obtain certification in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and 4) obtain certification in basic first aid. Additionally, telecommunicators who work in an environment involving the

receipt and dispatch of medical emergency calls must attend a 16-hour Emergency Medical Dispatcher course of instruction and complete a second field training program geared specifically toward handling medical emergencies.

Unique to the Oregon training and certification system for telecommunicators is the field training program. This phase of training is similar to that commonly used by police departments across the United States in the training of sworn police officers. Under the Oregon guidelines, each telecommunicator trainee spends up to one year in a comprehensive, structured, on-the-job training setting under the direct supervision of a specially trained Communications Training Officer. Basic tasks, job knowledge, and skills are taught, reviewed, and demonstrated in order to ensure that the trainee gains competency in the required areas. Oregon's telecommunicator training requirements were identified through the use of a job task analysis which identified the various skills, knowledge and abilities required for successful telecommunications.

In addition to the basic requirements for certification, Oregon telecommunicators are required to receive 12 hours of annual retraining and maintain their certifications in CPR and first aid. Telecommunicators holding Emergency Medical Dispatcher certification must receive an additional 4 hours of retraining in handling medical emergencies.

Oregon's training program for telecommunicators has improved the performance of both public safety agencies and the individual telecommunicators they employ. Telecommunicators have been very receptive to the implementation of Oregon's minimum standards program and are now enjoying an enhanced sense of professionalism. Telecommunicators report feeling more respected by the public and the officers they work with as a result of receiving formal training in their job tasks (J. Hoppe, personal communication, May 10, 1996).

Hoppe stated that the quality of Oregon's training program is a result of the fact that telecommunicators were involved in the development process from the beginning and have remained actively involved in every aspect of the program since that time.

Hoppe cautioned that the implementation of Oregon's minimum training standards for telecommunicators did not occur without problems. In fact, there was a great deal of resistance to the concept from law enforcement administrators who feared the standards were simply a means by which the telecommunicators could demand more money for the job they perform. This resistance was overcome by public demand that public safety dispatch centers be staffed by competent personnel. A number of high-profile cases of telecommunicator negligence which occurred in various areas of the United States fueled public scrutiny of the qualifications and training of Oregon's telecommunicators and softened the resistance to minimum standards.

Telecommunicator Training in Florida

In Florida, the issue of minimum training standards and certification for public safety dispatchers has not gone without attention over the years. In fact, the concept was brought to the attention of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission on at least two occasions. The minutes of the Commission's meeting held on October 25, 1991, reflect that the issue of dispatcher training and certification was brought before that body by Deborah Matz, who was then employed as a dispatcher with the Ft. Walton Beach Police Department. The minutes also indicate that this issue had been previously brought to the attention of the Commission by Sheriff Neil

Perry of St. Johns County, Florida. The minutes go on to state that the Commission certifies three types of criminal justice professions: 1) law enforcement; 2) corrections; and 3) correctional probation officers. The Commission's recommendation was to not support the certification of dispatchers, but instead establish job related, standardized training that agencies could choose to have their dispatchers attend.

The following quote from the October 1991 minutes sums up the Commission's action on the issue of dispatcher certification:

Bureau Chief Lowry requested that the Commission adopt staff's recommendation that staff, with the assistance of the dispatchers, develop a standardized training program as has been done for selective traffic enforcement specialists and for parking enforcement specialists. Commissioner Doss moved that the Commission adopt staff's recommendation with the modification that at such time as the Commission's and staff's workload is alleviated, the Commission would reconsider this issue and assist law enforcement administrators in Florida to develop a standardized criteria for training dispatchers; seconded by Commissioner Clarke. Commissioner Doss added to his motion the date to reconsider: the May, 1992 Commission meeting. Commissioner Clarke expressed concern that that date might be too soon, given the projects already underway. Commissioner Clarke went on to suggest that no date of reconsideration be attached to this issue, but rather that the Commission rely on staff to notify the Commission when it can undertake another project. (p. 4)

A search of the records of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Division of Criminal Justice Standards and Training conducted on November 29, 1995, failed to turn up any record of further Commission action relating to dispatcher training and certification.

While the state of Florida seems to have done practically nothing to address the lack of training standards for public safety dispatchers, considerable attention has been afforded to other professions. Through the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Division of Professions, minimum training and certification standards have been developed and legislated for a wide variety of service occupations and trades. The following table compares a few of these professions with telecommunicators:

Occupation	Training Hours Required	Examination Required
Massage Therapist	1,668	Yes
Cosmetologist	1,200	Yes
Barber	1,200	Yes
Auctioneer	80	Yes
Public Safety Telecommunicator	0	No

Note: Data compiled from Division of Professions publications for Board of Massage, 1995; Board of Cosmetology, 1995; Barber's Board, 1995; Board of Auctioneers, 1995.

While we would all like to know that the persons we entrust with the care of our hair or aching muscles are competent, their incompetence is not likely to cause our serious injury or death. Unlike the professions compared above however, telecommunications can be a life and death business. The tragic incidents cited in the introduction serve to illustrate this fact. While some may choose to defend the current system, it is apparent that the lack of training standards for telecommunicators in Florida contributes to an environment where such tragic mistakes can occur.

Methods

In an effort to establish a profile of the current levels of training provided to public safety telecommunicators by Florida police departments and sheriffs' offices, a survey consisting of 21 questions was developed and distributed to 112 Florida law enforcement agencies. Eighty of the target agencies were police departments, while the remaining 32 were sheriffs' offices.

Survey Instrument

The survey questions were designed to elicit responses on the following subject categories:

Agency profile. This category of questions served to identify the responding agency as either a police department or sheriff's office and gathered information regarding the number of personnel employed as sworn officers and telecommunicators.

Dispatcher training profile. This category gathered information regarding: 1) the total number of hours of training conducted for newly-hired telecommunicators; 2) the breakdown of those hours between formal classroom settings and on-the-job training hours; 3) number of hours of annual in-service training; and 4) the qualifications of personnel administering said training. Respondents were also asked to state whether or not they were satisfied with their current training programs for telecommunicators.

Research focus. The chief administrator of each agency was asked to provide answers for the last two questions on the survey. The first of these required a simple "yes" or "no" response to the question, "Would you support an effort to create a statewide, standardized training and certification program for public safety dispatchers?" Each respondent was then asked to provide a brief explanation of his or her answer to the first question.

In order to promote candid answers to the questions posed, the survey form did not request that the responding agency identify itself. While most respondents maintained the anonymity afforded them, several respondents chose to identify themselves and volunteered to provide additional information.

A copy of the survey instrument appears in Appendix C.

Results

A total of 85 completed surveys were returned. This represents a raw response rate of 75.89%. Upon reviewing the responses, however, 11 were excluded as invalid for the following reasons: 1) received from agencies which no longer maintain a communications center; 2) mailed to defunct agencies; 3) responding agencies which were neither police departments or sheriff's offices; 4) survey form not completed properly; or 5) responses were contradictory, unclear, or not relevant to the questions

posed. After deducting the responses that were deemed invalid for the reasons stated above, the survey return rate was reduced to 66.07%.

These responses were further separated by agency type. This distinction reveals that police departments provided 78.38% of the total number of valid responses received, while sheriff's offices accounted for 21.62% of the total valid returns.

The mailing list used to distribute the survey form is re-printed in Appendix D.

Considering only those responses deemed valid, the survey produced the following picture of public safety telecommunications training in the state of Florida:

Agency Size

The average number of sworn officers employed by the survey respondents was 236.69. The median number of sworn officers employed by the respondents was 86.5. Turning to dispatcher employed by the respondent group, the average number of telecommunicators employed was 28.22, with a median of 15.5.

The largest agency, based upon number of employees, employed 2,500 officers and 164 telecommunicators. The smallest agency employed 16 officers and 5 telecommunicators.

Budget

Budgetary issues were examined in two ways: 1) total training budget for the agency; and 2) percentage of the agency's total training budget allocated to the training of telecommunicators. The average agency training budget for the respondent group was \$201,621.34, with a median budget of \$24,644.00. The average percentage of the total training budget allocated to training telecommunicators was 6.12%, with a median budget allocation of 5%. The largest total training budget was \$4.5 million. Several agencies reported training budgets of \$0. Considering 54 complete responses of the 58 responses received from police departments, 29.63% of those agencies reported having no funds allocated for training their telecommunicators. Considering 11 complete replies from the 16 sheriffs' office responses, 54.55% of those agencies reported having no funds allocated for training their telecommunicators.

Training Hours

Training hours for telecommunicators were broken down into the following categories: 1) total number of training hours; 2) number of those hours which are delivered in formal (classroom) settings; 3) number of the total training hours which are delivered in an "on-the-job" setting; and 4) number of annual re-training hours received by telecommunicators.

First considering total training hours delivered to telecommunicators, the respondents reported an average of 570.77 hours, with the median coming in at 440 hours. The highest number of training hours reported was 2080, and the lowest was 0.

The average number of hours of training delivered in a formal setting was reported at 73.42, with a median of 40 hours.

On-the-job training hours were reported at an average of 496.67, and a median of 350 hours. The highest number of on-the-job training hours reported was 2000, and the lowest was 0.

The respondents reported an average of 18.62 hours of annual re-training for telecommunicators, with the median number of hours coming in at 8. Highest reported number of annual re-training hours was 120, and the lowest was 0.

Broken down by agency type, 48.28% of the police departments responding indicated that they provided 0 hours of annual re-training for telecommunicators. Twenty-five percent of the sheriffs' offices responding reported zero hours of annual re-training for telecommunicators.

Satisfaction with Training

The survey instrument asked respondents if they were satisfied with their current system of training telecommunicators. Considering all of the valid responses, 44.59% indicated that they are satisfied with their current training system. However, 54.05% of the respondents reported being dissatisfied with their current systems for training telecommunicators.

Support for Telecommunicator Certification

The chief executive officer of each responding agency was asked whether or not they would support the concept of state certification for public safety telecommunicators. The chief executive was then asked to provide a brief statement explaining their position on this issue.

Considering all 74 valid responses, 89.19% of the respondents indicated that they were in favor of state certification for telecommunicators. Respondents not in favor of state certification for telecommunicators represented 9.46% of the total, and 1.35% of the respondents did not answer these questions. One response was equivocal in that the respondent answered, "yes and no." This response was counted as a "no."

Broken down by agency type, 89.66% of the police departments and 87.50% of the sheriffs' offices indicated their support for telecommunicator certification.

Eighty-five percent of the respondents who had indicated that they were satisfied with their current training programs for telecommunicators expressed their support for the minimum standards concept.

Nine percent of those respondents who indicated that they were not satisfied with their current training programs for telecommunicators also indicated that they would not support the concept of state certification for telecommunicators.

One chief executive (Anonymous, 1996) who was in favor of certification for dispatchers stated:

This is the life-line of most law enforcement agencies. We must have just as well-trained personnel in these positions as we do in sworn positions. It is time for a state-wide certification program for communications and 911 officers so as to provide a higher level of efficient service to our citizens. A certification program will provide a quality dispatcher that will make it easier for us to hire better personnel and to attract the type of people we want in this critical position.

A chief executive (Anonymous, 1996) who was not in favor of state certification for dispatchers had this to say:

My opinion is that dispatcher training is best handled at the local level. While it is recognized that many tasks that dispatch personnel perform are similar among agencies, there is vast differences in operational, instructional and policies within the state. However... a state sponsored basic academy may be appropriate for smaller agencies.

A more comprehensive sampling of the comments made by respondents, both pro and con, appears in Appendix E.

Discussion

The survey results reported above bear out the presumption that the quality of telecommunicator training in Florida is uneven at best. As the results indicate, Florida's law enforcement agencies are spread across the spectrum when it comes to the amount, type, consistency, and regularity of training afforded public safety dispatchers. One can only marvel at the agencies with the foresight to provide their dispatchers with hundreds of hours of initial training and regular re-training sessions; and only wonder about the service being provided to the communities served by agencies that don't train their telecommunicators. Given the litigious nature of our society -- not to mention the fact that public safety is a business that routinely deals with lives in jeopardy -- the fact that so many agencies reported zero training levels is cause for concern.

Another concern is the fact that so many agencies find it necessary to allow untrained personnel to act as training officers for their telecommunicators. Training delivered in a haphazard or inept fashion is akin to no training at all. Personnel who have not been trained in the techniques necessary for successful training cannot be expected to deliver effective training. Hand-in-hand with the need to standardize training for telecommunicators is the need to establish standards for people who will be entrusted with the responsibility of teaching those telecommunicators the business.

Florida criminal justice leaders must take the initiative and address these training deficiencies. Long seen as a leader in law enforcement training issues, Florida must recapture and direct that same vision and leadership to fixing the problems associated with public safety dispatch. Again, Burke (1995) puts it clearly:

The complex role performed by dispatchers can be simplified through proper training sessions so that the training, education, and skills of dispatchers correspond adequately to the job demands. These sessions should be similar to academy and in-service classes provided to officers but should be modified to meet the specific needs of dispatchers. (p. 5)

While there are certainly differences in the ways various agencies process their calls, and definite differences in the equipment used by each, the basic skills of telecommunications remain the same no matter where they are practiced. Hysterical callers are the same all across the state. What works to calm distraught callers in Tallahassee probably works equally well in Tampa. No matter the location, when a citizen dials 911 he or she is counting on a telecommunicator to handle their request for service promptly, effectively, and properly.

The examples provided by states like Connecticut, Oregon, and Texas are there to be studied and adopted by Florida's public safety community. The success of these states in addressing telecommunicator training and certification flies in the face of critics

who claim there is too much diversity between agencies for telecommunicator standards to work. Obviously these states recognized that a problem existed and they took action to address it. Florida should take note and follow suit. Florida's public safety agencies should move to address and improve the training situation for telecommunicators in Florida before someone else has to suffer, and possibly die, because a poorly trained dispatcher failed to do his or her job. How many tragedies does it take before Florida's leaders comprehend the need to have competent, well-trained professionals manning our public safety dispatch centers?

Chief Bill McDaniel was assigned as Commander of the Plant City Police Department Support Services Division at the time of this research. He began his career in Plant City in 1985 and has served as a patrol officer, training officer, internal affairs investigator, and community relations officer. His supervisory experience includes responsibility for the communications center, records section, special investigations unit and various administrative support functions, and recently, appointment as Chief of Police. Bill's professional interests center around leadership and administrative issues. He is an active Rotarian and in his spare time enjoys flying, SCUBA diving, and travel. He lives in Plant City with his wife and their daughter.

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Appendix A
Texas telecommunicator basic training content

Section Title	Training Hours
Registration and orientation	1
Organization and overview of Law Enforcement Functions	2
History of Public Safety Communications	1
Federal Laws Regulating Public Safety Communications	1
Radio Communication Systems	1
Radio operations	8
Fire and EMS Dispatch Considerations	4
Telephone operations	8
Information Systems	8
Communications Records, Logs, and Documentation	1
Legal Issues - Phase I, Overview	4
Phase 11, Municipal Law	4
Phase 111, Traffic Law	4
Phase IV, Family Code	4
Phase V, Penal Code	4
Phase VI, Code of Criminal Procedure	4
Emergency Management	4
Police Emergency Situations	2
9-1-1/Computer Aided Dispatch	2
Media Relations	1
Stress Management	2
Crisis Intervention	2
Examination and Graduation	2
Total Training Hours	74

Appendix B

Elements of Connecticut telecommunicator basic training

Interpersonal communications;
Telecommunications history;
Telecommunicator role in public safety;
Organization of the communications function and the telecommunicator role in public safety;
Overview of the police function;
Overview of the fire function;
Overview of the EMS/rescue function;
Public safety telecommunications systems;
Basics of radio broadcasting;
Police, fire, EMS records systems;
Public safety telecommunications record systems;
Broadcast rules and procedures;
Telephone techniques;
Enhanced 911 systems and operating procedures;
Local, state and national crime information computer systems;
Telephone complaint/report processing procedures - police;
Telephone complaint/report processing procedures - fire and rescue;
Telephone complaint/report processing procedures - EMS;
Overview of the EMS function and emergency medical dispatch and pre-arrival instructions;
Stress management;
Telecommunicator legal issues;
Hazardous materials awareness.

Appendix C
Survey Instrument

Certification of Public Safety Dispatchers Survey		
<i>Agency Profile</i>		
Circle the response which best describes your agency	Police Department	Sheriff's Office
Number of sworn personnel employed by your agency		
Number of dispatch personnel employed by your agency		
Total annual training budget for your agency		
Percentage of training budget allocated to dispatch personnel		
<i>Dispatcher Training Profile</i>		
Total number of training hours provided to each newly hired, inexperienced dispatch employee		
Of the total hours, how many are formal (classroom) training hours?		
Of the total hours, how many are on-the-job training hours?		
If you use formal training for dispatch personnel, who delivers this training?		
Are these trainers certified?	Yes	No
If yes, what type of certification?		
If you use on-the-job training, who delivers this training?		
Are these trainers certified?	Yes	No
If yes, what type of certification?		
Do your dispatch personnel receive regular, on-going, in-service training?	Yes	No

If yes, how many hours per dispatch employee per year?		
Is this training predominately formal or on-the-job training?	Formal (classroom)	On-the-job
Are you satisfied with the current level of training that your dispatch personnel receive?	Yes	No
Please explain why or why not.		
<p>Research Focus Please have the chief executive (chief or sheriff) provide the answers to the following items:</p> <p><i>Please have the chief executive (chief or sheriff) provide the answers to the following items.</i></p>		
Would you support an effort to create a state-wide, standardized training and certification program for public safety dispatchers?	Yes	No
Please provide a brief explanation of your opinion.		
<p align="center">Thank you for your time and effort. Please return the completed survey in the postage-paid return envelope provided.</p>		

Appendix D
Survey Mailing List

Alachua County Sheriff's Office	Boca Raton Police Department
Boynton Beach Police Department	Bradenton Police Department
Bradenton Beach Police Department	Brevard County Sheriff's Office
Brooksville Police Department	Broward County Sheriff's Office
Cape Coral Police Department	Casselberry Police Department
Charlotte County Sheriff's Office	Clearwater Police Department
Collier County Sheriff's Office	Coral Gables Police Department
Crystal River Police Department	Dade City Police Department
Daytona Beach Department of Public Safety	Deland Police Department
Desoto County Sheriff's Office	Dixie County Sheriff's Office
Dunedin Police Department	Fernandina Beach Police Department
Flagler County Sheriff's Office	Flagler Beach Police Department
Fort Walton Police Department	Fort Lauderdale Police Department
Fort Myers Police Department	Fort Pierce Police Department
Gainesville Police Department	Glades County Sheriff's Office
Gulfport Police Department	Haines City Police Department
Hardee County Sheriff's Office	Hendry County Sheriff's Office
Hernando County Sheriff's Office	Hialeah Police Department
Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office	Hollywood Police Department
Homestead Police Department	Indian River County Sheriff's Office
Jacksonville Beach Police Department	Jacksonville Sheriff's Office
Jefferson County Sheriff's Office	Kenneth City Police Department
Key West Police Department	Kissimmee Police Department
Lake City Police Department	Lakeland Police Department
Lantana Police Department	Largo Police Department
Lauderdale By The Sea Police Department	Leesburg Police Department
Leon County Sheriff's Office	Levy County Sheriff's Office
Longboat Key Police Department	Maitland Police Department
Manatee County Sheriff's Office	Melbourne Police Department
Metro-Dade Police Department	Miami Police Department
Miami Beach Police Department	Monroe County Sheriff's Office
Mulberry Police Department	Naples Police Department
New Port Richey Police Department	North Lauderdale DPS
North Port Police Department	Ocala Police Department
Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office	Okeechobee Police Department
Orange County Sheriff's Office	Orlando Police Department
Osceola County Sheriff's Office	Pahokee Police Department
Palatka Police Department	Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office
Palm Bay Police Department	Panama City Police Department
Pasco County Sheriff's Office	Pinellas Park Police Department
Pinellas County Sheriff's Office	Polk County Sheriff's Office
Port Saint Lucie Police Department	Punta Gorda Police Department

Quincy Department of Public Safety
Saint Johns County Sheriff's Office
Saint Augustine Police Department
Sanford Police Department
Sarasota Police Department
Sebring Police Department
Stuart Police Department
Suwannee County Sheriff's Office
Tampa Police Department
Temple Terrace Police Department
Treasure Island Police Department
Vero Beach Police Department
Winter Park Department of Public Safety
Winter Garden Police Department

Saint Cloud Police Department
Saint Lucie County Sheriff's Office
Saint Petersburg Police Department
Sanibel Police Department
Sarasota County Sheriff's Office
Starke Police Department
Sumter County Sheriff's Office
Tallahassee Police Department
Tarpon Springs Police Department
Titusville Police Department
Venice Police Department
West Palm Beach Police Department
Winter Haven Police Department
Zephyrhills Police Department

Appendix E Survey Respondent Comments

Each response has been identified by the number assigned to the completed survey form. The number simply indicates the order in which responses were returned. Additionally, the number of officers or deputies employed by each respondent is listed parenthetically. The author feels that personnel strength of a particular agency provides a clue to the size of that agency's budget, potential for diversification of services, and potential for dedicating resources to training issues:

Comments not in Support of Telecommunicator Certification

Police response #18 (356 officers): "My opinion is that dispatcher training is best handled at the local level. While it is recognized that many tasks that dispatch personnel perform are similar among agencies, there is vast differences in operational, instructional and policies within the state. However... a state sponsored basic academy may be appropriate for smaller agencies."

Police response #31 (91 officers): "There is too much difference between departments, different computer aided dispatch programs, methodology, etc."

Sheriff response #10 (301 deputies): "Statewide standardization presumes... a standardization of equipment, systems and methodology. Differential (sic) agencies with respect to size, funding and mission would probably create hardships for some jurisdictions relative to meeting any comprehensive standards. We have found little relationship between any prior experience with other agencies and the acceleration of progress in our own training program. A minimum standard would guarantee very little."

Comments in Support of Telecommunicator Certification

Police response #1 (61 officers): "This is the life-line of most law enforcement agencies. We must have just as well-trained personnel in these positions as we do in sworn positions. It is time for a state-wide certification program for communications and 911 officers so as to provide a higher level of efficient service to our citizens. A certification program will provide a quality dispatcher that will make it easier for us to hire better personnel and to attract the type of people we want in this critical position."

Police response #4 (123 officers): "It's simple -- this is a life and death job. The public has a right to expect measured standards of proficiency."

Police response #9 (51 officers): "It (minimum training standards) would provide more uniformed (sic) method of training and agencies can hire state certified dispatchers who would require less on the job training."

Police response #10 (186 officers): "It is often said the Patrol Division is the backbone of the department. If that is so, then Comm must be considered the heart and lungs because of its critical interaction between the citizens and the officers. Because of Comm's critical role, it is imperative the employees are well trained in order for them to function as professionals that they are. A state-wide standardized training and certification would assist in not only providing the tools for the job, but also in recognizing the 'forgotten few' that really make it happen."

Police response # 19 (28 officers): "Long overdue. Would go a long way towards professionalizing this most important function."

Police response #50 (27 officers): "I have witnessed the improvement in the professionalism, knowledge and skills of (law enforcement) officers because of

standardized training and certification as opposed to the officers of yester year when training was at the discretion of the employing agency and I would expect the same results from required training and certification of public safety dispatchers."

Sheriff response #1 (650 deputies): "More intensive training needed. Hard to get entry level personnel qualified for the job. Once they learn, they (transfer) to other locations. Comm. needs to be a career."

Sheriff response #5 (55 deputies): "Yes, I truly feel there should be a basic standardized training for dispatchers. Many times they are forgotten considering they are the first members of the department to receive the calls. I think standardized training would give departments a base or a beginning for training. Employees would receive basic training before being hired and then individual agencies could then specialize for each different need."