

LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19:

NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC IN PUBLIC SAFETY
COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

IMPACTS ON STAFFING

The Collaborative Coalition of International Public Safety (CC:IPS), formed in November 2019 by APCO Canada, British APCO, NENA, EENA, and NECWG-A/NZ, joined forces with one mission in mind: to collaborate and share information, research and resources to advance public safety communications across the globe.

Convening biweekly since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we report on critical issues impacting the public safety communications industry in our respective countries, sharing best practice and lessons learned for the benefit of the global public safety community.



SUCCESS STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

UK: Call Handling Recruitment Drive

- Some UK Ambulance Services adopted an accelerated programme to bring in new staff for call handling and control room support. They targeted flight attendants furloughed from their airline due to the individuals rare combined experiences in communication, customer service, as well as first aid and the ability to work under pressure.
- Additionally, these professionals have recognized security clearances which quickened the recruitment process which was mainly completed online.

U.S: Staffing Procedures

- Some PSAPs split their shifts between the backup center and the primary location (or splitting shifts between physically separate locations inside the same building or on the same site) in order to limit potential exposure.
- Some PSAPs reduced the minimum size of their shifts to preserve the number of healthy, unexposed staff (based on call volumes).
- PSAPs with extended high call volume periods recruited/retrained retired PSAP staff and PSAP-adjacent staff (e.g. easily-activated medical staff, light duty field responders).

Europe: Staffing Procedures

- Some countries are using medical students or call takers currently under training to increase capacity of call centres or assist in supporting roles, for instance in France, Slovenia and Finland. In Malta, NGOs have called for volunteers to operate the COVID-19 hotline. In Portugal, nurses are reinforcing the COVID-19 helpline.

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RECOGNISE EMERGENCY CALL-TAKERS & DISPATCHERS AS ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SAFETY WORKERS

A shortage of PPE equipment across the globe impacted many control rooms, PSAPs and communication centres from obtaining necessary safety equipment in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak.

In some countries, this was compounded by the fact that Public Safety Communicators (PSCs) are not recognized as first responders or essential services in the job classification system, creating additional barriers to accessing PPE in a timely fashion or in the volume required. Additionally, in some jurisdictions, field responders (police, fire, ems), were instructed to respond as if every patient/call was COVID-19 positive and use full PPE when responding, increasing shortages of PPE supplies in emergency service agencies.

Further, as a result of public hoarding of PPE and other health items, some agencies resorted to seeking personal donations of PPE and health items from staff to cover the shortfall. In response to these shortages, many organizations repurposed manufacturing resources to produce PPE and health related products such as masks, sanitizer and respirators. In other areas, control rooms and communication centres resorted to following national best practice and guidelines to produce makeshift PPE such as masks, keyboard covers, etc.

Sadly, in many countries across the globe, call-takers and dispatchers did not have priority access to PPE nor COVID-19 testing. In a survey of 25 countries, mostly European, there were COVID-19 cases among call-takers and dispatchers in 38% of the PSAPs surveyed. Although these personnel are frontline and vital workers, there is often a lack of recognition of the importance of their work. Imagine the impact to a region where there is no longer enough staff to operate emergency call centres.

We invite the relevant authorities to work towards the recognition of PSCs as essential Public Safety workers. It is critical that this group of first responders have priority access to PPE, testing and in the near future, COVID-19 vaccinations.

