

asked to designate the number of times that the stressor has occurred in their work over the past twelve months. The time frame is broken into four time periods: 1-3 months, 4-6 months, 7-9 months, and 10-12 months. I invited four shift supervisors and the Director of the communications department to study the PSS and 1) eliminate items that did not pertain to telecommunication work, 2) modify the wording of those items which had merit, and 3) maintain those items which appeared to clearly measure police telecommunicator job stress. There was surprising consistency in the selection of items by all supervisors. Only those items in which a minimum of three supervisors either modified or eliminated were adapted or discarded. Of a total of 60 items, 17 items were discarded (e.g. "exposure to battered children," "making arrests while alone"), 19 items were adapted to fit the job description and structure ("training classes on days off", "dispatching a felony in progress"), 24 items were kept intact ("inadequate support by department", "demands made by family for more time"). A total of seven items were added that were suggested by the supervisors ("unpleasant physical environment", "isolation from other parts of department"). Thus the scale eventually comprised 50 items which had face validity. The PTSS was administered one week prior to a four-week stress management course in which one-half of the communications department was randomly selected for training while the remaining half served as a no-training control group. Additionally, an anxiety and personality measure was administered to further assess levels of stress and anxiety proneness before the training. These same measures were again administered one week after training to determine the effects of training. Only the preliminary stress survey data is presented here.

### Results

The results of this survey are similar to the previous findings of Symonds<sup>1</sup> and Spielberger, Grier & Greenfield.<sup>2</sup> Those researchers found that the sources of stress in police work have two broad categories: (1) Stressors associated with the nature of police work, and (2) stressors related to the nature of police organizations. The ten stress items that telecommunicators reported as most stressful are listed in the accompanying table. The items are listed by the average stress ranking in descending order. The second column lists the percentage of telecommunicators reporting the event. Like the Symonds study, these items can also be divided into stressors associated with the nature of telecommunication work (items 1, 4, 6 and 10) and stressful events related to the nature of the organization (items 2, 3, 7, 8 and 9). One stressor was related to the technology employed in the work (item 5).

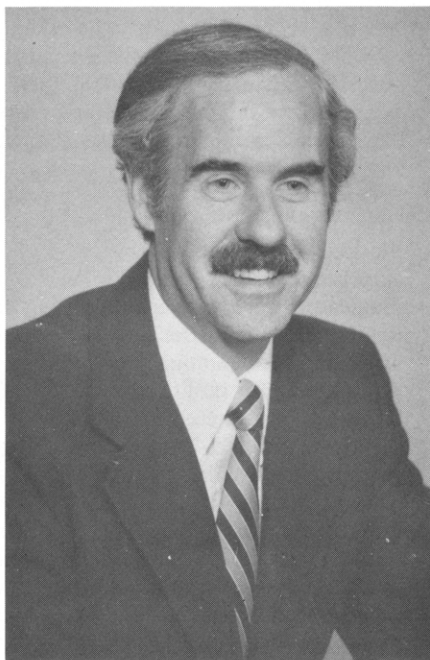
**TABLE 1**  
**Sources of Stress in Police Telecommunicator Work**

Stressful Event or Situation	Average Stress Rating	Percentage Reporting Event
1. Officer killed in line of duty	96	91
2. Poor or inadequate supervision	78	87
3. Insufficient manpower to adequately handle job	77	86
4. Dispatching a high speed chase	75	83
5. Inadequate or poor quality equipment	73	85
6. Responsibility for welfare of police officers	72	91
7. Lack of participation in policy decisions	71	80
8. Meetings on day off or following night shifts	69	86
9. Fellow operators not doing their job	68	81
10. Dispatching a felony	68	85

Interestingly, the item with the highest average stress ranking is "officer killed in the line of duty." This suggests a pervasive and potential stressor that communicators live with on a day-to-day basis. The present sample of communicators had not, in fact, experienced this event, so this type of reporting suggests that this potential threat looms large in their work experience. This can be interpreted as a positive sign. That is, dispatch workers are primarily concerned about the lives and welfare (items 1 and 6) of police. The constancy of this threat, however, can wear down even the most personally and professionally efficient communicator. The fact that the number one item carries an average stress ranking of 96 suggests that this sample of communicators perceive this potential event as an extremely volatile issue on the job and very likely keeps them close to the edge of distress.

The second identified group of stressors may come as a surprise to readers. Over 50% of the identified stressors with rankings over 50 were related to administrative

components to their job (supervision problems, insufficient manpower, lack of participatory management and excessive meetings). The number two reported stressor may suggest something characteristic of this particular sample, but may also indicate the need for efficient and supportive back up services. It is becoming common knowledge among stress managers that when work stress increases so does the need for interpersonal support, both at the work site and at home. And when we consider the next reported stressor, "insufficient manpower to adequately handle the job" we may assume that both peer and supervisory support are critical elements in the overall stress profile. Lack of participation, meeting overload and interpersonal conflict are also reported as stressors in descending order and further corroborate the fact that communication administration may have the potential for designing an atmosphere and environment that can produce or prevent stress. Equipment failure and dysfunction has always been a critical factor in causing pressure



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr. William Kirk is currently an Associate Professor of Psychology at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. He is a consulting psychologist with Behavioral Medicine Intervention Systems (BMIS) in Clearwater/Tampa, Florida, a Health Psychology organization providing wellness and employee assistance programs to industry and public service agencies. Dr. Kirk has conducted stress management workshops and courses throughout the United States and specifically assisted safety communications departments in developing stress training programs. He will be conducting a workshop for the Florida Chapter of APCO in Orlando this winter titled "Stress Management and Biofeedback for Telecommunicators". Bill is known as a stimulating speaker with a keen sense of humor.*