

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER PERFORMANCE

You need to measure it to manage it.

By Linda Haelsen

Management guru Peter Drucker, who authored countless essays on managerial best practices, was famously quoted as saying: “*You can’t manage what you can’t measure.*”

Metrics are the foundation of evidence-based decision making. They help emergency communications center managers better understand what their organization, shifts and employees are doing (and how well), benchmark center performance against industry standards, better align staffing needs, influence funding decisions, improve operations, and defend actions taken.

So, if metrics are that crucial, why are so many 9-1-1 centers still flying blind?

Tracking Metrics ... It’s Complicated

According to Richard Smith, product manager, NICE Public Safety, the complexity of tracking metrics arises mainly from the fact that data is spread across so many different systems and needs to be crunched manually. “Some of the data is in the radio system, some of it’s in the phone system, some of it’s in the recording system, some of it’s in the CAD system and in other places too,” he said.

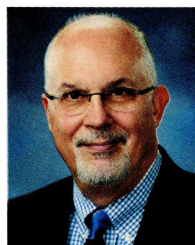
There’s also no way to automatically correlate and pull data together from different systems. A good example is ‘hello to hello’ time, which measures the time from when a 9-1-1 call is

picked up until the first unit arrives on-scene. To calculate this, an analyst has to manually pull information from multiple systems.

The Current State of Emergency Communications Center Standards

While ‘hello to hello’ time is a critical metric, especially for priority one calls, most emergency communications centers don’t have the time and resources to track it. More often, they track call handling times in line with NENA’s Call Answering Standard (which specifies that 95% of all 9-1-1 calls shall be answered within 20 seconds, and 90% within 10 seconds during the busy hour – defined as the hour with the greatest call volume).

The National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA’s) 1221 Standard has its own set of recommended guidelines for how quickly alarms received on emergency lines should be answered, and acceptable transfer times.



Keith Flewelling

In late 2017, APCO issued a call for work group members to participate in the creation of an ANSI standard addressing public safety communications center key performance indicators. APCO recently announced approval of the new standard (APCO 1.117.1-2019 Communications Center Key Performance Indicators).

According to Keith Flewelling, ENP, executive director, Thurston 9-1-1 Communications,

and APCO KPI workgroup committee member, the standard was created to identify specific areas of communications center performance that should be measured in order to benchmark center performance. Flewelling believes that KPIs shouldn’t measure *all* aspects of operations, but rather “the critical elements that are indicators of the health and well-being of the organization. Much like vital signs are indicators of a patient’s health and well-being (without having access to every single piece of patient data), KPIs can perform the same function for 9-1-1 centers.”

What a Nationwide Emergency Communications Center Metrics Survey Reveals

Until recently very little was known about the types of metrics 9-1-1 centers track, how often they compile performance reports and the biggest challenges in doing so. In late 2018, NICE conducted an emergency communications center performance metrics and benchmarking survey to examine these practices. Over 200 individuals (predominantly emergency communications center directors/managers) from 43 states and 5 countries responded.

The survey reveals huge gaps between respondents’ stated desires and current capabilities. Here are some key findings:

FREQUENCY OF REPORTING

Most 9-1-1 centers (nearly half) report on metrics monthly. An additional 31 percent report on performance metrics quarterly or annually.