



In the course of your responsibilities as a 9-1-1 call taker or emergency dispatcher, have you ever experienced physical or emotional effects such as a fast heart rate, clammy palms, thinking about calls after work, trouble sleeping, or avoiding calls or friends? Have you found yourself wondering in silence if your coworkers are feeling the same way? Well, as a seasoned call taker myself, I can answer “yes” to all of the above and much more. As I look back, it took me most of my 25 years in public safety to be able to admit this fact.

As leaders at all levels, we need to continue to work with our people, accept the reality of our jobs and improve as an industry. If we don't, who will?

ROBERT LEVY PHOTOGRAPHY

My epiphany came about a year ago when I attended a year-long public managers course that required me to write an in-depth capstone on a work related topic. If I am being honest, I thought I was choosing an easy topic when I decided to write about stress and its effect on our call takers. However, shame on me for minimizing the impact stress has on our industry. I spent countless hours documenting over 125 pages for my project, and I do not think I even scratched the surface of the research that needs to be done on this subject.

In doing my research, I was shocked to find very little information on the effects of stress on call takers specifically. Most of the documented research highlighted police, fire and other on-scene responders. In hindsight, this shouldn't have been surprising. With this realization and my time restraints early in my research, I found myself having to refocus and refine my topic. Are “public safety telecommunicators in New Jersey being affected by stress, and as leaders, are we doing enough to help them?”

By narrowing my focus, I was able to identify two prior studies: “The Experience of 9-1-1 Telecommunicators,” and “Effects of Stress on 9-1-1 Call-Takers.” Both these studies are well documented and referenced within our industry and gave me tremendous help in survey development. One study asked a series of questions of a single emergency communications center (ECC) and one used a wider base of subjects reaching out to several ECCs. Both studies concluded that as public safety telecommunicators, we are affected by our work as helpers to others so my goal was to try and replicate these findings here in New Jersey.

I developed a 75-question survey broken down into five categories (demographics, agency impact, stressors, emotions and compassion) to gather information from my participants. I also decided that even though I work in a larger center, to get a true picture I needed to reach out to a diverse range of small to larger ECCs. I am thankful to have received assistance from over 25 centers within New Jersey. Below I will outline the results by category.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Asking questions of the participants to determine a baseline of their background and experience within the industry. I found that my service group was closely split between males (55%) and females (45%). Agency management gender also followed the same trend. When asked about position type, they indicated (75%) held the dual title of call taker and telecommunicator. The majority of participants (80%) held college degrees and most (70%) were over the age of 30. What was surprising is that participants