

reporting their years of service (YOS) as one to five years was higher (42%) in the older age group. The demographic section seemed to indicate that we are hiring a gender diverse, educated and older workforce. My immediate thought was that, since we are hiring a more mature, educated workforce, they might have developed better stress management tools.

AGENCY IMPACT

Questions divided administrative (CEOs) and operational staff to compare understanding of the problem from both perspectives. These questions help start the conversation to determine if we, as leaders, are doing enough to support our staff.

In all, 25% of the CEOs replied that they didn't believe stress affected their center's attendance. However, 30% percent of operational staff replied that they have called out of work to avoid listening to peoples' problems. They also indicated that although 88% of operational staff are happy with their jobs as helpers, 65% indicate that they are emotionally impacted by that same job.

One question asked of all respondents was does your agency have an "Employee Assistance Program" (EAP). The administration replied 85% Yes and 15% No and operational staff replied 65% Yes, 12% No and 24% Don't Know [Figure 1].

It was not surprising to see agencies that did not have an EAP, but to have a quarter of the participants stating "Don't Know" was a revelation. Overall, these results support a study done by Hinkle in 2015 that showed we are doing a better job with EAP rollouts but fall short in the follow-up and support.

Administrators also reported that nearly 30% of them were not advised if their staff had utilized their EAP. I found this very concerning. How can we determine if a program is a success if we don't see the results? I would suggest that CEO's be made aware of at least program utilization – not who or why, but just if their staff are reaching out. Without this information, how can we determine if we are reaching them?

When CEOs were asked about formal training for supervisors to identify stress in employees, only 40% replied yes. This was also consistent with staff indicating (39%) that they felt their agency didn't support them with the tools to deal with difficult calls. Line staff also indicated (53%) that they didn't feel comfortable going to their administration when they felt overwhelmed. This may indicate management style issues and a need to evaluate them but remember as leaders, "If we're not communicating we are not solving problems." Can any of you remember the old days when being told by supervisors "it's part of the job" and to "just walk it off" was a valid response? Well, rest assured, some of those dinosaurs still walk amongst us with 30% of telecommunicators indicating they have received this response. On a positive note, they did indicate a comfort level (55%) with discussing troubling calls with supervisors.

STRESSORS

For this research, we focused on two categories: job and institutional. The job stressors can be further identified as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), compassion fatigue, STSD and vicarious trauma. Research has

shown that these disorders share common causes like repetitiveness and sensory factors. Recognition that call takers are exposed to repetitiveness and sensory factors has served to dispel the idea that we cannot be affected because we're not on scene. Taking call after call without breaks or resolution (repetitiveness). On the sensory side, we are trained to visually paint pictures of a scene using caller information, sounds heard and experience. However, most times we are never taught what to do with those mental pictures after the call.

Institutional stressors are those imposed on us during the process of doing our jobs. When we discuss stress within our industry, we commonly look externally at the events that affect our agencies and ignore the internal hurdles. These hurdles like protocols, lack of training, policy and procedure, shift work, work group division, response diversity, organizational fairness, employee support, and communication. Many of the respondents (64%) stated that they could not go to sister field units for closure. It's generally known that most telecommunicators are type "A" personalities and need closure. In the past, a lot of us would be able to hear the results of our work when responders returned to base and shared the outcome of calls with us. In today's world of regionalization, I feel this natural coping mechanism will continue to degrade and weigh heavily on telecommunicators.

Response diversity (a phrase I use to describe the following issue) has a large impact on multi-jurisdictional ECCs, but if not controlled, it can affect the smallest as well. Response diversity is allowing like-responding departments to have different dispatch procedures to respond to similar events. Allowing this type of diversity to grow unchecked requires telecommunicators to remember multiple ways to do the same job, increasing potential error rates and stress. Participants responded overwhelmingly (70%) to feeling "bogged down" by the systems in place for performing their jobs. They also indicated (20%) that they will purposely arrive to work earlier to avoid working disciplines they are not comfortable covering.

EMOTION

I looked at the emotional roller coaster respondents felt during call taking. When speaking about emotions and the need to separate them, don't forget the fact that the

Does your agency have an employee assistance program (EAP)?

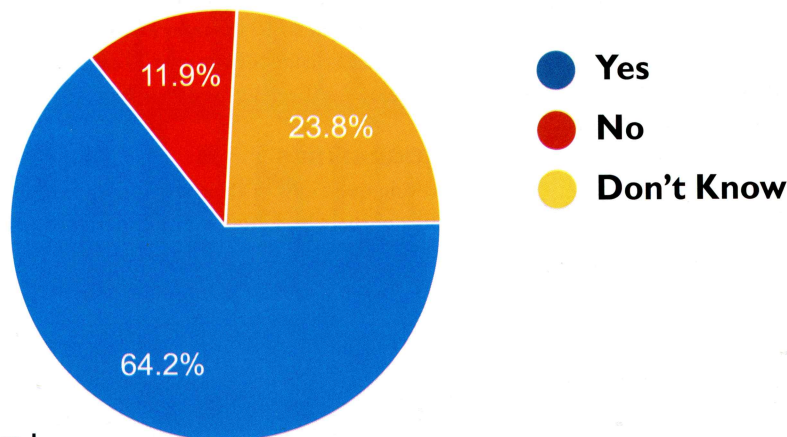


Figure 1