



## Why Prioritize?

Why do we need to prioritize calls in public safety? Everyone who calls the agency thinks that he or she has an emergency that requires a response. Therefore, agencies could adopt a "first come, first served" policy, answering calls in the order they were received.

It isn't that simple, though. Calls must be answered in order of urgency, and even that can get a little difficult. In this unit, we will look at why prioritization is necessary. Then we will look at a typical police prioritization hierarchy.

In the emergency services, there are some calls that require an urgent response, and some that need little or no response at all. The urgent calls receive the most attention, while the less urgent calls are given a lower priority. These lower priority calls are handled when time and resources allow.

Agencies have found it necessary to rank calls in a hierarchy, identifying those calls that are the most urgent. As available resources are reduced due to a high activity volume, calls are "held" for an available responder. The authority for these "holds" is normally vested in the field supervisor, although in some agencies, the telecommunications supervisor is responsible for holding calls - and seeing that all calls are answered in a timely manner.

In many agencies, call prioritization policies include provisions that prohibit the use of field resources on certain types of calls. This is meant to keep the responders free to handle the more urgent calls for service and keep them "on the road" for other duties, like preventative patrols.

In a typical agency, the call taker or dispatcher will send units to the more urgent calls first. This may be based on a policy or procedure that assigns definite priorities to certain types of calls, or it may be based on the common sense, experience and training of the telecommunicator. In either case, the more urgent calls get the first response.

There may be a time when a low priority call is bumped up the priority list because of the frequency and variety of callers. For example, a suspicious person at four in the afternoon may not be a high priority call. When five calls are received in fifteen minutes concerning this same suspicious person, it becomes more urgent to respond and check out the situation. Priority of a call is not only dictated by the type of call, but it is also dictated by the number and frequency of calls on the same incident.

### **CAD Environments and Call Prioritization**

Many agencies use computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems that automatically assign a priority to a call depending on the type of call that is entered by the call taker. For example, a call of vandalism is a lower priority call than a burglary in progress. Through the use of numerical systems or other rating systems, the CAD suggests or assigns a priority level to the call according to a predetermined chart. While the call taker may have the opportunity to change the priority level of the call, this is rarely done in a busy dispatch environment.

Call entry in CAD requires that the call taker choose a "title" for the call based on a forced list of choices. When a choice is made, the computer assigns the corresponding level of priority to the call. The information is then listed for dispatch, with the highest priority calls appearing first. A low priority call may be superceded by a higher priority call that comes in later, but is more urgent.

In large jurisdictions with many call takers, there is a tendency to *not* connect calls that may be a repeat or multiple calls on the same incident. In smaller agencies, all callers may speak to the same one or two people, while in large agencies, ten people could call and conceivably talk to ten different call takers.

To compensate for this problem, some CAD systems have a feature that is known as "near and similar." With this feature, the computer looks for calls that have the same or similar call type classification and are close to these other calls. It then alerts the dispatcher that there may be a more urgent problem due to many calls of one minor incident. The dispatcher can then "bump" the call up on the list and assign a field response to this group of calls.

It is important to note that when working with a CAD system, the telecommunicator must exercise some level of judgment in call prioritization. Experience has shown us that reliance on CAD to properly prioritize all calls can create significant problems. Agency policy should allow for changes in call priority by the telecommunicator as needed.

## Common Prioritization Scheme

Call prioritization schemes create a hierarchy of calls for service, ranking them from the most urgent to the least urgent. In some agencies, the lower level calls are not answered by field responders at all - a conscious decision driven by allocations of limited field resources.

The following is a typical call prioritization hierarchy. While your agency may differ in some areas, this represents current thinking in call priority.

- P-1 Officer needs assistance**  
These calls respond to a call from an officer for assistance in a violent or potentially violent situation. This can include backups for officers responding to potentially dangerous situations, or when policy and procedure require sending one or more backup units. All other calls for service are held until this call type is resolved.
  - P-2 Violent crimes in progress**  
"Violent crimes" in progress involve personal injury or the threat of impending personal injury. By its classification, a violent crime that is occurring now can lead to bodily harm or death, thus requiring an immediate response. In these cases, callers are kept on the phone to relay ongoing information about the situation.
  - P-3 Incidents involving personal injury**  
If the crime is already past or the incident is over, the fact that people are hurt will drive an urgent response to render aid. These include traffic accidents with injury, as well as other criminal personal injury incidents.
- Priority 1-3 normally requires an immediate response, even if it means pulling responders from other calls that they are handling.
- P-4 In-progress incidents involving property loss only**  
These calls involve burglaries in progress, thefts in progress, and other property crimes in progress. Some agencies will rank these types of incidents with the top three, requiring an immediate response.
  - P-5 Property loss incidents (not in progress)**  
These calls require a police response to an incident that has already occurred, and where those responsible for the crime are no longer at the scene. Police respond to the scene to begin an investigation or to create a report for insurance purposes.

**P-6 Officer-initiated field activity**

An officer may be called from a field stop, a traffic stop or other routine duty to answer any of the above calls for service.

**P-7 Nuisance calls**

These calls are classified on the lowest level because of many factors. In situations where the police have no jurisdiction or no responsibility, callers may be referred to the proper agency for action. For example, a "barking dog call" may not be answered by a field responder in many jurisdictions. However, a neighborhood of barking dogs in a high crime area may be worth investigating.

*This is where common sense, experience and judgment come in!*

Every agency has a slightly different way to prioritize calls for service. Similarly, every agency provides a slightly different level of discretion to the call takers and dispatchers when it comes to moving outside of the call prioritization guidelines. Review your agency policy and procedure manual and be familiar with your own priority levels.

**By Stephanie Graves**

## Quiz

### **CDE Article – Call Prioritization**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why should calls be prioritized?
  - A. More important callers should be given a faster response.
  - B. More urgent calls require a faster response.
  - C. Less important calls take up too much time.
  - D. There are never enough field resources to cover the calls that come in.
  
2. A low priority call can be "bumped" up the priority list if:
  - A. The call is perceived to have great governmental importance.
  - B. The caller is very important to the community.
  - C. There are many different callers about the same incident in a short time.
  - D. There are so many high priority calls that are "holding," handling one or two lower priority calls won't make any difference.
  
3. When using a CAD system, the computer will:
  - A. Ask the call taker to enter both a call type and priority.
  - B. Determine priority from the call type.
  - C. Determine call type from priority.
  - D. Determine priority from geographic location of the call.

4. One determining factor of a high priority call is:
  - A. The possibility of personal injury.
  - B. The level of urgency expressed by the caller.
  - C. The possibility of loss of public property.
  - D. The needs of the agency to answer calls promptly.
  
5. When compared to calls for service, officer-initiated field activity normally is a:
  - A. High priority activity.
  - B. Low priority activity
  - C. High priority activity unless it does not yield an arrest.
  - D. Priority only if property damage is involved.