

Project RETAINS: The Key to Satisfied Employees



Wanda McCarley

The nation's 9-1-1 calltakers and law enforcement, fire-rescue and EMS dispatchers and supervisors are the first of all first responders and perhaps the least sung of the nation's unsung public safety heroes. Every day, personnel in public safety communications centers of all sizes stand ready to assist citizens in their times of emergency. More than 300,000 times a day, citizens call 9-1-1 and are dealt with by communications center personnel.

This profession experiences high personnel-turnover rates and frequent vacancies. This often life-saving work is rewarding, but it carries the awesome responsibility of making split-second decisions in a time-critical, error-free environment, while being empathetic to citizens who are often in highly emotional, life-threatening and distraught situations. Our communications first responders are called on to check their own personal and family issues at the doors of their centers and arrive at their workstations ready to devote their full attention to their callers' problems. The impacts of shift work, long hours, difficult schedules and on-call requirements stretch the limits of personal sacrifice and family relationships.

This month's magazine features articles on employee relations. As we all have been aware, there is a crisis in staffing our centers. APCO's Project RETAINS has made us more aware of this issue and some of its causes and solutions.

Project RETAINS was initiated in response to a widespread perception that public safety communications centers have unusually high turnover rates. There was anecdotal evidence of a problem, but no hard data that could help determine if high turnover was a widespread problem or a highly localized phenomenon. Members were saying they struggled to find and keep qualified employees, but managers had no national data they could use to compare their centers to others, to determine if they were dealing with an extreme situation.

The APCO Public Safety Staffing and Retention Study is the result of Project RETAINS. It is the most extensive, in-depth research ever conducted of the issues affecting the recruitment, hiring, processing, training and retention of personnel in 9-1-1 public safety communications centers. The study's toolkit came from this research, with tools designed to assist communications center managers, human-resource and management and budget-department personnel, police chiefs, sheriffs, fire chiefs and elected officials in addressing the challenges of hiring and retaining qualified personnel.

We learned exactly how severe the problem is. Two surveys established baseline, national, retention rates in public safety communications centers. In Study I, which was conducted among a random selection of centers, the average retention rate is 83 percent across small (1-15 employees), medium (16-75 employees) and large (76+ employees) centers. In Study II, conducted among large centers only, the average retention rate was 85 percent. Conversely, the average turnover rate for all centers was 17 percent and 15 percent in large centers. To put these numbers in perspective, the turnover rate for communications centers is greater than the staffing crisis in the nursing and education industries, both well-known national issues.

The project also resulted in the Effective Practices Guide, which lists strategies and discusses factors related to retention and satisfaction. The guide also looks at pay, benefits, overtime, recruiting/screening/selecting qualified staff, shift management, turnover rates, job complexity, working conditions and factors related to employee satisfaction.

APCO International recently took this information on the road with the Project RETAINS Symposium Series and with sessions at several state and regional conferences. We learned a little more about how employee satisfaction relates to retention rates. The employees in the centers we studied identified several factors that related directly to their job satisfaction. The Project RETAINS Symposium Series focused on five.

We learned that staffing to the authorized level is the best single way to keep staff, as it reduces the need for overtime, minimizes downtime during training and helps employees maintain a high level of service. The other retention-predicting factors are managing monthly overtime hours, managing the number and variety of required tasks, reviewing hourly base-pay and reviewing working conditions.

The studies identified factors that predicted employee satisfaction. In the symposia, we learned about eight. These included center performance and management, preparation or ongoing training, appreciation by management, immediate supervisors and the media, shift-selection processes, effective mentoring and efficient screening and applications processes.

This information and more are available to APCO members only. In addition to the Effective Practices Guide, the study has developed a tool to estimate the staffing level needed in a center by looking at the available hours employees can work, turnover rate, hours that need to be covered and call volume. The study also developed new terminology

to define positions in a center. In addition, the toolkit includes a retention tool and an employee-satisfaction survey.

APCO International recognizes the important role of telecommunicators in protecting the public. It is vital that our centers are staffed appropriately to answer the calls and that the professionals at the console are satisfied. The APCO Public Safety Staffing and Retention Study addresses the issues of staffing our nation's communications centers, but, more importantly, it helps us manage our employees better.

www.apcointl.org