

Employee Turnover in Chesterfield County's Emergency Communications Center

A Research Study with Recommendations

Executive Development

By: Robert P. Avsec
Chesterfield Fire Department
Chesterfield, Virginia

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Abstract

The Chesterfield County, Virginia, Emergency Communications Center currently experiences a high rate of turnover of Emergency Communications Officers. This turnover rate has an impact on the quality of emergency services provided to the County's citizens and its public safety agencies.

Currently, there is little literature discussion regarding the high turnover rates for Emergency Communications Center personnel.

The purpose of this research project was to identify the factors that influence Emergency Communications Center's turnover rate and to recommend solutions.

This study used the historical, descriptive and evaluative methodologies. The research questions used in this study were:

1. What was the experience base of the Emergency Communications Officers lost during the past seven years?
2. What has been the impact of that lost experience base on the training and experience levels of the incumbent staff?
3. What has been the impact of the high turnover rate on the incumbent staff?
4. What do the incumbent staff members feel are the factors that cause a high turnover rate?
5. What were the reasons given by former staff members for their leaving the Center?

This research used a survey to assess the attitudes of the incumbent staff regarding the high turnover rate in the Center. The survey included questions on staff demographics, opinions on work schedules, salary, benefits, sources of workplace stress, and career attitudes. The survey was distributed to forty-four fully functional staff employees and eight employees who were still in training.

The study findings revealed that the high turnover rate has significantly reduced the experience level of the incumbent staff. It has also created the need for excessive overtime to provide minimum staffing in the absence of a fully trained staff.

The recommendations of the research were for Chesterfield County and the management of the Center to: 1) increase the salaries of Center employees; 2) accelerate the completion of a new Emergency Communications Center currently under construction; 3) pursue the acquisition of a new computer aided dispatch system; 4) develop a strategic plan for the Center to address the recruitment and hiring of new employees, training of supervisory personnel and trainers; and 5) develop a strategic plan for the overall management of a consolidated emergency communications center.

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Introduction

Emergency Communications Centers across America experience high turnover of employees, especially during the training process. The Emergency Communications Center in Chesterfield County, Virginia is a prime example of this problem. During the past seven years, Chesterfield County has lost ninety-one employees from its authorized complement of sixty-four employees; forty-two of those employees were lost during their training period the first year.

The purpose of this research project is to identify the reasons why the Chesterfield County Emergency Communications Center experiences such a high turnover rate in its staff and to recommend solutions to that problem.

This study used the historical, descriptive and evaluative methodologies. The research questions used to identify the factors that contribute to high turnover were:

1. What was the experience base of the Emergency Communications Officers lost during the past seven years?
2. What has been the impact of that lost experience on the training and experience levels of the incumbent staff?
3. What has been the impact of the high turnover rate on the incumbent staff?
4. What do members of the incumbent staff think are the factors that cause a high turnover rate?
5. What were the reasons given by former staff members for their leaving the Center?

Background and Significance

Definition of Terms

Civilian - an individual who is not administered an oath of office, who is not charged with enforcement of any laws, nor given the power of arrest. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, it also applies to an individual whose position is not listed on the Circuit Court List.

Dispatcher - an employee of a communication center who dispatches calls to police, fire or EMS units. As this term has been in use much longer, it also is used by many localities synonymously to describe an Emergency Communications Officer.

Enhanced 9-1-1 (E-9-1-1) - specialized 9-1-1 service that provides the Call Taker who answers the call in an Emergency Communications Center with the address and phone number from which the call is placed. The information is displayed on the Call Taker's computer screen and can be transferred into the computer aided dispatch system (CADS) with a single keystroke or "mouse" click.

Emergency Communications Center (ECC) - a location within a jurisdiction where emergency and non-emergency telephone calls for service are received; radio dispatches of calls are made for police, fire and EMS resources; radio communications are maintained with field units that are in service.

Emergency Communications Officer (ECO) - a civilian employee whose job responsibilities include answering emergency and non-emergency telephone calls for service, dispatching public safety resources, and handling other activities in an emergency communications center.

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) - federal law that dictates to employers the accepted methods of payment for hours worked, how many hours may be worked in a particular period before

overtime compensation is required, and establishes record keeping procedures for employers and grievance procedures for employees regarding compensable hours.

Garcia vs. San Antonio Metropolitan Transit Authority - federal court ruling that made the provisions of FLSA applicable to state and local governments.

Section 7(k) Exemption under FLSA - exemption from FLSA requirements granted to public sector employers of police officers and firefighters exempting such agencies from the provisions requiring overtime for all work over forty hours in a pay period. The exemption allows such employers the option of establishing alternative work periods that have the effect of raising the FLSA overtime threshold beyond the normal forty hour work week.

Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) - a location in a jurisdiction where E-9-1-1 calls for emergency service are received and processed for dispatch to public safety agencies.

Chesterfield County, Virginia

Chesterfield County borders the state's capital city, Richmond, to the south with the James River as the boundary line. The County comprises 446 square miles and has an estimated population of 260,000 residents. The governing body is a five-member Board of Supervisors with each member representing one of five magisterial districts. A County Administrator, whom the Board appoints, manages the daily operations of the County.

A County Police Department provides the law enforcement needs of the County. A County Fire Department provides fire protection.

EMS services are provided by a multi-agency system consisting of the Fire Department and four separate and autonomous volunteer Rescue Squads (ambulance corps). The Emergency Communications Department provides the emergency communications services and operates the Emergency Communications Center.

Chesterfield County Virginia's Emergency Communications Center

The Emergency Communications Center (ECC) has an authorized complement of sixty-four Emergency Communications Officers (ECO) and Supervisors and three administrative staff positions. Staffing is maintained on a twenty-four-hour basis through the use of rotating shifts for the day and evening shifts and a fixed midnight shift: the rotating shifts switch every twenty-eight days. Approximately a third of the staff works either a fixed day schedule or a fixed evening schedule and those assignments are based on seniority.

All ECOs are trained as Call Takers and then receive radio dispatch training on either police radios or Fire/EMS radios. An additional level of ECO training is the Cross-Trained ECO: this person is qualified on all radio dispatch positions in the Center. On shift supervision is provided by a supervisor for the Call Taking Operations and Police Dispatch Operations and a supervisor for the Fire/EMS Dispatch Operations. The minimum staffing requirements for the Center require twelve personnel on day shift, thirteen personnel on evening shift and nine personnel on midnight shift.

The ECC is the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) for the County. All emergency and non-emergency telephone calls for the County's public safety agencies are answered and processed in the Center.

Call Takers answer and process all calls for service and enter them into the Computer Aided Dispatch System (CADS). Once the call for service is entered into CADS, it is dispatched by the radio operator to the appropriate public safety agency for response.

Chesterfield County's Employee Retention Problem in the ECC

Chesterfield County's ECC is approaching a crisis due to its inability to recruit adequate numbers of new employees and the continued loss of experienced employees. The Center has always experienced a rate of turnover that exceeded that of most County Departments and is well above the County workforce average of 4% annual turnover (Personnel records from Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center, October 1997). Since March 1996, however, the Center's staff has experienced a significant loss both in numbers and experience. The last factor, experience, is critical to the success of the Center in its mission of serving the public and the public safety agencies in Chesterfield County. Table 1 shows the number of employees and their years of experience at the time they left employment with the County for the years 1990-1997 (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

<u>Years of Service</u>	<u>No.</u>
Less than 1 year	42
1-2 year	16
2-3 years	7
3-4 years	4
4-5 years	5
Greater than 5 years	17

Table 2 presents data that suggests that the situation is even more pronounced when one examines the trend from April 1, 1996 to present (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

<u>Years of Service</u>	<u>No.</u>
Less than 1	8
1-2 years	4
2-3 years	3
3-4 years	2
4-5 years	1

greater than 5 years

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The reader will note the significant number of employees, twelve (40%), who left the job and had greater than five years of experience in the Emergency Communications Center. These numbers are particularly distressing when one considers that an Emergency Communications Officer is considered experienced only when they've had three to four years of experience (J.E. Ruffin, personal communication, October 15, 1997).

Another distressing trend is the number of new employees that are leaving the Center during their first two years on the job. A total of twelve (40%) of the employees left during that period, with eight (27%) leaving during their training period. These numbers seem to suggest that the Center has problems attracting candidates with the necessary job skills to effectively learn and do the job of an Emergency Communications Officer (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

Chesterfield Center has sixty-four positions funded in its budget. When this study was completed there were forty-three fully trained employees and eight trainees on the payroll. This equates to a Center that was operating one-third understaffed.

Maintaining sufficient staffing in the Center is not solely a problem of retention. The management of the Center is also having problems attracting qualified applicants to the job who can complete the required training and become productive members of the staff. Table 3 presents data for the period of April 1, 1996 through August 14, 1997 which illustrates this trend (Personnel records from Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center, October 1997).

<u>Applications Received</u>	<u>No. Interviewed</u>	<u>No. Hired</u>	<u>No. employed</u>
126	66	20	11

Before 1981, the Police and Fire Departments in Chesterfield County had separate Emergency Communications units in two physically separate locations. Employees of each communications unit were employees of their respective department. In November, 1981 both units moved to a common location in the basement of the County Administration Building. Each department maintained control of their respective communications unit in this new location; each department had a field officer assigned as a manager to oversee the operations of their respective unit. The Police Department's manager was a Police Lieutenant and the Fire Department's was a Captain. (The two ranks were equal pay grades in the County's Compensation System.) There was a separate supervisory hierarchy for each unit under that field officer.

In 1992, Chesterfield County consolidated the operations of the two communications units into a new entity, the Emergency Communications Department. The manager of this new department was a newly created civilian position, Director of Emergency Communications.

The new director reported to both the Police and Fire Chiefs. Daily Center Operations continued to be supervised by the same supervisory hierarchy that existed when the communications units were separate under the Police and Fire Departments (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

Several problems arose with the consolidation of the Center as that process progressed. The primary problem was that a vision or definition of what consolidation would mean was never presented to the personnel of the ECC.

There was no blueprint depicting how a consolidated Emergency Communications Center would be constructed, no list of the components that would be used, no time line for completion, and no architect's rendering of what the finished product would look like (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997, p.16).

The Center Director had problems with the arrangement of having both the Police and Fire Chiefs as his superiors. Decisions affecting the Center had to have the approval of both individuals. Both the Police and Fire Chiefs had a strong desire to be involved in both the strategic and tactical management of the Center. Over time this situation deteriorated to the point that the Center Director resigned from the County in February, 1996 (J.E. Ruffin, personal communication, October 15, 1997).

Upon the director's departure the Police and Fire Departments each assigned a line officer to the Center as Co-Directors. The Police Department's representative, a Lieutenant, and the Fire Department's representative, a Senior Captain, continue to manage the Center. The Center continues to operate as a separate County department.

The materials presented in the Executive Development course included information on problem solving techniques, how to promote creativity and innovation, and how to improve service quality. This research is relevant to that course material because it addresses the issue of high employee turnover in an Emergency Communications Center from all of those perspectives.

Literature Review

Historical Perspective

From the time that civilized societies started to provide emergency services to their citizens there have always existed two basic needs: how to summon the needed service and how to communicate that need to the proper service so that help would respond. Today in the United States, a Police Dispatcher takes a 9-1-1 call and dispatches a patrol car to an incident, where once the police officer walked a beat and received verbal notification of the problem, or saw the problem with his own eyes. Emergency Communications Centers today receive reports of a structure fire via the telephone from the public and dispatches the necessary resources, where once an individual walking a Fire Patrol saw the fire and manually and verbally sounded the alarm.

As police and fire departments (and later emergency medical services) grew and became more structured to meet the demands of the growing urban populations in this country, so too did the need for a more structured communications process. The origins of today's public safety communications centers were the police station house desk or at the fire station "watch desk." On-duty police officers and firefighters staffed those positions and received information about an emergency from the citizen who either walked into the office or called by telephone. However, as the workload for all public safety agencies continued to increase, so too did the need for more centralized communications so that there was a more systematic approach to the allocation of resources (Pivetta, 1993).

Police departments and fire departments began to create dispatch or alarm centers where alarms and telephone calls from citizens reporting emergencies could be processed at a central location and resources dispatched accordingly.

Additionally, it became important to have communications between the dispatch center and the field units so that they could be assigned another call when they finished the previous call, rather than having to wait until units returned to their quarters.

The growth of police and fire communications in America has been pushed by the vital need to get the information from the source of the problem to the system immediately. As more efficient communications systems developed, so did the need for professional personnel to monitor the system and relay the information (Pivetta, 1993, p. 6).

Originally, police officers or firefighters provided the staffing for telephones and radios in those centers. Personnel recovering from line of duty injuries or those on medical retirement from such injuries provided the staffing pool for many organizations. For others, working in the "alarm center" was the entry level position into the organization (Pivetta, 1993). It was common knowledge that these were not the most desired assignments, especially for those able-bodied individuals in those entry level positions. In other departments, assignment to "alarm" was seen as a demotion or punishment (Pivetta, 1993).

The staffing of many centers, for both police and fire departments, began to change in the early 1960's. A rising crime rate and an ever increasing fire problem, particularly in the larger cities, created

higher demand for public safety agencies. These demands were also being felt in the dispatch centers. Faced with increasing crime and the need for more police officers, police departments began to question the value of having sworn, able-bodied police officers staffing dispatch center positions. Fire departments began to make the same assessment in their centers as well (Miraglia, 1996).

An increasing level of sophistication in communications technology was also becoming a change engine in the communications center. More complex radio and telephone systems, combined with the introduction of computer aided dispatch systems (CADS), increased the need for specialized skills and training. A new field, emergency communications, was emerging as was a new position in public safety, the emergency communications officer.

The need for specialists--carefully selected, highly trained and administratively supported telecommunicators--is no longer just a gentle tap on the shoulder, but a requirement for almost every city. Agencies face liability if they do not employ skilled and knowledgeable workers (Pivetta, 1993, p. 17).

McMillian (1991) describes this new field of emergency communications and the new organizational term that came with it, civilianization. Civilianization was the replacement of sworn police officers and firefighters in the dispatch center with civilian employees. In its early stages civilianization meant that sworn personnel in the dispatch center were replaced by civilian employees hired for that position. Those civilian employees were still employees of the respective public safety agency for whom they provided dispatching services, i.e., police dispatchers worked for the police department and fire dispatchers worked for the fire department. Starting in the early 1970's, however,

some jurisdictions, in the search for tax dollar savings, began combining their separate police and fire communications units into an autonomous department within the jurisdiction, hence the birth of the Emergency Communications Center. "Eighty percent of reporting agencies have an all civilian staff, or are phasing in an all civilian staff"(Broughman, 1995, p. 15).

Employee Turnover in Emergency Communications Centers

The review of available literature concerning the high turnover rate in emergency communications centers found that the problem affects centers across the nation. McMillian (1991) describes high turnover rates for employees as having been a chronic problem in the field of emergency communications. Beyond the technological challenges of the job, emergency communications center employees are faced with an increasing workload without the personnel resources needed to do the job. Many centers, even if staffed at their authorized complement, are understaffed in comparison to the workload. When centers are forced to maintain operations with decreased staffing, due to employee turnover, existing staff assumes a greater burden (Middleton, 1995).

The volume of business handled by an emergency communications center means employees spend more time seated at their positions. In many centers, only breaks and meals may offer any time to get up and move around - - and those are not guaranteed (Pivetta, 1993, p.23).

Besides the physiological impact of staying at their radio or telephone console, there is also the psychological aspect. While many callers are experiencing true emergencies and need the services of

the emergency communications center, many callers dial 9-1-1 because they do not know who else to call.

You will be dealing with unpleasant situations and unpleasant people. You will hear things most people do not want to hear. You are in the "belly of the whale." No one knows more than the dispatcher (Pivetta, 1993, p. 22).

Emergency communications employees deal with the stress of handling emergencies over the telephone or radio, never seeing the situation they're dealing with, and only occasionally seeing the outcome of their work.

A police officer has much more mobility being in a car and firefighters have a lot more room at the fire station than we do in the Center. When they're stressed, they have a place to go. We hang up (the phone) from one situation and take the next call. Often there's no break (P.M. Cimburke, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

A National Communications Officers Association (NCOA) survey of 111 public safety agencies in twenty-three states and Ontario, Canada found that the average turnover rate was 18.3 percent per year (National Communications Officers Association [NCOA], 1994, p.1). A more recent national survey revealed that the average turnover for communications centers in the United States and Canada is 17.19 percent per year. (Association of Public Safety Communications Officials [APCO], 1997)

The review of the literature also suggests that there are many commonly held conceptions of what causes the high turnover of employees. Low salaries, lack of respect from other public safety providers, and long hours on the job are frequently cited as reasons why emergency communications

center employees leave the profession (Miraglia, 1997). Recruitment and hiring practices have also been identified as factors that occur early in an emergency communications officer's career that affect the longevity of that career (Miraglia, 1996). Proper training, both initially and on a continuing basis, has also been cited as a factor in reducing employee turnover in emergency communications (Broughman, 1995).

The job description of the average emergency communications center employee is changing dramatically. Whereas once most employees answered calls for service, and dispatched the resources of one public safety agency, i.e., the fire department, many centers are consolidating public safety communications. That same employee is now responsible for taking calls for service and dispatching resources for all public safety agencies (Miraglia, 1996). This paradigm shift can be difficult for emergency communications personnel to accept, especially in the employee who has strong allegiances to one public safety agency or another. This may be especially true for an employee who, for instance, obtained a job as a fire dispatcher because they wanted to be part of the fire department mission, but did not possess the requisite physical skills for the job (McMillian, 1991).

Salary

When local government chooses to civilianize the staffing of their emergency communications center, the primary motive is economics (McMillian, 1991). Civilian employees of emergency communications centers typically receive lower salaries than police officers and firefighters working "the street."

Although some telecommunicators would do the job regardless of pay, pay is a measure of worth. If the actual duties, skills, and level of difficulty were evaluated, it would be without question that the job is equal in pay to that of the officer in the field (Pivetta, 1993, p. 32).

Miraglia (1997) wrote that low salaries affect the turnover of emergency communications center employees in two ways. He postulates that low salaries make it hard to attract qualified applicants to the job initially.

Agencies should examine closely what type of people are applying for the entry level job as an emergency communications officer and assess whether those applicants have the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary to be successful.

I would suggest that if your agency's starting salary is bringing you applicants with limited experience, no professional job history and immaturity, it might be time to evaluate how much a talented, skillful dispatcher is really worth (Miraglia, 1997, p.30).

Miraglia (1997) further states that basing the pay scales for emergency communications officers on those of police officers and firefighters is archaic at best. "There are far more candidates out in the job market qualified to be police officers and firefighters, but far fewer qualified to be successful dispatchers"(Miraglia, 1997, p. 32).

APCO (1997) as part of its computerized on-line Research Center Catalog conducted a research project surveying members about communications center turnover. APCO reported that the survey data shows a small direct inverse correlation between starting salaries in communications centers and turnover rates.

The Metro-Dade (FL) Communications Center reported dispatchers working three 12-hour shifts per week due to understaffing ("Frustration builds," 1997). A pay study to support a pay reclassification for Center employees in that locality compared dispatcher pay to that of other employees in the local government pay structure (See Table 4):

<u>Job Title</u>	<u>Annual Salary</u>
Transit Dispatchers	\$28,158
Police Office personnel	\$26,676
Waste truck drivers	\$ 23,972
Police Dispatchers	\$22,178

In 1997, the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) conducted the first comprehensive study of salaries paid to emergency communications center employees (NENA, 1997). Table 5 provides a "snapshot" of yearly salaries for entry level emergency communications center employees:

<u>Region</u>	<u>Starting Salary</u>
West Coast (AK, WA, OR, CA, NV, and HI)	\$23,483 per year
North Central (ID, MT, WY, ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO, WI, IL, MI, IN, and OH)	\$19,385 per year
South Central (UT, CO, AZ, NM, TX, OK, AK, and LA)	\$19,011 per year
Northeast (ME, MA, RI, CT, DE, NJ, NY, PA, VT, NH, and MD)	\$18,262 per year
Southeast (WV. VA. KY. TN. NC. SC. GA. FL. AL. and MS)	\$17,534 per year

Miraglia (1997) reported that given the choice between earning more money per hour or working fewer hours per week today, 75% of the respondents would like greater compensation (more money). In response to the question, “What about your job keeps you working as a dispatcher?”, the single highest response, ninety (32%) was “Money.” In response to the question, “What is the most important aspect of your job that should be added/changed to keep you working as a dispatcher?”, the single highest response, twenty-seven (10%) was “Better pay.”

Review of the available literature appears to show that inadequate salaries have a job satisfaction influence on personnel who staff emergency communications centers. It is not entirely clear to what degree salaries influence employee turnover rates. The review does suggest a vital need for more job analysis of the emergency communications officer position so that personnel are compensated for the skills, knowledge, ability and experience that the position requires. The review of available literature found no studies, formal or informal, which provided such job analysis for the emergency

communications officer position. References to such job analysis are purely anecdotal in the writings available for review at this time.

Respect from Other Public Safety Agency Personnel

What do dispatch center employees mean when they say lack of respect? Frequently, they are referring to lack of radio discipline, second guessing of their dispatch decisions, and lack of cooperation on the part of public safety field providers.

In this profession, it is not uncommon to hear, "They [meaning the officers and Administration] think that we [emergency communications officers] are 'just clerks.' They give us no respect." Most people do not respect the job because they do not know what the job really involves" (Pivetta, 1993, p.32).

Miraglia (1997) cited lack of respect from police officers, firefighters and paramedics in the field as one source of job stress that contributes to personnel leaving the field of emergency communications. Employees of emergency communications centers are the lowest paid members of the public safety "team" and as such are viewed as the lowest level in the "pecking order."

In the discussion about the causes of these problems, dispatchers from every agency spoke of instances where field providers and field supervisors chastised or spoke rudely to dispatchers over the radio, and because nothing was done to correct the behavior, it is part of the organizational culture (Miraglia, 1997, p.50).

Though low salaries for emergency communications center personnel are seen as one factor that influences respect from field providers, it is not the only one. Miraglia (1997) reported that

dispatchers felt the organizational culture of many public safety agencies was also a factor. The traditional conflict between sworn personnel and civilians was one factor that affected the degree to which dispatchers were made to feel a part of the public safety team. "Sworn personnel, police officers and firefighters, are seen as professionals and treated as such"(Miraglia, 1997, p. 32).

Miraglia (1997) also described the acceptance of women as part of the traditionally male dominated public safety arena as another organizational culture issue that has an impact on the amount of respect that field providers accord dispatch center personnel. In August 1997, the Medford (MA) city council scuttled efforts by the town's mayor to civilianize that locality's emergency communications center as part of a consolidation plan. Among the arguments put forth in support of that action during a public hearing was the firefighters' union president stating, "Nobody can tell me that some housewife can do all that, fire and police dispatching all at once, and not make a mistake ("Firefighters say 'no way'," 1997). Miraglia (1997) made the observation that public safety agencies must make the same commitment to resolving such gender conflicts between agencies that they have made within their respective agencies.

Miraglia (1997) reported that 80% of emergency communications center personnel surveyed were women. Tannen (1994) suggests that working in an environment where they are liked and respected is more important to women than it is to men. "The congeniality of the work environment is important to everyone, but the requirement that everyone like each other may be more central to women's notion of congeniality, whereas men may value other types of congeniality, such as easy banter" (Tannen, 1994, p.155).

Since the transition from police and firefighter staffing of centers to staffing by civilians is a relatively new phenomenon, the subject of mutual respect and understanding is in great need of analysis.

The review of available literature suggests that such analysis is necessary if local governments want to have a public safety system where all agencies are equal partners in the process.

Work Schedules

Pivetta (1993) reports that shiftwork is a common ingredient to the operation of any communications center. She points out that the phones and radio positions must be staffed around the clock. Many centers rotate shifts so that no one group of employees must shoulder the burden of a particular shift, i.e., the 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. (midnight shift). NENA (1997) reported that 90% of the centers in a national salary survey work rotating shifts. Of those centers, only 30% provide a shift differential for those employees who work shift work.

Klein (1997) wrote that one in four working men and one in six working women currently work on some type of variable or round-the-clock schedule. Many people have difficulty making the biological and social adjustments required by shiftwork.

Shiftworkers are more likely than non-shiftworkers to experience: (a) chronic sleep problems, (b) stomach disorders, (c) chronic fatigue, (d) mood swings and depression, (e) drug and alcohol abuse, (f) more serious accidents on the job, and (g) divorce and spouse abuse (Klein, 1997, p. 2).

Employees working shift work, especially those shifts working when most of the population is sleeping, often find it difficult to remain alert and concentrate on their work. Klein writes that research

shows that alertness decreases and reaches a low point along with body temperature around 3:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. (Klein, 1997). Most communications centers experience their lowest workloads during the midnight shift, most commonly 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. It is during this period, however, when significant incidents, such as large fires or serious accidents, occur that require appropriate actions by emergency communications center personnel (J.E. Ruffin, personal communication, October 15, 1997).

The accident at Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant, for example, occurred at 4:00 a.m. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the Union Carbide chemical accident in Bhopal also occurred during the early morning hours. This is also the time most single vehicle truck accidents occur, as do mistakes by telephone operators, postal workers, surgeons, railroaders and practically anyone who works during these hours (Klein, 1997, p.54).

Emergency communications center employees who work shift work report that such schedules have a significant impact on their personal life as well. Miraglia (1996) wrote that of dispatchers surveyed, 227 (80%) were women, most of whom had at least one dependent. "Time with their families and the ability to care for dependents is critically important to dispatchers"(Miraglia, 1996, pp. 13-14). "I realize the importance of twenty-four hour services to the citizens, but it's hard when I have to miss out on things with family and friends"(T. Higgins, personal communication, November 6, 1997). "After going from nights to days, I get so tired and spaced that my husband and I are cranky and short-tempered with each other"(P.M. Cimburke, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

The scheduling constraints placed upon emergency communications center personnel make it difficult to develop schedules that allow personnel enough time away from the stressful work environment in today's emergency communications center. Pivetta (1993) writes that most communications centers are minimally staffed. Given the turnover rates that are endemic to the profession, most centers cannot maintain even those minimum staffing levels that are authorized. The result is overtime, either voluntary or involuntary, that staff must work to operate the center. "Overtime is a reality and mandatory overtime is commonplace at some centers"(Pivetta, 1993, p.21). Miraglia (1996) reported that when given a choice of better compensation or more time off today, 75% of the dispatchers surveyed responded "more money." But, when asked the same question for the long term, only 61% still responded "more money."

The response to these questions is somewhat surprising considering the number of comments made by dispatchers in the survey about the importance of time off and away from the job. The results suggest that there is a more immediate need for additional monetary compensation and a longer term need for more time off (Miraglia, 1996, p. 7).

More than any other public safety function, the application of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) has had a negative influence on emergency communications center personnel. The overtime requirements of FLSA were first applied to state and local governments in 1974, though most public safety agencies withheld application to their public safety agencies (Aitchison, 1992). In Garcia vs.

San Antonio Metropolitan Transit Authority (1985), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the provisions for overtime compensation contained in the FLSA applied to state and local governments (Cordelli, 1993).

Middleton (1995) described the affect that this ruling had on the personnel assigned to the Emergency Communications Center in Henrico County, Virginia. In Henrico County, the civilian dispatchers had continued to work the same work schedule as their sworn counterparts in the police and fire departments. Garcia vs. San Antonio required that the Police Department adjust the work schedules of their dispatchers, though they were employees of the Police Department, so that they did not exceed the forty-hour FLSA threshold because they were civilian employees (Cordelli, 1993). Miraglia (1997) reported similar actions in dispatch centers operated by both police and fire departments operating in northern California in a multi-agency survey.

Local governments have responded to the requirements of FLSA with several work schedules designed so that their emergency communications center personnel comply with the provisions of FLSA.

In a survey sponsored by the Napa-Solano County Consortium on Dispatcher Recruitment and Retention (Miraglia, 1996), the respondents to a multi-agency survey found the following work schedules in use by emergency communications centers. (See Table 6).

<u>Work Schedule</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
4-10 hour days per week	179	63%
3-12 hour days per week	74	26%
5-8 hour days per week	12	4%
4-11 hour days per week	7	3%
No response given	12	4%

Table 7 shows the results of a survey of 111 communications centers in twenty-three states and Ontario conducted by the National Communications Officers Association (NCOA) in 1994 that found the following work schedules being used.

<u>Work Schedule</u>	<u>%</u>
5-8 hour shifts per week	60%
3-12 hour shifts per week	18%
4-10 hour shifts per week	15%

The NCOA survey found that those agencies working the twelve-hour shifts reported an employee turnover rate that was 4.7% higher than those working eight-hour shifts ("Turnover survey: no easy answers," 1994). NENA (1997) reported that 75% of respondents in a national salary survey worked eight-hour shifts. The next most common response was twelve-hour shifts.

Many agencies use the longer ten and twelve hour shifts in an attempt to give their employees more time off from the job. Middleton (1995) found that many such agencies, due to chronic understaffing have to fill vacancies using existing staff working overtime.

The net effect is that requiring existing employees to work more than forty hours per week negates the efforts to get them more time off using the longer shift hours.

Middleton (1995) examined the work schedule of the Henrico County (VA) Emergency Communications Center's schedule to find out what impact the use of a fixed schedule had on the use of sick leave by center personnel. (A fixed schedule has personnel assigned to a set schedule of hours, i.e., 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., on a fixed basis with no rotation.) In Henrico, the fixed schedule had been implemented in 1985 with no subsequent evaluation of its effectiveness until Middleton's study in 1995. Middleton's research was designed to prove or disprove the administration's hypothesis that the fixed schedule was the influencing factor in increased use of sick leave by center personnel.

The conclusion of the research was contradictory to the hypothesis. It was believed that fixed scheduling did affect sick leave, overtime, and training opportunities. The research revealed that other factors were more likely contributors to the problems being experienced (Middleton, 1995, p. iv).

The review of the literature suggests that the development of staffing strategies that offer flexible work schedules may be one component of a successful plan for reducing employee turnover. Employees need time off from the rigorous work environment that is found in the emergency

communications center. The underlying "illness," however, does not appear to be the schedule worked, but the amount of people available to work the schedule.

Most agencies are already using a work plan, other than the five eight-hour shifts per week, which allows for more than two days off a week. However, because of staffing shortages, overtime is required and the value of these alternative work plans may be compromised when dispatchers have to work extra hours (Miraglia, 1996, p. 13).

Training of Emergency Communications Officers

Broughman (1995) reported that of all the factors under an agency's control, only training practices appear related substantially to turnover rates. Broughman wrote that in a survey done by NCOA that the twenty-five agencies who reported using only "on the job" training had a turnover rate 10% higher than the survey average of 27.6%. Those agencies that reported the highest training standards, i.e., basic academic training with written and practical testing, had only slightly better results, a 17.5% turnover rate. However, when Broughman analyzed the difference between the "on the job" group and the "most stringent" group as a percentage of increase, he found that the "on the job" group showed a turnover rate increase of 58%.

Broughman also found a strong correlation between turnover rates and the length of the initial training period. Survey respondents reported initial training periods ranged from ninety days to one year.

Those agencies that required that training be completed no more than ninety days after employment reported turnover rates 5% lower (16.2%) than the agencies allowing up to one

year (21.4%). Again using the percentage of increase analysis, turnover for the "up to one year" group was almost 32% higher (Braughman, 1995, p. 14.).

Eller (1997) reported dramatic reduction in the turnover rate for employees of the Delaware County (PA) emergency communications center (DELCOM) after a rigorous initial training program was begun. "Fifteen years ago DELCOM had a turnover rate of 45%. After a rigorous training program was instituted over the years the turnover rate has dropped to approximately one half of one percent"(Eller, 1997. p. 54). The DELCOM training program is a six month, 500 hour training program that includes didactic training and simulator exercises. "Applicants are hired on a part-time basis and encouraged not to leave their full-time place of employment"(Eller, 1997, p. 54). There is one training academy per year and the graduates are graded by score. The first three months of the academy are conducted at night from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and cover the classroom and simulator portions of training. The final three months of the academy are conducted in the emergency communications center setting under the guidance of a trainer. If a full-time job in the center becomes available, the top candidate on the list is offered the position. If the full-time job is refused, the employee is terminated from part-time employment. ". . . this policy became necessary several years ago when nine part-time telecommunicators refused a full-time position and the position could not be filled." (Eller, 1997, p. 54).

Summary

Overall, the review of the literature suggests that many localities recognize that employee turnover is a problem. The next step, how to solve that problem, does not appear as if it is being

addressed. If Center managers are addressing it, the solutions are not being published. One possible cause for that is that the field of emergency communications, as a civilianized entity of the public safety community, is in its infancy.

Much time and effort by center managers is likely being expended on making the daily operations work: work on strategic planning and problem solving may be getting a lower priority. There exists a great need for research on the subject of employee turnover, particularly on what steps localities are taking to eliminate the problem.

Procedures

The research procedures for this project began with a review of available literature on the subject of employee turnover in emergency communication centers. This search took two forms. First, a manual review was conducted covering several years of back issues of emergency communications trade journals stored in the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center between September, 1997 and November, 1997. The author also manually reviewed exit interview records obtained from Chesterfield County's Human Resource Management Department and Emergency Communications Center that dealt with exit interview information from former Emergency Communications Center employees. Secondly, an on-line search of available information on the Internet computer network was conducted using the NetScape Web Browser software between September, 1997 and November, 1997.

The author interviewed individuals who work in the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center, with expertise in the field of emergency communications, between October, 1997 and November, 1997. James E. Ruffin II, an Emergency Communications Supervisor with twelve years experience in emergency communications and thirty-three years of experience in the fire service and law enforcement fields, was interviewed on October 15, 1997. Tamara Higgins, an Emergency Communications Supervisor with nine years experience, was interviewed on November, 6, 1997. Pamela M. Cimburke, an Emergency Communications Supervisor with fifteen years experience, was interviewed on November 10, 1997. Administrative Staff members of the Emergency Communications Center, Pearl Goff, Administrative Supervisor with seventeen years experience, and James McDonnell,

Senior Automation Analyst with eighteen years of experience, provided historical information concerning Chesterfield's Emergency Communications Center and its employee turnover problem during October, 1997 through December, 1997. Mr. McDonnell provided technical support for this project through his extensive knowledge of the Internet and his ability to use the NetScape Web Browser. He also assisted the author of this study by compiling the results of the written survey distributed to employees of the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center.

Before the initiation of this study, the Co-Managers of Chesterfield County's Emergency Communications Center, one of whom is the author of this study, began preparing a plan to upgrade the compensation provided to employees of the Emergency Communications Center. That proposal was completed in late December, 1997. Much of the information contained in that single issue proposal was beneficial to the completion of this more comprehensive study of the employee turnover problem. Lieutenant Robert C. Pridemore, Chesterfield Police Department, the other Co-Manager, provided valuable assistance to the author of this study, much of it occurring during their daily interactions as Center Co-Managers.

The author interviewed Douglas A. Middleton, Major in the Henrico County (VA) Police Department, on October 11, 1997 because of his extensive research in the area of scheduling and its effects on the Henrico County Emergency Communications Center.

The Internet search for information revealed a survey of dispatchers in the north San Francisco Bay area conducted in March, 1996. Gregory Miraglia, Technical Services Manager, conducted the survey for the Fairfield, California Police Department. The study, conducted on behalf of the Napa-

Solano County Consortium on Dispatcher Recruitment and Retention, was designed to identify why dispatchers leave the field of public safety emergency communications.

Miraglia distributed the survey to 650 dispatchers and supervisors representing sixty-five public safety dispatch centers. Miraglia reported that he received 284 completed surveys. The results of that survey showed that respondents felt there were three main factors that contribute to, or detract from, a desirable work environment conducive to long term employment of dispatchers. Those factors were: salary commensurate with the tasks and responsibilities, adequate respect from field providers, and regular time off from the stresses of the job (Miraglia, 1997).

The author determined that replicating Miraglia's survey in Chesterfield County would provide useful information that could be used to learn the causes for Chesterfield County's difficulties in retaining ECOs. A copy of the survey instrument, along with the complete report to the Napa-Solano County Consortium on Dispatcher Recruitment and Retention, was obtained from Miraglia. Since the survey instrument had been previously used with such a large survey population, the author decided to use the survey as written to determine if the causes of employee turnover identified in California were pertinent in Chesterfield County (See Appendix A).

The survey was distributed to fifty-four employees who completed the survey between October 9, 1997 and October 17, 1997. A total of forty-nine surveys (90.7%) were returned, a number well above the 95% confidence level as described in the Research Section of the Executive Development class at the National Fire Academy.

The data from the surveys was entered into a computerized spreadsheet (Lotus 1-2-3 for Windows, ver. 5.0). Written comments from respondents on the surveys were transcribed into a word processing program (WordPerfect for Windows, ver. 7.0). The data was then used to answer the research questions.

Limitations

The small size of the survey population limited this research in Chesterfield County. Another limitation was that of the fifty-four employees who received surveys, eight of those employees were still in some stage of their initial on-the-job training. (All of them, however, had completed five weeks of basic training before assignment to the Center for on the job training).

This could affect the results of the survey because the research problem is what causes high employee turnover in the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center. However, since one of the issues identified in the literature review was the amount and quality of initial training, the opinions of trainees, particularly their written comments concerning treatment while in training, did prove helpful in analyzing the survey results.

Results

This study used the historical, descriptive and evaluative methodologies. The research questions used to identify the factors that contribute to high turnover were:

1. What was the experience base of the Emergency Communications Officers lost during the past seven years?
2. What has been the impact of that lost experience base on the training and experience levels of the incumbent staff?
3. What has been the impact of the high turnover rate on the incumbent staff?
4. What do the incumbent staff members feel are the factors that cause a high turnover rate?
5. What were the reasons given by former staff members for their leaving the Center?

The survey results yielded much information about the employees of the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center. Besides statistical information, the respondents provided many written comments that contributed much information about their attitudes related to the job. Included with the responses from Chesterfield ECC employees are responses to the same questions from the California survey reported by Miraglia (California responses are listed as "CA Study").

Demographics

The staff of the ECC in Chesterfield County typifies centers across the country with most of the staff being composed of female employees.

<u>Gender</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>CA Study %</u>
Female	44	81.5	80
Male	10	18.5	20

Women in the workforce today are still struggling with finding good paying jobs, especially those women who are single heads of households. While emergency communications officer salaries may be low in comparison to the pay of other public safety agencies, the salary is usually greater than can be secured in other fields, especially if the employee possesses only a high school education.

Female respondents to the survey wrote that childcare has a significant impact on their work life. They cited the difficulty in obtaining competent, affordable child care that can accommodate their work schedule. This was especially true for those personnel assigned to shifts that rotate between days (7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) and evenings (3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.). The childcare issue becomes even more complicated when the employee is required to work a four-hour overtime slot, either before or after their regular shift, to fill a sick leave vacancy.

The literature review also suggests that female employees of an emergency communications center encounter a lack of respect because the public safety agencies they serve, police and fire departments, organizations that are still staffed predominantly by males. This was a predominant finding in the California survey where employees cited a lack of respect from field personnel. There was no corresponding response by Chesterfield ECC personnel.

In fact, the respondents to the Chesterfield survey reported very good working relationships with field providers in the police and fire departments. The only negative comments about field providers that ECC personnel reported were directed at many volunteer rescue squad (ambulance service) providers.

A young workforce also dominates Chesterfield's ECC staff as shown in Table 9. This seems to suggest two things: a high turnover rate brings in a steady flow of new employees who are just entering the job market; employees seek other job opportunities early in their ECC career. The California survey reported that the average age group for that survey population was 31-40 years of age.

<u>Age of Respondent</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
18-30 years	23	46%
31-40 years	19	40%
41-50 years	4	8%
>50 years	3	6%

The type of family situation reported by the Chesterfield respondents seems to correlate with the results of the age groupings (See Table 10). Fifty-three percent of the respondents do not have dependent responsibilities. This seems to suggest that the salaries and working conditions of the ECC in Chesterfield are conducive to single life or that of a married couple with no dependents.

<u>Family Situation</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Single with no dependents	21	43%
Married with no dependents	5	10%
Single with dependents	6	12%
Married with dependents	17	35%

The California study reported that the average family situation for the survey population was married and/or has a dependent.

Attitudes About the Job

This study queried survey respondents regarding their attitudes about being an Emergency Communications Officer. It also asked them if they have chosen the field of emergency communications as a career. Respondents were also asked if they were actively seeking other employment at the time of the survey. Table 11 shows the results of those questions.

Do you like being an Emergency Communications Officer?	Yes 44 (92%)	No 0 (0%)	Sometimes 4 (8%)
Have you chosen the ECC as your career?	Yes 25 (52%)	No 5 (10%)	Undecided 18 (38%)
Are you planning a career change?	Yes 8 (16%)	No 21 (44%)	Undecided 18 (37%)

1. What was the experience base of the Emergency Communications Officers lost during the past seven years?

Table 12 shows that a total of ninety-one employees have left employment with the Emergency Communications Center since 1990. That is an average of thirteen employees per year. These numbers equate to an average employee turnover of 20.3% per year. (Human Resource Management Records, Chesterfield Emergency Communications Department, October 30, 1997).

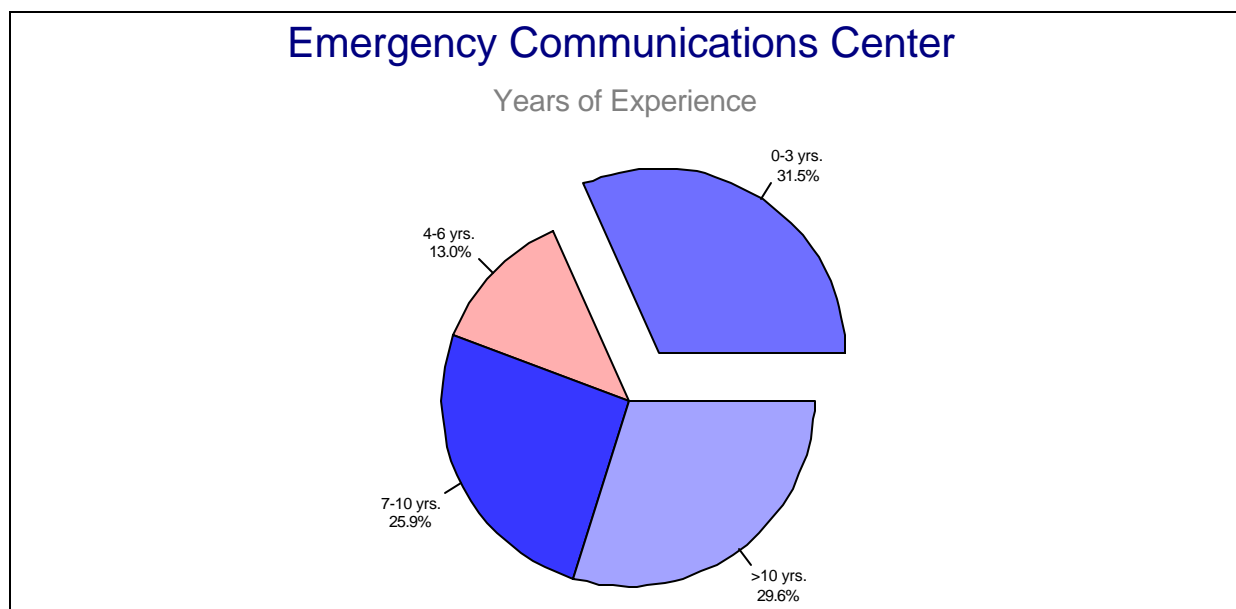
<u>Years of Service</u>	<u>No.</u>
Less than 1 year	42
1-2 years	16
2-3 years	7
3-4 years	4
4-5 years	5
Greater than 5 years	17

The data shows that twenty-six (28.6%) of the employees that left employment with the Center had three years of experience or more on the job. Emergency Communications Officers are just considered

reaching a level of proficiency in the field when they reach three years of experience (J.E. Ruffin, personal communication, October 15, 1997).

2. What has been the impact of that lost experience base on the training and experience levels of the incumbent staff?

When the survey instrument was completed, fifty-four positions of the sixty-four authorized payroll positions in the Center were filled. This data equates to an 84.4% staffing level for the Center. However, eight of those employees on the payroll were still at some stage of their in-center training and were not a part of the functional staff. Thus, the true staffing complement of the center was forty-six personnel (71.9%). Figure 1 provides information on experience levels of the employees that were on the Center payroll at the time of the survey. (The chart includes all fifty-four employees on the payroll at



the time of the survey.)

The California study showed the average experience level was 6-10 years.

3. What has been the impact of the high turnover rate on the incumbent staff?

The Chesterfield survey respondents reported that the high employee turnover rate creates a work environment where chronic under staffing of the Center is the norm.

Chesterfield's ECC requires thirty-four employees to operate the Center on a twenty-four-hour cycle (twelve on day shift, thirteen on evening shift, and nine on midnight shift). Such staffing requirements and a total functioning staff of forty-six employees mean that only twelve employees are not scheduled to work. From this small pool of unscheduled workers must come the staffing to cover annual leave and sick leave on a daily basis. The result is that overtime, both voluntary and involuntary, is an everyday reality. Personnel work the overtime in four hour blocks, either before or after their regular shift. A large segment of the workforce ends up working twelve hour shifts, not by design, but by necessity. This is particularly difficult on the present schedule: four days on duty, one off duty, four days on duty, and two days off duty.

4. What do the incumbent staff members feel are the factors that cause a high turnover rate?

Incumbent staff members reported that low salaries that are not in line with the responsibilities of the job was a significant factor in turnover. Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents said more money was important to their continued career in Emergency Communications. When asked over their career which was more important, more time off, or greater salary, 70 percent still responded greater salary.

	<u>Shorter Week</u>	<u>More Money</u>
Which is more desirable to you?	10(22%)	35(78%)

The high employee turnover rate creates a stressful work environment for the Center employees, according to the Chesterfield survey respondents.

The California survey reported a similar stressful work environment. Table 14 compares what the two survey populations reported as the causes of that stressful work environment.

<u>Cause of Stress</u>	<u>Chesterfield</u>	<u>California</u>
Co-workers	31(65%)	139(49%)
Administration	17(35%)	94(33%)
Shift work	15(31%)	41(14%)
Overtime	11(23%)	29(10%)

Miraglia (1997) reported in the survey of northern California ECCs that co-workers and field personnel were the number one cause of job stress. In the narrative to that survey, however, the respondents suggested that interpersonal relations with field personnel as a cause of stress was much more prevalent than relations with their co-workers. In the Chesterfield survey, however, only four respondents (8%) suggested that field personnel were a source of stress.

When citing co-workers as a source of job stress, there were two distinct groups of Chesterfield ECOs that gave that response: the experienced ECOs and the inexperienced ECOs. The experienced ECOs reported that the inexperienced group of ECOs created stress because of their lack of job proficiency, i.e., they coded calls incorrectly, did not obtain pertinent information on calls, could

not keep pace with the daily work load, etc. The inexperienced ECOs reported that their job stress was caused primarily by intolerance on the part of the experienced ECOs as they [the newer employees] learned their craft and gained job experience.

The less experienced group also reported that they felt their trainers were not well suited, in many cases, to be training new employees.

In both surveys respondents listed Center Administration as a source of job stress. In the California survey this response was based on Center Administration that did not provide adequate support to the staff. The California survey respondents described this lack of support as inadequate training, poor policies and procedures, and inadequate support when conflicts between ECOs and field personnel occurred. The Chesterfield respondents, however, cited continuing problems resulting from the 1992 consolidation of Police and Fire Communications into the emergency Communications Department. Those problems included inconsistent application of policies between Police Dispatch Operations and Fire/EMS Dispatch Operations, inadequate training and supervision of first-line supervisors, and inadequate management of the under staffing problem.

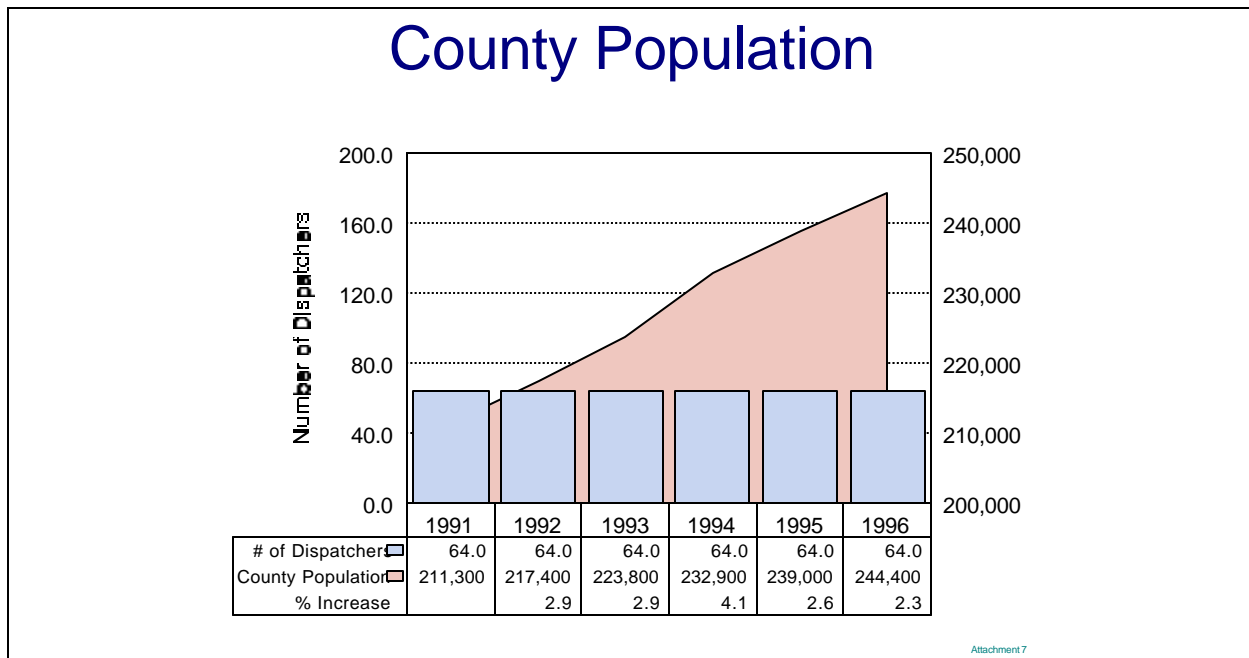
Table 15 contains the responses to the question, “Which statement best describes your feeling about supervision?” The responses to this question are somewhat at odds with many written comments supplied by employees of the center. Those written comments describe supervision that lacks good “people skills” and the technical competence to be good supervisors in an emergency communications center environment. Several survey respondents specifically referred to problems associated with the

promotional processes used to appoint shift supervisors and assistant shift supervisors when the Center was consolidated in 1992.

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>No. (%)</u>
I do not have enough supervision available to support my needs.	14 (29%)
I have enough supervision to support my needs.	34 (69%)
I feel over supervised.	1 (2%)

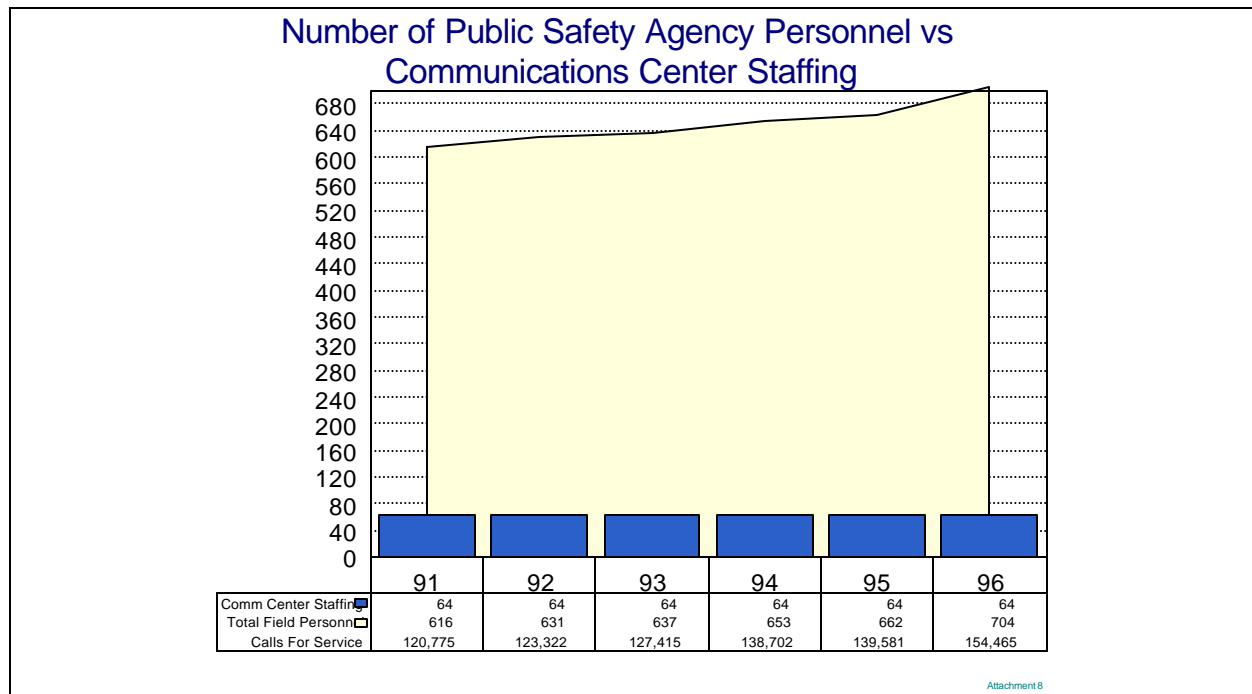
Another significant stress factor listed in written comments provided by Chesterfield respondents was the physical environment of the Center. The current Center is found in the basement of the County's five-story Administration Building. Originally the twenty-five hundred square foot work area was designed as a computer equipment room; only later was it decided to move the separate Police Communications Unit and Fire/EMS Communications Unit into that area in 1981.

Chesterfield employees also cited the increased workload that they are expected to handle without corresponding increases in Center staffing. Figure 2 illustrates the increase in County's population with no increases to the Center's staffing complement.



The reader will note that despite a 13.5% growth in the County's population from 1991 to 1996, there have been no additions to the staffing complement of the Center (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

Figure 3 shows that during the same period the number of police, fire and EMS personnel that depend on the Center for emergency communications services has increased by 12.5% with no comparable increase in Center staffing.



During this period the calls for service, dispatched by the Center, for all public safety agencies in Chesterfield County rose by 21.8% from 120,775 calls in 1991 to 154,465 in 1996. (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

5. What were the reasons given by former staff members for their leaving the Center?

As part of this research paper the author conducted a review of Employment Exit Interviews completed by Chesterfield County's Human Resource Management Department. Those records, however, were only available for the period beginning in March, 1996. That review revealed the following reasons why former employees of the Chesterfield Emergency Communications Center left their Center positions (See Table 16).

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>No. Employees Lost</u>
Less than proficient performance	8 (6 less than 1 year of experience)
Personal reasons	3 (1 less than 1 year of experience)
Failed follow-up background investigation	1
Dismissal as result of disciplinary action	1 (less than 1 year of experience)
Retirement	2
Provide full-time health care for family member	1
Family relocation	2
Return to school	1
Career move to County Fire Department	1
Career move to County Police Department	5
Career move to other Police Department	1
Career move to telecommunications position in private sector	4
Total Employees Lost	30

Avsec and Pridemore (1997) provided further analysis of the data contained in Table 15 in a study completed to justify an increase in ECO salaries in Chesterfield's ECC. Poor employee selection by the two Center managers, whom the Police and Fire Departments recently assigned to the Center, is largely responsible for the large number of employees, eight (26.7%) who left during their first year because of inadequate job performance. The managers, both line officers in the Police and Fire Departments respectively, were inexperienced in Center operations and this inexperience manifested itself in inadequate employee selection as they attempted to hire personnel to fill ECO vacancies.

Another factor in the loss of those newer employees was a lack of adequate ECO trainers in the Center to facilitate the on-the-job segment of the new hire training process. This resulted in high levels of dissatisfaction for both the trainees and the trainers. This job dissatisfaction had significant impact on

the self-esteem of the new employee that resulted in them leaving the field (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

The second highest reason for leaving the Center, five (16.7%), was a career move to the County Police Department. While many Centers report personnel using the ECC as a "stepping stone" into a job as a police officer or firefighter, this study found that to be the case in only one of these employees. The County Police Department, in June 1997, expanded their Record Room Operation into a twenty-four-hour operation and created civilian Booking Technician and Evidence Technician positions . Five senior employees took lateral transfers to those new positions where their County seniority gave them an opportunity to work a steady day schedule of 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. hours with weekends and holidays off, or to work non-rotating shifts.

The third highest reason for leaving the ECC, four (13.3%), was to take a position in the private sector working for the expanding telecommunications industry. Those employees took positions with local offices of MCI Telecommunications and Bell Atlantic Telephone Company of Virginia with increased salaries that ranged between \$3000.00 and \$5000.00 per year above their ECC salaries. These employees were also able to obtain work schedules that included 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. hours with weekends and holidays off.

Discussion

The results of this research indicate that there are many factors that affect employee turnover in Chesterfield County's Emergency Communications Center. Those turnover factors are as follows: salaries that are not commensurate with the skills, knowledge and abilities required by the job; lack of respect and understanding among the staff; work schedules that do not allow adequate time away from the stresses of the job; change and unresolved issues resulting from consolidation of the center; shiftwork and mandatory overtime. The underlying factor to all of the above is a poor physical work environment that exacerbates the other causes of employee dissatisfaction and leads to employee turnover.

The salary paid to an ECO was identified in the literature as a factor in high employee turnover. Both the Chesterfield and California surveys corroborated this in which respondents stated that greater compensation was important to their continuance in the field. In Chesterfield County, the starting salary for an ECO is \$22,380 per year; the starting salaries for both police officer and firefighter are \$25,800 (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997). The ECO, once trained, will make more decisions that have an impact on service delivery during an eight-hour shift than either the rookie police officer, or firefighter will make in an eight-hour tour of duty. Every emergency response that requires police officers, firefighters, or paramedics starts with an ECO deciding what the emergency is and properly entering the call into CADS. (In Chesterfield's ECC, the goal for answering and processing a Priority 1 [life-threatening call] 9-1-1 call is 45 seconds or less, 85% of the time.) Frequently, they make that decision with limited

information, and obtain the information from a distraught caller that the ECO cannot see, a real feat when one considers that 45-55% of oral communication is through nonverbal means.

Communications Center employees in today's emergency communication environment are not secretarial staff or data entry technicians. The ability to type using a computer keyboard is a necessary basic skill, but it is only part of the basic skill set necessary to be successful as an Emergency Communications Officer. ECOs need to be excellent telecommunicators, have an excellent command of logic and common sense, be able to make outstanding, quick decisions with limited information, and most important, must be able to listen and carry out multiple tasks simultaneously. This package of skills is truly a unique combination to find in any one person.

The job requirements of an Emergency Communications Officer have changed substantially over the years. Many localities believed that the introduction of technology made the job of the ECO easier and more accurate. Computer Aided Dispatch Systems, computerized radio systems, enhanced 9-1-1 and other automated systems have improved accuracy and enabled ECO's to work more effectively, but all this technology also has made the ECO's job far harder to learn.

(Miraglia, 1997, p. 33)

Chesterfield County's Center has had a computer aided dispatch system (CADS) and an automated phone system for many years. However, the Police Dispatch CADS and the Fire/EMS CADS are two different systems. The programming for the former was completed in 1981 and the latter was completely rewritten in 1993. This provides for a very challenging environment, especially for those employees who are cross-trained on both systems.

Besides the automation changes, in the last two years all Center employees were trained to Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) standards as set forth by the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) and the Center's Operational Medical Director, Dr. Alfred Gervin. Beginning in April, 1997, the Co-Managers changed Center operating procedures to eliminate the transfer of Fire and EMS calls from the original Call Taker to one of the Center's Fire/EMS radio positions. All Call Taker positions now handle the original call, whether for police, fire or EMS, in total before sending it to the Radio Operator for dispatch of resources.

An employee's ability to earn a salary that is commensurate with the job responsibilities of an Emergency Communications Officer has an effect on both the recruitment of new employees to Chesterfield's ECC and the retention of experienced employees. The expanding scope of job responsibilities, coupled with an ever increasing workload, makes it imperative that Chesterfield's ECC is able to recruit experienced ECOs. The job is becoming more difficult and the time line to train a new employee, who has no experience in the field, increases exponentially. For new employees who have excellent keyboarding skills, the ability to "talk and type," and follow protocols, such as EMD, the hardest part of the job is learning the public safety culture and developing their critical thinking skills. By improving the ECO salary scale, Chesterfield County could attract the experienced ECO who already has this knowledge base and should have a shorter initial training period since they would only have to learn how Chesterfield's system works.

Improving the salary scale would also serve as a tool to retain experienced employees, a significant problem in Chesterfield. When experienced employees leave Chesterfield's ECC, they take

with them a tremendous knowledge of County public safety operations. This creates a sense of apprehension and lack of confidence for public safety field providers as they deal with the less experienced ECOs on a daily basis.

The loss of experienced employees also means that fewer employees have the skills, knowledge and abilities to train the new employees who are hired. This puts Chesterfield's ECC in the unenviable position of having "kids teaching kids."

Women make up 80 percent of the Center's staff. Twenty-three of the fifty-two respondents (44%) were single mothers or were married with children. Women in today's society still bear most of the child rearing responsibility whatever their marital status. Finding competent, affordable child care in this country is an issue that every working mother faces on a daily basis. The respondents to this survey reported that child care is even more difficult given the work schedules of the ECC and the demands of working overtime, especially the involuntary overtime required by staffing shortages. A further compounding factor is that many married ECC employees have spouses who are members of the Police Department and they too work shift work. For those who do not work shift work, they have work assignments in such areas as Investigations, Forensics, etc., where they are on-call outside their normal work hours. The stresses associated with raising a family when the parent or parents work shift work were cited by respondents who left the employment of the Center to take positions with more convenient work hours.

Lack of respect by other public safety agencies is not as big a factor in Chesterfield as it appears to be in other localities. Many of Chesterfield's conflicts are interpersonal conflicts within the

staff of the Center. The consolidation of the Police Communications Unit and the Fire/EMS Communications Unit into a consolidated Emergency Communications Center in 1992 created problems that are still in evidence today.

Many ECC employees have expressed how they felt that their former departments, Police and Fire, “abandoned them,” as they underwent a consolidation process for which there was no "road map" (strategy) or "destination" (goal).

Without such direction, there have been several different directions that the Center has traveled, first with a civilian Director, and now with Co-Directors from the Police and Fire Departments (Avsec and Pridemore, 1997).

Beyond the lack of strategic direction, the management structure and operational policies of the consolidated center continued to promote a concept of separation between personnel conducting Police communications functions and those conducting Fire/EMS communications tasks. There is still a separate supervisory hierarchy on each shift for Police Dispatch Operations and one for Fire/EMS Dispatching Operations, with each having its own supervisor per tour. Currently the Center has no center-wide operational leader on a per tour basis.

These additional training requirements and the accompanying operational paradigm shifts have created additional job stresses for those employees who were part of the pre-consolidation workforce.

These changes were undoubtedly a factor in the decision by several experienced employees to seek other employment, especially those who chose to transfer to civilian positions in the Police Department that offered more attractive work schedules with the same salary as part of a lateral transfer.

The physical location of the Center is the basement of the five-story Government Administration Building. The space was originally meant to be a computer room, and was not designed for human occupancy and as such has inadequate ventilation and air filtration.

The Center has no designed heating system: the computer and telephone equipment generate all heat in the Center. The air conditioning is designed to keep the air temperature within operating specifications for that equipment.

This leads to constant temperature fluctuations that affect the human occupants: warmer temperatures when the larger day and evening shifts are working and lower temperatures when the smaller midnight shift is working. The staff more easily communicates illnesses, especially respiratory viruses, because of the inadequate air filtration.

Personnel report that the lighting of the Center, which was not designed for a computer use environment, is very stressful. The glare of overhead lighting on computer screens creates eye strain and leads to fatigue, especially when employees work longer twelve-hour shifts required by overtime.

Most of the occupiable work area is dedicated to the functional operations of the Center, call taking and radio dispatch operations. The only space available for personnel to eat meals or take breaks from their work is a small kitchen, approximately ninety-six square feet in area. This provides a less than optimal opportunity for personnel to gain separation from their work when they are allowed time for a meal or a break. The space becomes even "smaller" when two or three employees are eating.

Even the operational work area itself is a source of stress to the respondents. Employees work close to each other and there is no separation between work spaces. The ambient noise levels of

personnel taking telephone calls for service, making outgoing calls for such things as wreckers for accident sites, and radio operators dispatching calls makes it difficult to concentrate on ones work.

The lack of separation also exacerbates the friction between experienced and inexperienced personnel: the experienced personnel can easily "eavesdrop" on the work being done by the inexperienced workers and then criticize mistakes.

The number of potential applicants that possess such a unique combination of skills is very limited. In Virginia there are very few post secondary education programs that provide the necessary training and education for a person seeking a career in emergency communications. It is even more unique to find this package in a person who is willing to work shifts, weekends, and holidays in a high stress environment where "nobody is calling to say they are having a great day."

This study has several implications for Chesterfield County and its Emergency Communications Center. It represents an in-depth study that identifies what the employees feel are the causes of high employee turnover. The study also provides information that shows the problem is not just a local problem, but one that plagues localities across the nation. It also provides information that helps support initiatives that the County is already undertaking to improve the situation.

In 1993 the County opened a new Public Safety Training Center that dramatically improved available learning facilities for all public safety providers. Part of that facility included an attached 12,000 square foot wing for a new Emergency Communications Center. Unfortunately, the bond monies available then did not allow more than the completion of the "shell" for that new ECC. In November, 1996 a new Public Safety Bond initiative, approved by County citizens, provided the

funding to complete that facility in addition to building six new fire stations. The new ECC, which the County targets for completion in the early summer of 1999, will be almost four times larger than the current facility and be above ground.

This new ECC should provide a much improved physical work environment that includes not only more room, but natural lighting that should provide a much more positive workplace as well.

During their budget presentation to the County Administrator in January, 1997, the Co-Managers of the ECC outlined the need to increase the monetary compensation provided to the employees of the ECC. Their proposal emphasized that they needed this to attract qualified employees to the Center and to retain the valuable experienced employees. The County Administrator agreed with this idea and asked that the Co-Managers not only approach the turnover problem from that perspective, but also determine what other causes existed as well. The results of this study provide information about the full scope of the high turnover problem experienced in Chesterfield County's Emergency Communications Center.

Recommendations

The recommendations from this study are:

1. Chesterfield County should carry out a proposed pay reclassification plan for the Emergency Communications Officers and Supervisors of the Emergency Communications Center that would bring those salary scales up to those of their public safety counterparts in Chesterfield County. Such a salary reclassification will also enable Chesterfield County to attract more qualified applicants for the Emergency Communications Officer position, especially those possessing previous Emergency Communications Center experience.
2. Chesterfield County should aggressively complete the construction and outfitting of the new Emergency Communications Center as provided for in the Bond Referendum of 1996.
3. Chesterfield County should aggressively pursue the design and purchase of a new Computer Aided Dispatch System (CADS) that consolidates all of the Public Safety Communications functions into one coordinated system.
4. The Co-Managers of the Emergency Communications Center should develop a strategic plan for improved recruitment and hiring of qualified applicants for the position of Emergency Communications Officer.
5. The Co-Managers of the Emergency Communications Center should develop a strategic plan for the education and development of the Centers supervisory staff to

improve the abilities of those personnel to provide leadership in a high stress work environment that has many unique personnel challenges.

6. The Co-Managers of the Emergency Communications Center should develop a strategic plan for the education and development of Center trainers to improve the abilities of individuals selected for those roles to effectively and efficiently train new employees selected to fill positions as Emergency Communications Officers.
7. The Co-Managers of the Emergency Communications Center should develop a training plan that provides group dynamics and conflict resolution education to all staff members.
8. The Co-Managers of the Emergency Communications Center should develop a strategic plan for the overall management and supervision of the Center that best supports the consolidation of the police, fire and EMS communications functions of the Center.

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Appendix A - Survey instrument

Emergency Communications Officer**Survey of Desirable Benefits and Working Conditions**

This survey is intended to identify the job benefits and working conditions most desired by Emergency Communications Officers and Supervisors in Chesterfield County.

Which of the following statements best describes you: Male _____ Female _____

Your age: 18-30 yrs. _____ 31-40 yrs. _____ 41-50 yrs. _____ 50+ yrs. _____

Your ECC experience: 1-3 yrs. _____ 4-6 yrs. _____ 7-10 yrs. _____ 10+ yrs. _____

Your family situation: Single, no dependents _____ Married, no dependents _____

Single with dependents _____ Married with dependents _____

Circle your responses to the following questions

How many Emergency Communications Centers have you dispatched for: 1 2 3 4+

Do you like being an Emergency Communications Officer? Yes No Sometimes

Have you chosen Emergency Communications as your career? Yes No Undecided

Do you aspire to promote within the career? Yes No Undecided

Are you planning a career change? Yes No Undecided

What hours are your favorite time to work? _____

Which would be more desirable to you: A shorter work week (less than 40 hours) More money per hour (higher rate of pay)

Which shift schedule do you like best? Fixed schedule Rotating schedule

Should schedules be established by seniority? Yes No

Which would you rather earn more of over the course of your career? Additional Pay
Additional Time Off

What other types of benefits do you desire? _____

Check your responses to the following questions

What is your favorite type of work week? 5-8 hour days _____ 4-10 hour days _____

What is the most important aspect of your job that should be added to, or changed, to keep you working as an Emergency Communications

Officer? _____

Appendix B -What keeps you working as an Emergency Communications Officer?

The following are a summation of written comments from respondents. They have been edited for spelling only.

Helping people/public service	24 (49%)
Enjoy the work	14 (29%)
Money	9 (19%)
The unexpected	7 (8%)
The camaraderie with my co-workers	5 (10%)
Fast pace of job / excitement of the job	4 (8%)
Self satisfaction	4 (8%)
Enjoy law enforcement field	4 (8%)
Time and grade	3 (6%)
Benefits	2 (4%)
The respect	1 (2%)
Fun	1 (2%)
In the medical field, but removed from field contact	1 (2%)
Lack of experience to go elsewhere	1 (2%)

Appendix C - What is the most important aspect of your job that should be added to or changed to keep you working as an Emergency Communications Officer?

A better work schedule with more time off	18 (38%)
Money	7 (15%)
Co-workers treating each other better	5 (10%)
Attract and keep good co-workers	4 (8%)
Change policy about staying on the phone with EMS callers	4 (8%)
Respect from Supervisors	3 (6%)
A solid teamwork environment	2 (4%)
Support from management	2 (4%)
Better physical work environment (Center)	1 (2%)
Better supervision	1 (2%)
Recognition of seniority	1 (2%)
More stress management	1 (2%)
Administration should consult with employees before making decisions	1 (2%)

Administration should work on present problems and get them solved before starting more PATs

1 (2%) Let us do our jobs, cut the B.S.

1 (2%)

Bonuses after training someone

1 (2%)

Provide child care

1 (2%)

Establish more Police Department radio channels

1 (2%)

Improve the workload - work increases, staffing level never does

1 (2%)

Appendix D - What about your job keeps you working as an Emergency Communications Officer?

The type of work I do. I realize this is an unusual job and not everyone can do it so I feel we are a unique group of people.

I enjoy the field of Law Enforcement.

Money, lack of experience to go elsewhere.

The work. I have always felt the need to be around to 'help' people in their times of urgent need.

Money is OK. Benefits are good.

Helping people.

I enjoy helping others.

I enjoy the job.

Helping people, excitement of job, money.

Besides a pay check, I enjoy helping others. This job allows me to give.

I love the actual job. The people can be hard to work with at times, but part of that is having so many women working together.

It is rewarding and fun.

The ability to help others in need.

The camaraderie with the police officers. The respect the job brings. The feeling of being involved with something important.

I enjoy the job. Helping others. I enjoy the fast pace of the job.

Daily challenges, the unexpected, co-workers (ECO's & field personnel)

Liking the job itself.

Love my job and try to ignore the administrative stressors. Doing what I love to do is the bottom line.

It's never the same day twice.

Enjoy Police work.

I love the actual work, interacting w/ citizens and field personnel and my co-workers.

I like what I do.

The satisfaction of helping others during their time of need.

Excitement, helping others.

The field units, the variety, excitement.

The challenge of helping people in need. Some of my co-workers.

Decent pay at this time & helping people who need help.

I like helping others, I've always liked being in medical environment and this is about as safe as you can be from things (infections) that might harm me or my family.

I love what I do as a dispatcher.

Money. Too old to go anywhere else. But I do enjoy helping people.

Variety everyday, helping people.

Self satisfaction. Knowing that I can do my job with very little supervision and that I'm good at it.

Self satisfaction in helping others. It doesn't matter who. It is the only job you can go home from and know everyday you made a difference. But ability is being overlooked for stats and min. entry time.

Public service, plus decent paying jobs are hard to get.

Helping others (citizens). A different call every time.

Satisfaction.

Money, enjoy the work

Helping others in the county.

Helping People.

I enjoy being involved in Police work. The satisfaction of helping the citizens of the county.

The challenges. The self-satisfaction of helping people during as emergency or crisis. Helping employees develop themselves - seeing the potential that's there.

The police investigations work. Helping citizens.

Years of service. Helping people. The pay and County benefits.

Appendix E - What is the most important aspect of your job that should be changed to keep you working as an Emergency Communications Officer?

I wish there was a way we could get and keep quality people working so that the experienced people don't get burned out having to work so many hours.

Days off. The one day off does not allow you to feel as if you've had any time off.

The schedule and co-workers capabilities.

Take care of problem employees (even if they have 12 years of experience) ASAP! They cause undue stress on supervisors, management and other employees. Left employed, they adopt attitude of "they can't do anything to me" and they seem to keep pushing their limits, instead of counting their blessings they are still employed.

Better schedule. Stress management for some employees who have been here for a while.

Added: money; respect from supervisors; better schedule - more time off (not 1 day at a time).

Changed supervision - more people managers and not just supervisors who know the job, but have no tact or people skills.

This changes on a regular basis. Everyday is a new day. Deal with it as it arises.

I can't say that there is anything you can change. I think the worst part of the job is how people treat each other. It's liveable, just doesn't always make a comfortable working environment. You learn to live with what you need to live with.

At this time, I can't pinpoint one.

The physical plant sucks and the pay needs to be brought in line with the responsibilities.

Better morale and more support from a manager.

Go to a permanent schedule.

Higher pay.

More recognition for seniority - better treatment from certain supervisors - pay (for senior people and shift differential).

Do away with the reserve day - we didn't have the staffing to begin with to do it, we surely don't have it now.

The center itself is Emergency Communications, however it is and needs to be separate. P.D. and Fire are two separate entities, is totally different and always will be. After the consolidation is when all the problems started and morale dropped.

A solid team work environment with good time off.

Keep permanent shifts always! Seniority should always mean a lot! We need to change the way we handle EMS calls, staying on the phone listening to people breath for 15 minutes while waiting for the squad to arrive is useless. We could handle a lot more calls with fewer people if we didn't have to spend so much time on these types of calls.

Produce better trainers/trainees which will make my job easier. More money. For administration to consult with employees and get our opinions before making decisions that affect all of us. For Administration to work on present problems and get them solved before moving on to make more PAT's. We have been working on so many (TQI) PAT's, I have yet seen any results.

Too old and too much time to go anywhere else.

Reserve Day / Draft one or the other. EMS calls - staying on line with priority 1 calls is increasing our times with answering other emergency calls. This is a direct effect on our operation as a 9-1-1 center

The hours, 3-11 shift - unable to see children when they get out of school; permanent shifts would be easier to plan your life around.

Support from Administration and Supervisors.

Management needs to back off with so much emphasis on EMS. There is a Police Department in this county. The needs of Police Department have been overlooked. What is it going to take to realize Police Officers are also a vital interest to Chesterfield County?

Friendlier work environment which would be created by everyone receiving same treatment (re: working OT & other situation & each shift working together).

There are only 2 things that could make me leave my job. #1 - I win the lottery and become rich and don't have the need to work or #2 - I'm forced to go and work a shift that will cause stress again to my family life. Being mid-nights. It's just too hard on my body.

Come off of midnights to have somewhat of a social life outside of here. I spend too much time here because I can't do anything else due to shift.

Rotating schedule, possible overlap schedule.

I feel they need to up-grade salaries for 5+ year employees.

Minimize the BS and let us (the professional communicators) do our jobs!

There is no one important aspect. As long as I am kept well informed of changes to Police, Fire, Rescue and dispatch. As long as my salary increases with good evaluations I will remain in dispatch. One good idea would be bonuses after training someone. The bottom line is as long as ECC personnel are taken care of and not set to the side, moral, teamwork and everyone's attitude will drastically change.

Large decrease in chances of mandatory overtime.

Some of the co-workers need to back-off. Remember new employees are not going to know everything.

Schedule that supports child care.

More P.D. radio positions.

I believe that being able to work fewer days during the week would be beneficial to most employees including myself.

The workload - the amount of work is constantly increasing and our staffing level never reaches what is considered adequate.

Request not to be harassed by rescue calls. I am not a doctor or nurse. My obligation is to get "help" to citizen in the best possible way -- get the correct location and dispatch the call as quickly as possible.

More competent workers.

More money. Less mandatory OT.

Allowed to be part of team and not just a body and number.