



Next Generation of RETAINS

APCO Releases a Follow-up Study for Comm Center Retention ~ BY CHRIS FISCHER

Too often, it takes catastrophic events to shed light on the urgent contributions public safety communications work and personnel make to our nation's well-being. Every day the media reports on 9-1-1 calls that go wrong. Unfortunately, during more routine moments, public safety professionals labor outside the public eye, often with limited resources and insufficient support affecting their ability to provide the services on which our citizens rely.

For years, APCO International members have been telling APCO leadership that they have been struggling to find and keep qualified employees. But no national data existed for comparison. There was anecdotal evidence of a problem, but no hard data to help determine if high turnover was a widespread or localized phenomenon.

Seeking to address this need and assess the conditions under which communications centers staff and hire employees, APCO established Project RETAINS (Responsive Efforts to Assure Integral Needs in Staffing), which resulted in a 2005 report and the Project RETAINS toolkit. Project RETAINS is the product of the most extensive, in-depth research ever conducted on the issues affecting the recruitment, hiring, processing, training and retention of public safety communications center personnel. The study found a national employee turnover rate of 16%. It also found that, among the other factors that contribute to employee retention, having a fully staffed center was the most important. In addition, the quality of the center's management and the training offered to employees contributed to employee satisfaction.

As we all know, public safety communications centers vary from state to state, county to county and city to city. There's no magic formula or magic number when it comes to determining appropriate staffing.

However, Project RETAINS developed a tool to estimate the staffing level needed in a communications center. In addition, Project RETAINS developed terminology to define positions in a communications center and an employee satisfaction survey.

APCO recently released a follow-up report to Project RETAINS. This second study, Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Communications Centers: A Follow-up Study, sought to extend APCO's knowledge of communications center staffing issues not addressed in the first study and gauge the degree to which Project RETAINS has proved useful. This report examined retention rates, employees' organizational commitment and employees' psychological distress levels.

The study found the national telecommunicator turnover rate was 19%, an increase of 3% since the 2005 release of the initial study and higher than the better known turnover rates of nurses and teachers. The report also includes highly sought-after guidelines to estimate the appropriate staffing levels for dispatchers based on workload.

Despite the broad differences in size, location and type among centers, a number of patterns relevant to the nation's communications centers emerged. First, the overwhelming majority (83%) of centers have experienced an increase in the number of dispatched calls when compared with the previous three years. In addition, retention rates are significantly affected by the hourly salary that starting employees receive *and* work schedule flexibility. Further, the findings draw attention to the need expressed by employees to receive greater support, recognition and appreciation—whether from their supervisors and directors or the public at large. Finally, communications centers that have used the Project RETAINS tool-

kit indicated that retention had significantly increased over the past three years.

Project RETAINS was created to provide our organization with a better understanding of the issues experienced by our members and effective ways to address them, and, by those standards, we have succeeded. However, we continue to battle to achieve our goal of awareness and truly believe that full success will not be realized until the public has a greater understanding of and appreciation for the work of these talented and dedicated professionals.

The next-generation Project RETAINS report is free for APCO members and can be downloaded at www.apcointl.com/new/commcenter911/retains_at_a_glance.php. A summary of the report is also available to the public at www.apcointl.com/new/commcenter911/retains_at_a_glance.php.

Telecommunicators are required to staff our country's emergency communications centers 365 days a year, 24 hours a day—regardless of holidays. There must always be a trained professional at the other end of the line to answer calls in times of emergency. APCO recognizes and supports the telecommunicator's important role in protecting the public. Project RETAINS addresses the issues that are of the utmost importance to those responsible for ensuring that staffing of our nation's communications centers is adequate and that the employees hired and trained will stay in the industry. APCO is very proud of the value that Project RETAINS brings to its members. **||PSC||**



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