



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

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Thomas F. Cahill, Chief of Emergency Operations

Kenneth T. Pitts, Public Safety Computer Systems Manager

Pat Macher, Administrative Assistant

Memorandum

To: Robert Healy
From: George Fosque
Re: Response to Council Order 22 from November 30, 1998
Date: 1/4/98

The council expresses concern about staffing levels, turnover, and overtime at the Emergency Communications Department. The following report addresses these issues.

SUMMARY

A. Staffing Levels

The ECD currently has one vacancy: an employee resigned in December to take a day job as a Dispatch Supervisor for Bay State Gas.

The authorized operational staff complement of the ECC is now 35 persons: 27 dispatchers, 1 dispatcher/trainer, 6 Supervisors, and 1 Chief dispatcher. While this is three less than the 38 total authorized operational positions assigned to dispatch when there were two dispatch centers, it is a sufficient number of positions (if filled) to operate the ECC, provide quality services to the city, and minimize overtime.

This being said, the problem of turnover causes the actual strength to be significantly below the authorized strength, causing persistently excessive overtime usage and overtime costs.

RECOMMENDATION:

A partial staffing solution would be to increase the authorized strength by 1 more dispatch position so that the ECC has the ability to have a true trainee position available "off-shift". This would enable us to hire and train someone prior to an actual vacancy. Then, when a vacancy did occur (we usually get only 2 weeks notice) we would have an experienced trainee already hired who has been trained and is thus available to step immediately in and perform full shift functions shortly after a vacancy occurs.

B. Turnover

Dispatcher turnover is a central problem in most all dispatch centers. Rotating shifts, working on holidays, lack of control over workloads, the stress of multi-tasking, the demands of technology, the requirement to be "tied-to-a-chair", and the easy availability of comparatively much higher paying (and less routinely stressful) police and fire jobs makes turnover a fact-of-life in Cambridge and many other dispatch centers.

In the last 6 years in Cambridge, turnover has been about average for a dispatch center. We have experienced the following turnover percentages:

Three Years Before Merger - average turnover: 17%

1993	10% turnover
1994	20% turnover
1995	20% turnover

Three Years of ECC Merged Operation - average turnover: 13%

1996	10% turnover
1997	12% turnover
1998	17% turnover

While average turnover has actually declined (from 17% for the three years prior to merged operations to 13% for the three years of merged operations) the following appears problematic:

1. Turnover rose in 1998 back toward pre-ECC levels - in spite of considerable achievements by the city in raising pay and other compensation elements for dispatchers. This base and incentive pay increase was made precisely in order to attract and retain quality, long-term dispatchers.

Turnover should be much closer to 10% per year rather than 20%.

2. We have conducted exit interviews with many of the dispatchers who have left in the last 6 years and the following are the main reasons given for leaving:

 Took other higher paying job - 8

 (or same pay job with day/regular hours)

 Took Police Officer or Firefighter position - 7

 (considerably higher pay)

 Not suited/poor performance - 5

 Didn't like job/shift/schedule - 3

 Pensioned - 2

 Unknown - 2

Some persons give multiple reasons. Looking at the reasons, we can see that taking higher paying positions or taking similar paying positions with regular or day hours accounts for 65% of the reasons for leaving.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Be more careful to try to hire capable, talented persons that will not leave for police and fire jobs. This is difficult as most candidates claim that dispatching is their career and/or they can't be reached on police/fire lists. But more weight can be given to develop and use indicators of long dispatch tenure.
- Improve pay (e.g., specialty incentive components) even more. This is only possible over a long period and will not offer short term results.
- Work with the Personnel Office specifically on techniques to minimize turnover without sacrificing the talent pool.

- Work with Local 195 and the dispatchers themselves on ways to reduce turnover and improve the long term attractiveness of the job.

C. Overtime

Overtime usage is excessive at the ECC. In the three full years of merged operation OT costs were:

Year	Budget	Expended	Comment
FY97	\$150,000	\$274,651	First year
FY98	\$150,000	\$257,668	Decreased some from 97
FY99	\$150,000	\$232,805 (projected at current rate)	Additional decrease from 98

The ECC Overtime tracking system reports the following reasons for overtime usage:

Reason	Percent FY97	Percent FY98
Vacation Coverage	23%	26%
Vacancy Fill-in	40%	29%
Sick Fill-in	13%	17%
Holiday Fill-in	4%	9%
Training Fill-in	7%	5%
All Other (Military,	13%	15%

Maternity, Court, etc.)		
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It takes approximately seven months to replace a departing dispatcher with a new dispatcher that is properly certified and trained. Thus, overtime must be used to fill-in vacant positions until trainees gain experience.

This training time is necessary, but more trainees may be needed in the pipeline so actual replacement is much quicker than the current lengthy process of 7 months.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Take the steps outlined in sections A and B above
- Work harder to minimize sick leave usage
- Reduce the number of training opportunities where OT must be used to fill behind
- Speed up the training process for new dispatchers

DETAILED INFORMATION

1. Staffing Levels - History

Prior to the merger of Fire Alarm and Police Communications, there were a total of 38 line and supervisor positions allocated to the dispatch function in two separate locations. These positions were allocated as follows:

Location	Title	Allocation
Fire Alarm	Fire Alarm Operators	12
Fire Alarm	Supervisor	1
Police Comm	Dispatchers (Civilian)	18

Police Comm	Dispatchers (Police Officers)	6
Police Comm	Supervisor	1

During the period prior to merger the allocated 38-person complement was rarely, if ever, achieved. For example:

- a. In Police Communications, there were often 1 -3 openings for civilian dispatchers because of turnover.
- b. In Police Communications, only 5 of the 6 police officer dispatch positions could be filled (no officer even bid to the 6th dispatch position in the later years).
- c. In Fire Alarm there was historically less turnover, although the last group of three civil service Fire Alarm Operators all left or were let go (one was terminated for poor performance, one became a Fire Alarm Operator in Boston for greater pay, and one resigned to be a full-time musician.)

After the merger in August of 1996, the allocated number became 24 Dispatchers and 7 Supervisors = 31 total line and working supervisory personnel. This was a major drop from the previous complement of 38, but it was believed that various efficiencies would allow fewer personnel to operate the combined center and there were vacancies in the complement making the actual gap only about 5 personnel.

After one year of operation - based on staffing needs and overtime usage - the Manager and Council added 3 additional dispatch positions in July of 1997 to the ECD to make a total of 27 Dispatchers and 7 Supervisors. This made a total of 34 total line and working supervisory personnel.

Subsequently, in July of 1998, one additional dispatcher/trainer position was added to make a total of 28 dispatcher and 7 Supervisor positions (35 total positions) allocated as follows:

Location	Title	Allocation
ECC	Dispatchers	28

ECC	Supervisor	6
ECC	Chief Supervisor	1

In general, we believe this complement, if fully staffed with trained personnel, is sufficient to meet the needs of the ECC and the City. However, we have not been able to achieve a fully staffed complement due to extended sick leave and turnover. The turnover is less than in the previous two-center environment, but it is still much more than we would like.

2. Turnover Review

Turnover has been the following:

Year	Number Dispatch Positions	Number of Hires	Number of Separations	Comment
1993	30	8	3 (10%)	Police and Fire Separate
1994	30	7	6 (20%)	Police and Fire Separate
1995	30	8	6 (20%)	Police and Fire Separate
1996	30	4	3 (10%)	ECC Opens August 1996
1997	33	6	4 (12%)	Added 3 Dispatch positions
1998	34	6	6 (17%)	Added 1 Dispatch/Train pos.
1999	34	1	-	

3. Analysis of Staffing Issues

- a. Extended sick leave of a few, very sick employees results in the loss of about 1 employee per any time period

In the last several years, we have nearly always had at least 1 person out for extended sick leave. Here is a summary:

- i. Current: one experienced Fire-certified dispatcher (Steve Gagalis) out with a shoulder operation - 3-4 months
 - ii. Spring-Summer 1998: One experienced police-certified dispatcher (Mary Sheehan) out as a kidney donor to a family member - 6 months
 - iii. Fall-Winter 97-98: One new fire-certified dispatcher (Mat Ansello) out with a spinal/neck ailment - 4 months (mostly on sick time donated by other employees)
 - iv. 1996: One experienced police dispatcher (Archie Prendable) out with heart attack/bypass surgery prior to retirement - 4 months)
 - v. 1997-8: Two experienced police-dispatch certified employees out for extended maternity leave.
- b. A Light Duty Assignment has reduced available personnel by 1.

One experienced fire dispatcher (Joseph Fresolo) was formally evaluated as unable to perform regular duties and has been assigned to special daytime tow recording and business contact update duties.

While this assignment does provide some useful service (augmenting the day shift to deal with tow management), it still decrements the rotating shift complement and removes an overtime candidate.

- c. Sick leave abuse contributes some to staffing issues

In the current year, seven dispatchers have been warned orally or in writing about patterns of sick leave that indicate abuse of possible abuse. This system of tracking and warning has helped control excessive patterns of sick leave usage somewhat.

One dispatcher has been placed in a status that requires a doctors note anytime they are absent. This action has reduced sick time usage by that dispatcher.

- d. Training requirements further decrement available personnel

The ECD conducts a 6-month training program for new dispatchers: 5 weeks of pre-service (mostly classroom) training, 2 months of OJT call taker training (leading to call taker certification), and 3 months of basic dispatch OJT training. In

the second 6-months of employment, dispatchers master either the police or fire primary dispatch function. Thus, it takes approximately one year to train and develop a certified dispatcher.

- e. Turnover effectively reduces available personnel from 2-3 persons

Currently, we have one vacancy from the allotted schedule, but we have three two employees in training status, plus three recent training graduates that are still working toward learning primary dispatch jobs. Thus, we have a total of six relatively new employees.

Three of these personnel are to lesser and greater extents (depending on their progress through training) an extra on the shifts. As 1999 progresses, these personnel will gain experience and become full members of their shifts.



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38.

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
ROBERT W. HEALY
City Manager

RICHARD C. ROSSI
Deputy City Manager

January 11, 1999

To The Honorable, The City Council:

In response to Awaiting Report Item No. 23, regarding a report on staffing levels, turnovers and overtime at the Emergency Communications Department, received from Emergency Communications and 911 Director George Fosque.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/mec
Attachment

Consent Agenda #38

5/9

Relative to AR 23 regarding a
report on staffing levels, turnovers
and overtime at teh Emergency
Communications Department..

In City Council January 11, 1999

PLACED ON FILE