AMERICA'S 911 WORKFORCE IS IN CRISIS

RESULTS OF A NATIONWIDE 911 STAFFING SURVEY



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE 911 ADMINISTRATORS

IAED | International Academies of Emergency Dispatch

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THE 911 EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM is the public's first point of contact in most emergency situations. This vital public system depends on the presence of trained professionals who respond to emergency calls.

But according to new research, many 911 centers are facing their own workforce emergencies.

At the beginning of 2023, the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch® (IAED™) and the National Association of State 911 Administrators (NASNA) surveyed the staffing levels of 911 centers across America to understand the challenges these centers face in maintaining an adequate workforce.

The survey collected data from 774 respondents representing 48 states. Out of those respondents, 691 (89.3%) were based in primary Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) and 83 were in secondary, or more specialized, PSAPs. The data the centers provided covered the four-year period from 2019 to 2022.

The survey results suggest that the average vacancy rate in 911 centers across America was about 25% over that four-year period—meaning that one in every four positions needed to be filled. This is about a five-point increase in the anecdotal number that industry experts used to cite before the COVID-19 pandemic.

And while 27% of centers reported no change in actual staffing levels over the last four years, 36% reported having fewer positions filled in 2022 than in 2019.

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A DEEP AND WIDE-RANGING PROBLEM

The 911 staffing problem appears to be deep and wide-ranging, affecting parts of every state and every type of 911 center, from rural to urban. The 25 centers reporting the most significant shortfalls were in all regions of the country, and the average vacancy rate was similar across agencies of every size.

Nearly one-third of the centers reported stunning vacancy rates in 2022. Thirteen reported that 71% or more of positions were unfilled; 92 reported a vacancy rate between 51% and 70%; and 202 reported rates of 31% to 50%. One agency reported an 83% vacancy rate in 2022. Nearly every respondent reported a loss of employees in 2022.

Overall vacancy or attrition rates for 911 centers were calculated by looking at the number of employees that left the agency each year compared to the number of authorized employees. The agency average was determined by examining the number of departing employees in two categories: those who left before the end of their probationary or training period; and those who were more experienced.

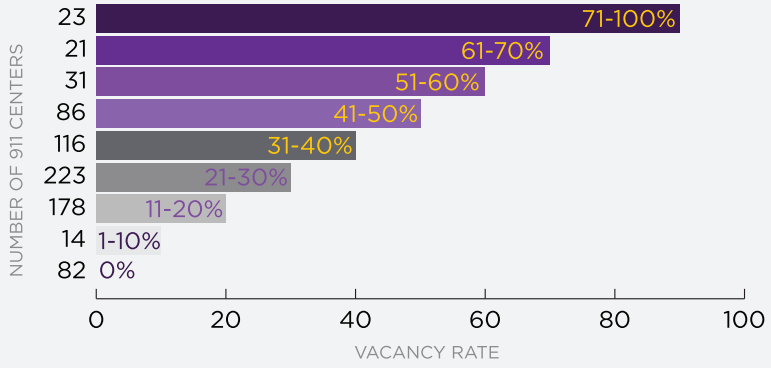
Breaking these two categories down can assist agencies in understanding where potential issues may exist.

The survey first examined the average number of new hires who failed to complete the probationary/training period. The results showed a 50% increase from an average of two new hires lost in 2019 to three in 2022. This indicates that the job demands and expectations are high, and not everyone can meet them.

The survey also evaluated the number of experienced employees that left agencies. There was a 100% increase in the median (from one to two experienced employees) and a 33% increase in the mean (three to four employees) from 2019 to 2022. In addition to losing the laborers necessary to handle call volumes, this exodus of experienced employees also creates a deficit of knowledge and expertise that these employees would have shared with their co-workers.

STAFFING VACANCY RATES IN 911 CENTERS

While some 911 centers surveyed report being fully staffed, others report staggering vacancy rates.



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THE 911 STAFFING CRISIS IS A NATIONWIDE PROBLEM

A sampling of news headlines from a 60-day period in the spring of 2023, as this report was being prepared, confirms that the 911 staffing crisis is deep and widespread.

Brown County looking to fill multiple 911 dispatcher positions; annual turnover rate is 25-30 %,
WGBA-NBC26 (Green Bay, Wisc.), June 2, 2023

Santa Fe's 911 call center vacancy rate down but still high at 56%,
Santa Fe New Mexican, (Santa Fe, N.M.), May 30, 2023

Staff Shortage Turns Up Heat for 911 Operators,
Mountain Xpress (Asheville, N.C.), May 25, 2023

911 call takers 'overworked' while responding to crisis calls,
ABC13 (Houston, Tex.), May 23, 2023

Complaints continue about delays in Little Rock 911 response,
KARK (Little Rock, Ark.), May 22, 2023

Michigan 911 dispatch centers face staffing shortages,
WILX-10 (Lansing, Mich.), May 15, 2023

Hawai'i County 911 fire dispatchers having own crisis with severe shortage of workers,
Big Island Now (Hawaii), May 14, 2023

Maine town paying top dollar for 9-1-1 dispatchers,
WCSH-TV/WLBZ-TV (Portland-Bangor, Maine), May 10, 2023

50% of Sedgwick Co. 911 calls answered by automated message; Short staffing and retention are main issues,
KWCH-TV (Wichita, Kan.), May 4, 2023

9-1-1 dispatchers warn of burnout in San Francisco,
The San Francisco Standard (San Francisco, CA), May 1, 2023

Hialeah, Fla., struggles with 9-1-1 staffing shortage,
Miami Herald (Miami, FL), April 26, 2023

Police sergeants working OT as Austin dispatchers,
KVUE-TV (Austin, Texas), April 24, 2023

West Palm Beach seeking 9-1-1 dispatchers,
WPEC-TV (West Palm Beach, Fla.), March 29,2023

Ala. county faces shortage of 9-1-1 dispatch applicants,
WVTM-TV (Birmingham, Ala.), March 20, 2023

Indiana considers dropping residency rule for dispatchers,
WRTV-TV (Indianapolis, IN), March 20, 2023

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THE GOOD NEWS

There is some good news from the report as well. When comparing the actual number of employees versus the number of vacancies, the percentage of vacancies decreased by 6.7% between 2019 and 2022. In addition, 70% of respondents— a clear majority—indicated that when they were at their fully authorized staffing levels, they would be adequately staffed to meet their centers' needs. Of the agencies that did not believe they were adequately staffed, 84% cited rising call volumes as driving the reason for needing additional employees. One respondent to the survey cited "constantly rising call volume with increased (additional) responsibilities as a public safety access point (PSAP)" as one of the most difficult aspects of their overall staffing issues, echoing a common theme across 911 centers.

REASONS WHY 911 EMPLOYEES LEFT THEIR JOBS

The survey revealed several reasons why telecommunicators and emergency dispatchers reported leaving the profession. The stresses of the job and wages are two of the top reasons why people are leaving 911. Said one survey respondent: "It is very hard to retain employees because of the stress of the job and the low level of pay." Another expressing similar concerns said, "It is hard to find, and keep, qualified employees when we cannot compete with pay in the private sector."

Additionally, because of the 24/7/365 requirements of the job, work hours are often cited as an issue. Staff shortages can compound this with agencies forcing people to work overtime. "Due to almost always being at minimum staffing, we are unable to offer our employees the mandated breaks they deserve," commented yet another survey respondent.

See Table 1 below for the comprehensive list of reasons why 911 professionals left their agencies.

REASONS	RESPONDENTS (N)	YES N (%)
WORK HOURS/SCHEDULE	**774**	**359 (46.4)**
BETTER OPPORTUNITY	**774**	**340 (43.9)**
PAY	**774**	**254 (32.8)**
STRESS	**774**	**235 (30.4)**
FAMILY CHANGES	774	203 (26.2)
OVERTIME	774	152 (19.6)
LEADERSHIP/MANAGEMENT	774	99 (12.8)
CULTURE	774	78 (10.1)
TIME OFF	774	59 (7.6)
CHANGE IN POLICIES, PROCEDURES, OR PROTOCOLS	774	27 (3.5)
MULTIPLE SYSTEM TECHNOLOGY CHANGES	774	18 (2.3)

Table 1. Top reasons for 911 employees quitting their agencies.

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A VARIETY OF SOLUTIONS TO FILL THE GAPS

Agencies described using various means to fill the gaps left by the vacancies: 85.1% used voluntary overtime; 70.7% used mandatory overtime; 47.3% supplemented their staff with part-time employees; and 16.3% used reassigned field responders. While these measures can be effective in the short term, they are not sustainable in the long run. Agencies simply must find long-term solutions to the staffing problem if they are to serve the public well.

Efforts to retain current employees and attract new employees are being addressed in various ways in the centers surveyed. Almost two thirds – 62% – have increased the pay for 911 professionals, and nearly 45% have improved retirement and other benefits to improve retention and attract new hires. Attracting new employees can be incredibly difficult even with improvements in and benefits, because of location.

Noted one 911 agency: "Finding qualified people or any people with any experience in emergency medical dispatch is extremely difficult … We have been able to overcome some of the pay discrepancies and schedule issues over the past few years for qualified medical dispatchers but in our rural area, getting them to apply is difficult."

Throughout public safety, many agencies have been modifying their minimum requirements to join various agencies, whether it be law enforcement, fire, or EMS. However, more than 70% of 911 agencies have not changed their employment requirements, reflecting the difficulty of getting qualified applicants in the first place. Of the remaining number, 12% of agencies modified their requirements in 2022, and 9% have modified theirs in 2021. The area of most change was in the pre-employment testing scores, with 17% indicating they had adjusted the minimum scores. Eight percent removed or eased the disqualifying circumstances from the background investigation. It remains to be seen whether these modifications are making it easier to attract and retain new employees.

AGENCIES SIMPLY MUST FIND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS TO THE STAFFING PROBLEM IF THEY ARE TO SERVE THE PUBLIC WELL.

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OVERCOMING A LACK OF RECOGNITION

Another part of the solution is increasing public awareness and appreciation of hard-working 911 professionals. Because they work out of sight and are contacted rarely, if ever, by most individuals, they tend to be taken for granted by the members of the public and by officials at all levels of government. Recognition and honors are common for police, fire, and EMS field responders, but not so much for 911 professionals. They are truly the unsung heroes of public safety.

Federal and state occupational statistics compound the problem. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies 911-related jobs as "Office and Administrative Support Occupations," not "Protective Service Occupations." With all due respect to office workers, this misclassification of 911 workers fails to recognize their crucial role in public safety; the highly specialized training and skills they must acquire and use daily; and the uniquely complex, stressful work environments in which they serve. Giving 911 professionals the respect and support they deserve will help improve employee retention and ultimately benefit callers in crisis.

A LACK OF PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT COMPOUND THE PROBLEM FURTHER.

CONCLUSIONS

The staffing crisis in America's 911 centers is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach to improve it. Public safety agencies need to:

- Find ways to recruit more qualified 911 applicants.
- Retain more experienced 911 employees.
- Improve 911 working conditions.
- Ensure that the demands and expectations of the job are manageable.
- Anticipate and plan for rising call volumes.

The public and policymakers also need to respect 911 professionals alongside their peers in the public safety community who work to protect our communities and lives.

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS ...

Leaders of 911 Centers Across America Share Their Views on the Workforce Challenge

ON RECRUITING & RETAINING 911 STAFF

"I have been here for over 25 years, and we have never been short of full-time staff. We always had people in PT pool waiting for FT. These last two years have been difficult because most people leave for a better opportunity which causes extra mandatory overtime that makes employees disgruntled. The new trainees see this, and it is difficult to retain them."

ON THE IMPACT OF RISING CALL VOLUMES & INCREASED WORKLOAD

"Staffing and retention are the largest challenge we face as a PSAP. Often as we are getting people trained the stress involved with the volume of 911's we are answering makes them want to leave the job. Because we are short, people are always forced on duty, working vacation to vacation. In our county, every PSAP is running with skeleton crews, which only compounds the issues."

"Raise the minimum manpower requirement to meet the needs of the call volume..."

ON SIGNS OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF 911 CENTERS

"Invest in your employees, train them often, create opportunities, think outside the box. Collaborate with your neighbors, find a plan, consider sharing staff. Work on regional options and overall assistance. Together 911 can still provide great service with excellent collaboration and interagency and technical commonalities."

"I hate to jinx it, but I feel like the quality of recruits has really gotten better. We are getting entry-level dispatchers who have amazing work ethic. I hope that continues to be the trend."

"Thankfully we have been well-staffed for 10 years now."

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