



9-1-1: An Emerging 'Hidden' Career

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“9-1-1, What are you reporting?” This question is asked an estimated 240 million times each year by an estimated 306,000 9-1-1 telecommunicators across the country. The answer to this question could be just about anything: a baby not breathing, a domestic homicide, a person trapped in a fire, a 9-1-1 hangup, an angry customer, a person wanting to know the time.

Answering 9-1-1 is not the only aspect of this fascinating career. The call begins an amazing linkage of information to public safety responders through the emergency radio system. Every call is electronically tracked and documented from start to finish. Calls come in from wireline, wireless, and internet phone systems; not all caller locations can be determined and not all calls are routed to the correct agency. Next generation 9-1-1 (NG911) considers the challenges of new technology such as text and video reporting.

Who Are 9-1-1 Professionals?

The 9-1-1 career is multi-faceted, complex and demanding. Agencies hiring 9-1-1 professionals are often in a “hiring crisis.” The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) estimated 2006 wages ranging \$25,000 - \$47,000. These wages are not typical for 2009 as the demand for a more technically oriented candidate, the stigma of the stress and difficulty of the work, and the increase in men in the profession has pushed the wages closer to that of the responders. For example, wages in a 9-1-1 center near this author increased from \$18 per hour to \$26 per hour over several years in order to attract a higher qualified applicant. This Comm Center recently received 300 applicants and selected only 7 qualified to test.

The Bureau recognized candidates are only required to have a High School diploma and are “trained on the job.” Unlike police, fire, and EMS professionals, there are no federal requirements, certifications, or minimal state standards. 9-1-1 agencies that have such minimal requirements have written, oral, and performance tests that include a minimal typing, polygraph, drug, background, and psychological exam. Few pass the rigorous testing and the retention of those who get in the door without experience or training is dismal.

The Need for Career Education

One common cry from 9-1-1 Trainers is, “They didn’t know what they were getting into.” The excitement of being a 9-1-1 Hero quickly fades through the rigors of shift work, overtime, crisis situations, strenuous multitasking, and on the job learning in a high stress environment where mistakes can be deadly. OJT is often referred to as “learning to play the violin in public.” Had the candidate received entry level career training, the prospects of being tested, hired, and thriving in the environment have proven to be significant. Not only does the college or high school 9-1-1 graduate know “what they were getting into,” they jump start their training, improve the current bleak retention rates for new hires, and save the Comm Center funds and time.

So then why is it that Police, Fire and EMS in almost every community have college and High School criminal justice, fire science, or emergency medical training, but no such career training for 9-1-1 since every police, fire, or EMS agency has a corresponding number of emergency telecommunicators to hire? Quite simply, the profession has been too busy with

hiring, training, and retention to advocate for career training. Without an advocate, “Public Safety Career Clusters” have no mention of the communications professionals so vital to responders’ survival. [See author’s blog about [National Career Clusters](#)].



Career Clusters identify pathways from high schools to two- and four-year colleges, technical schools, graduate schools, apprenticeship programs and the workplace so that learners can recognize the relationship between what they learn in school and what they can do in the future. But 9-1-1 is lacking in most Clusters. (Image via [mtsu.edu](#))

High School Career and Technical programs are a perfect match for a profession so lacking in entry level training. Any candidate possessing any type of experience or training in the field, let alone a certification, is moved to the top of the list of those accepted for employment testing. Currently only a handful of colleges or high schools have career training for the in-demand and highly skilled career of 9-1-1 in the U.S. and Canada. The first vocational training program in the nation was a 630 hour certificate college program began 23 years ago. High School Career and Tech programs have begun to appear in the last five years. Current courses range in hours and scope from 3 day workshops to a full year degree program.

Job prospects From the Bureau

In addition to openings due to growth, job openings will result from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Many districts are consolidating their communications centers into a shared area-wide facility. As the equipment becomes more complex, individuals with computer skills and experience will have a greater opportunity for employment as public safety dispatchers.

The 9-1-1 job market is particularly favorable to bilingual students, disabled or students in wheelchairs, students interested in future careers in fire service, medicine, criminal justice yet not yet the minimum age requirements. Alternate careers include: alarm companies, call centers, corrections, animal control, ambulance, police records, forestry, parks, tow companies, customer service, courts, private security, self-contained public safety (Boeing, Microsoft) military, airlift, hospitals, recreation sites, casinos.

Although the Bureau states the job prospects are slow due to the economic downturns, the reality is the opposite in 2009. National media focused on errors by 9-1-1 Operators often brings into focus the need for more pre-employment training or higher standards in job tests or training. In addition, the current recognition of the need for higher wages, improved training has resulted in many grants from Homeland Security and stimulus money targeted for improvements in 9-1-1.

Expanded Value

History tells us 9-1-1 is a perfect fit for career training for high school and college students. Instructors report teaching the course is also exciting and rewarding as students learn not only about public safety system but about self. Typical college units of study include; police, fire and EMS call taking and radio dispatching, crisis intervention, stress management, liability, technology and customer service and interpersonal growth. Students then have a broad range of learning in such intriguing subjects. Skill building on simulators for call taking and radio dispatching are exciting lab events. “911 What are you reporting?” “Hurry, my baby isn’t breathing!” The training lab offers no less heart pounding handling this simulation than the real thing.

Current career training programs report that although many students feel the work of 9-1-1 would be exciting and rewarding, few would consider entering what seems to be a very stressful occupation without preparation. A not so evident fact told by emergency communications veterans is that their lifework is indeed rewarding and exciting but also offers many practical reasons for their longevity; good pay, job security, great benefits, flexible or creative scheduling, ability to serve others, being vital to public safety and feeling their work has great importance and value. Having trained new hires that indeed ‘know what they are getting into’ would welcomed by all those heroes in headsets who may be working way too many hours of mandatory OT.

*Sue Pivetta began one of the first college career training programs in the U.S. in 1986. As a former 9-1-1 Supervisor/Trainer she recognized the need for a pool of trained and skilled candidates for the increasingly burdensome overtime created by high turnover for new hires. From the college program Sue wrote the first college text *The 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Manual*. From the manual a curriculum was created to support classroom training. Sue worked with telephone experts to create a simulator for multi tasking phone and radio skill building named *9-1-1 Reality*. With nine other college instructors Sue created the NECC National Emergency Communications Certification for entry level knowledge and skills for pre employment training. Her company can be seen at www.911Trainer.com and 9-1-1CareerTraining.com and 9-1-1Academy.com.*

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