



## VIEW FROM THE TOP

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### 911 telecommunicator training takes center stage in many states

May 11, 2017 by Urgent Communications contributor in View from the Top

By Nancy Pollock and Glenn Bischoff

Across the state of Idaho, hiring and training standards for 911 telecommunicators (call-takers and dispatchers) always have been both voluntary and inconsistent. But the situation changed dramatically in March, when a new law was enacted that calls for training to be standardized statewide.

Seven years ago, the Idaho E911 Emergency Communications Commission directed a statewide committee chaired by Lt. Kevin Haight—a body that oversees statewide communications for the Idaho State Police—to develop hiring and training standards that could be applied statewide. The effort culminated in Senate Bill 1083, which was signed by Gov. Butch Otter on March 27. Effective July 1, the new law mandates certification training be completed by any telecommunicator hired after July 1, 2012.

Telecommunicators hired between July 1, 2012, and June 30, 2017, need to complete the training by January 1, 2019. Telecommunicators hired on or after July 1, 2017, need to complete the training within 18 months of their hire date. Those hired prior to July 1, 2012, will not be “grandfathered,” i.e., granted certification simply based on their years of service and experience. Rather, they will participate in the certification training at the discretion of their employer.

The law does not stipulate the number of hours that telecommunicators will need to devote to training to achieve certification, Haight said.

“If that was contained in the law, then every time we wanted to add to the training requirements, we would need to rewrite the existing law or write a new one,” he said.

Instead, the state’s telecommunicators will adhere to rules adopted in accordance with the Idaho Administrative Procedure Act (IDAPA) that call for 40 hours of initial certification training, with 40 hours of continuing education to be completed every two years.

The law has several “character” clauses. For example, telecommunicators working in Idaho no longer will be able to have a felony conviction on their record, no matter when it occurred.

“It’s unfortunate, because people make mistakes when they’re young, and then they turn the corner,” Haight said. “But this is a critical profession, and you have to draw the line somewhere.”

In addition, certain serious misdemeanor convictions—such as those for petty theft, domestic violence and driving while under the influence—and even lesser ones may be a disqualifier, depending on when

the offense occurred. Going forward, certain misdemeanor convictions may result in a decertification, making the telecommunicator ineligible for continued employment in the profession. While this might strike some as being overkill, Haight explained the rationale behind these requirements.

“There’s a certain level of professionalism that we want,” Haight said. “Police officers are held to similar standards, and 911 dispatchers have their backs—in fact, we consider them equal partners. Plus, they will have access to critical information and will have knowledge of things that are going on in the community. It’s an important job, and we only want the highest-caliber people filling those seats.”

Haight credited collaboration within the Idaho public-safety community for the legislation coming to fruition. The endorsement of the Idaho Sheriff’s Association particularly had an enormous effect, according to Haight.

“The sheriffs or counties operate 39 of the 46 primary PSAPs in the state,” he said.

A good amount of evangelism also occurred to make this law happen. Early in 2016, Haight crisscrossed the state, driving a total of 1,100 miles in a week to conduct nine presentations to raise awareness of the proposed hiring and training standards. A media campaign in advance of the road trip paid enormous dividends.

“We sent out press releases, and we had TV and print media at virtually every venue,” Haight said. “The result was massive statewide coverage. The media was really interested in this and wanted to keep it in front of the public.”

Haight was joined on his sojourn by Nathan Lee, executive director of the Denise Amber Lee Foundation. Ground zero of the movement to develop nationally accepted minimum training guidelines for telecommunicators can be traced to the abduction and murder in January 2008 of Denise Amber Lee, Nathan’s 21-year-old wife and the mother of their two small children. Denise was able to make calls to 911—as did at least three other eyewitnesses— during the incident. Despite this, law enforcement was unable to locate her in time, and telecommunicator error and lack of training were cited as key factors.

Since then, Nathan Lee has worked tirelessly in the name of enhancing the training that telecommunicators receive and ensuring that a base level of competency is established from coast to coast. Haight was so impressed with Nathan’s passion that he agreed to become a Foundation board member.

The foundation was one of numerous organizations that joined in an industrywide collaborative effort— facilitated by the National 911 Program—that resulted in the adoption of recommended minimum training guidelines for telecommunicators in June 2016. (See the figure for the complete list of participating organizations.)

Primary training topics identified through the effort include the following:

- Telecommunicator roles and responsibilities
- 911 call processing
- Radio communications
- Emergency management
- Emergency communications technology
- Legal concepts
- Interpersonal communications
- Stress management

- Quality assurance
- On-the-job training guidelines

Numerous subtopics were identified for each of the above listed topics. In addition, the project generated a model legislation-advocacy toolkit that state and local entities can use to pursue legislation such as the law developed in Idaho. In addition to actual model legislation that can be used as the foundation for the development of a state or local law, the toolkit contains a PowerPoint presentation, one-page summary sheet, suggested answers to frequently asked questions, case studies, and an “elevator pitch” for advocates to use.

All of these items can be used to persuade both legislators and the media by leveraging the power of the media--an enormously effective tactic, as Haight’s experience demonstrates. Often, [PSAP](#) officials do not possess the expertise nor the time to effectively lobby legislators or the media, so the toolkit should be quite useful in this regard.

Haight said that the guidelines provided a very effective benchmark, something that other public-safety officials echoed. One is Jill Rohret, executive director of the Metropolitan Emergency Service Board (MESB) that oversees 9-1-1 services and provides direction to [PSAPs](#) across the nine counties that surround the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, which adopted new training guidelines for telecommunicators on January 1, 2017.

“When we saw what the national group came up with in terms of the training topics and ... that they were pretty much the same [as ours], that created a comfort level for everyone,” Rohret said.

The Kansas 911 Coordinating Council found itself in similar circumstances when the national guidelines were announced. The Council adopted new training standards in October 2014 that will take effect next year. These standards outline the topics that should be covered in the first 40 and 80 hours of training but give PSAPs some latitude in developing their own training programs, so they can make adjustments that address local needs and circumstances. The Council’s authority to create the standards is granted by state law.

“We compared the national guidelines with what we did and found that we were in alignment,” said Ellen Wernicke, who chairs the Council’s training subcommittee and is director of Johnson County Emergency Management and Communications.

Like Idaho, Kansas has chosen to eschew a grandfather clause, so all telecommunicators in the state will be subject to the new guidelines and be required to take a certification test. The thinking behind this decision is that a standard level of service is needed statewide, so anyone who answers a 9-1-1 in Kansas should meet the standards, according to Wernicke.

“That’s why we built in the timeline that we did, so that they can get up to speed,” Wernicke said. “We want to help every PSAP to be a professional organization, and that requires consistent standards across the board. No matter if you’re in the eastern or western part of the state, or served by a large or small PSAP, we want to make sure you receive the same level of service.”

In Indiana, the Statewide 911 Board provided \$1.5 million in funding during the last fiscal year to support basic training for all 2,000 telecommunicators in the state. The board hopes to increase funding in this fiscal year to support basic training for supervisors and continuing education for telecommunicators, particularly as it relates to handling discipline-specific calls, such as law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services (EMS).

The basic training curriculum for telecommunicators will mirror the national guidelines, said Barry Ritter, executive director of the Statewide 911 Board.

“The idea was, let’s not reinvent the wheel,” Ritter said. “The board had no interest in writing our own curriculum when national experts already had done it for us.”

One of those experts is Michael Snowden--executive director of the Hamilton County Public Safety Communications Department--who was a member of the national guidelines working group. Snowden has been assisting the Statewide 911 Board in developing the structure for Indiana’s training program.

“Mike’s involvement in developing the national guidelines gave us an immediate comfort level, in terms of adopting them for our program,” Ritter said.

According to Snowden, the training will consist of a five-day, 40-hour program that will be conducted regionally. Each region will choose one of three national providers—the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO), PowerPhone and Priority Dispatch—to conduct the training. Nineteen carefully selected counties will serve as hosts.

“We wanted to ensure that no telecommunicator had to travel more than an hour to the nearest host site, to avoid overnight expenses,” Snowden said.

Idaho’s Haight believes that training and certification is something that telecommunicators want, because it will enhance their professionalism and will improve how their profession is perceived.

Another law that worked its way through the state capitol would have classified telecommunicators as “emergency communications officers” and would have placed them in the same retirement benefits class as police officers and firefighters, but it was rejected by the Idaho House Judiciary & Rules Committee.

According to Haight, there was a good bit of opposition to the bill, which centered on the fact that police officers and firefighters throughout the state are required to meet the same training standards for their respective professions, while telecommunicators have not. There also was sentiment that the telecommunicator’s job is not “dangerous.” The training-standards law enacted in Idaho would take care of a portion of that dilemma.

“Just another reason why they are in favor of it,” Haight said.

Enhancing the professionalism of PSAPs and the telecommunicator role is a national issue. For far too long, 911 call-takers and dispatchers have been perceived as being on the periphery of public safety, when—in reality—they are the hub of the first-response wheel. Worse, they often are perceived as clerical workers, when in fact they are life savers. The work being done around the country to implement training standards for telecommunicators is a huge leap toward changing these perceptions.

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