

Illinois - Public Safety Telecommunicator Training

by Michael P. Moos

Illinois Public Safety Telecommunicators and their PSAPs have had over the years a myriad of training choices. This article discusses how the State of Illinois developed a voluntary standard that will ensure that certain measures of instruction are used thus providing consistency in training. This will guarantee PSAP personnel are trained for today's public safety environment and serve us beyond the year 2000.

Introduction

Emergency communications have been available in some form since the advent of emergency services. Telecommunicators have long been the vital link between the public and emergency responders. In the early 1970s television shows such as "Rescue 51" and "Emergency" launched the public's expectations for paramedic services and pre-hospital care. Today "Rescue 9-1-1" has molded the public's perception of the telecommunicator as another professional in their link to public safety services. This is further emphasized with 91% of Illinois' population served by 9-1-1 systems covering approximately 54% of the state's land area.

Recent events, media scrutiny and public concern have alerted local public safety officials that there is a lack of standardized training in the public safety telecommunications arena. Because training has been historically inconsistent throughout the State of Illinois, the need for a training standard became paramount. In order to ensure we can meet our public's expectations, a standard curriculum was needed to meet state minimum standards. In conjunction, it was necessary for such a standard to be upheld through a certification process administered by the State.

The Planning Process

In response to the findings from its "Long Range Plan," the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, under the leadership of executive director Dr. Thomas J. Jurkanin, formed a Telecommunicator Training and Standards Advisory Committee. The mission of the committee was to plan and recommend the training curriculum and standards for telecommunicators in the State of Illinois.

The Advisory Committee first met in April 1994. The membership of the committee included the Board and representatives of the following organizations:

- Illinois Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association (NENA)
- Illinois Chapter of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, Intl. (APCO)
- Illinois Department of Public Health Division of EMS and Highway Safety
- Illinois Association of Fire Protection Districts
- Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police
- Illinois Department of State Police
- Illinois Fire Chiefs Association
- Illinois Sheriffs Association
- City of Chicago
- A Mayor and two Telecommunicators

The professional input provided by each representative and the membership it represented was an important factor that influenced the Advisory Committee's ability to reach its goals.

It was clear to the committee that no single entity could identify the number of telecommunicators in the state or the type of training received. A survey was designed and sent to every 9-1-1 system in the state. The survey and its corresponding data provided personnel usage and training trends within Illinois. In addition to this, the Advisory Committee contacted every state in the nation to obtain current information to be incorporated into Illinois' curriculum.

In order to ensure local issues were addressed, three public hearings were held in the incipient stages of the planning process. By Fall 1995, a core curriculum had been developed. At that time Winnebago County 9-1-1 petitioned the Advisory Committee to pre-test the curriculum in their county. The pre-pilot course provided information that formed the basis for which the curriculum could be finalized.

By Spring 1996, the Advisory Committee had met a total of 14 times to research, develop and finalize the curriculum to the point of field testing. It should be noted that during this time frame an updated EMS Act was passed in Illinois' General Assembly which stipulated the training and registration of Emergency Medical Dispatchers (EMD). This assisted the Advisory Committee in redefining an EMD direction for the public safety telecommunicator in the State of Illinois.

Prior to the final testing of the curriculum, a public announcement was made that the curriculum was available for review and comment. In order to insure an opportunity for locals to provide any concerns, testimony was permitted either in writing to the Board or in person at three public hearings. After the hearings, the Advisory Committee held a meeting to review the testimonies provided and to finalize the curriculum on the basis of those testimonies. The pilots were then reviewed and approved for field testing. The pilots were held by two of the Board's regional training systems (Mobile Team Units 7 and 14).

On July 16, 1996, the Advisory Committee finalized the curriculum from data and evaluations derived from the two pilots. The Committee also approved a Code of Ethics for the professional telecommunicator. Finally at this meeting, the Advisory Committee finalized its recommendations to the Board emphasizing certification of telecommunicators as a necessary component of the profession. Organizations submitted their formal support of the Advisory Committee's recommendations and their letters were provided to the Board.

The Curriculum

The Advisory Committee developed a 16 module unit course. The course content is a minimum of 80 hours of instruction and is intended to provide the basics in many topic areas but is designed to permit local adaptations and additions to those basic topics of instruction.

The curriculum's flexible design allows it to be offered "academy" style or in a module by module training format. The units are listed in numerical order to enhance learning skills where one unit builds upon another. However, while there is no requirement that the units be taught in a prescribed order (unless defined by a prerequisite), it should be recognized that the course was designed in a logical order of instruction to promote a means to attain proficiency in the required learning skills.

Additional Training Modules

It should be noted that certain advanced training is required for telecommunicators whose job function is defined in which they have a more advanced function. These additional training modules are identified

as separate from the basic level curriculum and are not part of the basic curriculum. The job responsibilities for both modules are considered advanced level training and could be incorporated immediately after the basic training program is accomplished.

Module 1 - Emergency Medical Dispatch: As identified by the Illinois EMS Act of 1995, the minimum standard for EMD training is the U.S.D.O.T. EMD National Standard Curriculum, as adopted by the Illinois Department of Public Health, Division of EMS and Highway Safety.

Module 2 - LEADS Operator Certification Program: The National Crime Information Center (NCIC) has mandated training standards for each Illinois agency accessing NCIC. The Illinois State Police Agency Field Services Section has established a comprehensive training program aligned with NCIC requirements.

Recommended Training Practices

The Advisory Committee notes that certain practices should be considered prior to, during and after the basic training program is implemented.

Practice 1 - Ride-Along Program: If practical, administrators should ensure the student experiences the activities of the field personnel through a ride-along program. Administrators should try to utilize Field Training Officers (FTOs) or their equivalent for ride-along programs. It is further recommended that public safety response personnel be provided the same training courtesy with a "ride-along" experience in a dispatch center.

Practice 2 - PSAP Orientation: It is recommended that a minimum three day orientation/visit be made to a PSAP prior to students taking the basic course. This orientation would permit the student to begin to become familiar with the profession, terminology and equipment used. It is recommended only those students enrolled and committed to attend a course should be scheduled for the visit. The visit should have a set structure to maximize the experience to the student. Appropriate security precautions should be implemented by the PSAP to ensure criminal justice information is not viewed by or disseminated to the student.

Practice 3 - Evaluation Program: Local trainer/student programs are suggested to bring confidence and aid in the student's effectiveness and efficiency. This training course should not be considered the sole source of training for telecommunicators. It should be supplemented with local training to ensure retention and agency orientation. Agencies should periodically evaluate the telecommunicator's proficiency, during and/or after the training period.

Practice 4 - Annual Continual Education: The Advisory Committee recognizes that in order to remain proficient in the telecommunications field, continual education training is a necessity. At the time of this recommendation, there is no statutory requirement for continuing education in the telecommunications field other than those set by the LEADS, the Illinois Department of Public Health and private industry accreditation boards. The Advisory Committee does strongly recommend that a telecommunicator complete 24 hours every two years of actual continuing education instruction.

Public Safety Telecommunicator Certification

The public safety communications profession has evolved to a level which requires a standard of training for its personnel. Telecommunicator actions have a significant impact on the successful delivery of public safety services. Several factors have forced a change in telecommunicator training including the influx of civilian telecommunicators, the specter of civil liability lawsuits, the advent of complex

systems and heightened public awareness. These considerations have compelled many states to establish and maintain a level of certification for their telecommunicators based on standardized training. The mission to the Advisory Committee from the Board was to develop a basic training curriculum. During the incipient stages of the planning process, it became apparent certification is essential to ensure a statewide mechanism for qualified public safety telecommunicator training. Only this benchmark ensures statewide consistency in the administration of the curriculum.

A major concern to local public safety officials was that telecommunicators, who are the first to be in contact with the public and the main link to field personnel, are not required to be certified. Recognizing this concern, the Telecommunicator Training and Standards Advisory Committee formally adopted, at the July 16, 1996 meeting, a motion to respectively petition the Board to approve the proposed curriculum as a state standard. The Advisory Committee also moved that the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board approve the development and implementation of a certification program for Public Safety Telecommunicators.

During the development process for the state standard, APCO initiated Project 33, which was the development of nationwide training standards for telecommunicators. Both planning processes culminated almost simultaneously. The final product for Illinois had encompassed and surpassed all the components suggested by the APCO standard. The committee also welcomed the National Fire Protection Association's Standard 1061, but noted that this was a hiring standard versus a training standard.

At the Quarterly Meeting of the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board held on September 5, 1996, the two proposals were presented. The first proposal was the certification of a standardized voluntary curriculum as recommended by the Advisory Committee. The curriculum was adopted by the Board. The second proposal was for the Board to develop and implement a certification program for the public safety telecommunicator. The Board adopted this proposal and provided direction for implementation through the Long Range Plan.

In Summary

The State of Illinois has long been an advocate for proactive public safety telecommunications. While there has been an explosion of growth in the implementation of 9-1-1 systems, no one standard of training has been available to keep up with this growth. The Board now offers a means for local government to implement, through a voluntary system, the minimum training a public safety telecommunicator should have. The Advisory Committee also realizes that until the program is mandated and integrated with a certification program that we will not achieve state-wide coverage. The public expectation of telecommunicators is no different than that of law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services. The guarantee of providing professional public safety services to the citizens of the State of Illinois is a basic and essential criterion influencing the general quality of life for both individuals and communities. The citizens of Illinois are worthy of such a commitment, this standard is provided here on their behalf.

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