

NACo Brief

911 and Behavioral Health: Supporting Telecommunicator Health and Well-being

Introduction

Local government sits at the operational center of emergency and behavioral health crisis response systems. Counties in 48 states and the District of Columbia operate, fund and manage thousands of the nation's public safety answering points (PSAPs), or 911 call centers.¹ PSAPs rely on more than 100,000 telecommunicators who answer approximately 240 million 911 calls each year.²

Telecommunicators serve as the first point of contact during emergencies, gathering critical information, assessing rapidly evolving active events, providing lifesaving pre-arrival instructions, coordinating responses across multiple agencies and maintaining communication with callers until in-person help arrives. They must also manage system upgrades driven by technological advancements, such as Next Generation 911 (NG911) technologies that are changing how

emergency information is received and handled. In PSAPs with NG911 capabilities, telecommunicators can receive and process text messages, photographs, enhanced location information and other digital communications alongside traditional voice calls.³ These changes require telecommunicators to perform increasingly complex operational and decision-making responsibilities.⁴

As the 911 profession evolves, counties recognize the need to build, invest in and sustain a skilled workforce to maintain coordinated emergency call handling.⁵ This second brief in NACo's series on 911 and Behavioral Health explores occupational stressors and staffing challenges affecting telecommunicators and highlights county strategies to strengthen career pathways, expand training opportunities and promote employee well-being.



Common Stressors and Workforce Challenges Impacting Telecommunicators

911 telecommunicators face a unique combination of occupational stressors, staffing shortages and operational demands that affect recruitment, retention and employee well-being.

Mental Health and Well-Being

68% of telecommunicators report daily pre-shift and persistent stress

“Reduced performance/productivity” is cited as the most frequent symptom, along with fatigue and anxiety

In 2026, 12 known telecommunicator deaths by suicide*

Workload and Operations

83%
of telecommunicators work mandatory overtime

86%
of PSAPs experience high-call volumes at least once a week

35%
report daily high-call volumes

63%
of PSAPs report non-emergency calls account for 50-80% of total call volume

**Reported through professional networks of 911 directors and peers; gaps in national tracking limit understanding of the full scope*

Staffing and Retention

72% of PSAPs report having 1 to 10 vacancies

58% of PSAPs report a “struggle to hire”

#1 Staff burnout was the #1 staffing challenge cited by PSAPs in 2025

22% of new hire programs report that more than half of trainees fail or drop out of training.

The top reasons cited are:



Demands and stress of the job



Schedule and work hours

Occupational Stressors

- Continuous exposure to traumatic events: repeated contact with emergencies and crises through calls, texts, images and video
- Chronic workload: high-call volumes, staffing shortages and the demands of managing complex technology
- High-pressure decisionmaking: rapid assessment, prioritization and coordination of emergency response services
- Limited debriefing time: back-to-back incidents with limited time or support to process the cumulative effects of high-acuity calls
- Work schedule demands: shift work, overnight hours and mandatory or volunteer overtime

Key Strategies to Support the 911 Workforce

Supporting the 911 workforce requires coordinated investments across the entire employee lifecycle. Counties are implementing strategies to strengthen recruitment pipelines, equip telecommunicators to perform an increasingly complex role and sustain a healthy, resilient workforce over time. While approaches vary based on local needs and resources, county efforts generally fall into three complementary areas.

Workforce Strategies	Key County Actions
Build Expanding recruitment efforts and developing career pathways to prepare the future 911 telecommunicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partnering with community colleges, technical schools and local school districts to establish telecommunicator training and certification programs• Modernizing hiring practices to reduce barriers to entering the workforce• Increasing awareness of career opportunities and pathways in 911 and emergency communications• Supporting efforts to recognize telecommunicators as first responders or protective service professionals to strengthen their inclusion in public safety research and to potentially expand benefit eligibility
Invest Equipping telecommunicators with the skills, technology and support needed for an evolving profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implementing comprehensive onboarding and continuing education programs• Incorporating simulation-based and scenario-driven training• Expanding the availability of crisis intervention training, de-escalation tactics and mental health first aid• Adopting technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) tools, that improve call handling, training and operational efficiency
Sustain Promoting retention through employee well-being initiatives to reduce the cumulative impacts of occupational stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishing peer support and critical incident stress management programs• Providing confidential access to clinicians experienced in working with telecommunicators• Creating dedicated wellness spaces and incorporating wellness into organizational culture and leadership practices• Reviewing scheduling, staffing and workplace policies that support employee well-being

Building the 911 Workforce: Strengthening Local Career Pipelines

Anderson County, S.C.

2020 Population: 203,718



The Anderson County Unified Emergency Communications Center handles all emergency and non-emergency call taking/dispatching services for Anderson County jurisdictions. The center employs 64 communications personnel and processes between 300,000 and 400,000 calls each year. The Anderson County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) created Operation Jump Start to recruit local high school seniors to careers in emergency communications and law enforcement. Through partnerships with high schools and guidance counselors, ACSO identifies interested students, hosts annual recruitment events and arranges field tours to the Anderson County Detention Center and 911 call center. During these visits, students tour the facilities, ask questions and learn directly from telecommunicators and other public safety professionals.

The ACSO Hiring and Recruiting Team also guides students through the application, interview, background and selection process. Students who are at least 18 and successfully complete the hiring process may begin working after graduation as 911 telecommunicators or detention deputies. ACSO highlights the positions' starting pay, health and retirement benefits, paid leave and opportunities for advancement.

"This entry level program is an excellent way for our high school graduates to test their abilities and dive into a sustaining career."

Anderson County Sheriff's Office¹⁰

Operation Jump Start creates an early entry point into emergency communications, strengthening the local workforce pipeline and providing students with a direct route from career exploration to county employment.



NACo County News:
Rural county program preps students for first responder careers

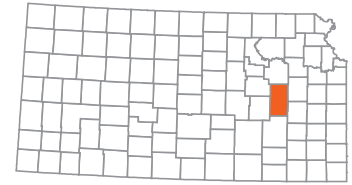


Scan the QR code to read a County News story about a similar Okeechobee, Fla. program

Investing in the 911 Workforce: Technology and AI Operational Relief

Lyon County, Kan.

2020 Population: 32,179



The Lyon County Emergency Communications Center (LCECC) introduced an AI-powered virtual assistant in December 2025 to reduce routine call demands and preserve staff capacity for emergencies. The initiative responded to persistent vacancies, a small applicant pool, difficulty recruiting candidates willing to work shift schedules and high call volumes that increased pressure on day-shift employees. With non-emergency calls accounting for approximately 80% of total call volume, these demands also reduced staff downtime and limited experienced telecommunicators' capacity to train new staff.

Named "Betty" after the county's longtime switchboard operator, the AI assistant was tested through a four-month pilot developed with staff input. Testing started with 10 high-volume call types before expanding to 30 types of non-emergency calls based on operational needs and emerging community issues. The system now manages about 35% of calls by completing interactions independently, collecting information for staff to process when capacity is available or transferring callers as needed. Emergency calls remain human-handled, and staff monitor all AI-supported interactions.

Within the first month, telecommunicators were strongly in favor of continuing the pilot. As Betty became part of daily operations, the center reported reduced workload pressures, increased opportunities to recover between calls and improved morale. The additional capacity provided time for experienced staff to train two new telecommunicators. Based on these workforce benefits, the LCECC proposed redirecting funding from a position that remained unfilled to cover the AI assistant's ongoing costs. County commissioners approved the request as a practical alternative to leaving a budgeted position vacant.

***"The goal wasn't to replace staff.
The goal was to better support the
staff we already have."***

*Roxanne Van Gundy, Director, Lyon County
Emergency Communications Center and President,
National Emergency Number Association*

Beyond call handling, LCECC uses AI for training simulations, transcription and translation services and is exploring automated quality assurance reviews of all calls.

Sustaining the 911 Workforce: Workforce Wellness Initiatives

Cobb County, Ga.

2020 Population: 766,149



The Cobb County Department of Emergency Communications (DEC) launched a comprehensive workforce wellness initiative in November 2024 following a staff survey conducted by Cobb 911 and Kennesaw State University. The survey examined post-traumatic stress, mental health and related concerns among emergency communications personnel. Department leaders used the findings to develop a structured approach to reducing burnout and supporting telecommunicator mental and physical well-being.

The initiative provides access to mental health resources, peer support and department-wide wellness activities, including guidance on healthy workplace boundaries and self-care practices. It also includes an after-hours communication protocol that limits non-emergency work-related contact and assigns after-hours emergencies to rotating on-call personnel to ensure staff have adequate time for rest and recovery.

These efforts are reinforced through DEC's G.R.O.W. program — Growth, Restoration, Oneness and Wellness — and its employee-led Health & Wellness and Morale Committees. Most wellness activities are incorporated into the department's annual budget, with the Cobb County Public Safety Foundation providing additional support for projects such as an outdoor garden and an indoor lounge. The indoor lounge offers a quiet space where telecommunicators can step away and recharge during their shifts.

Since launching the initiative, follow-up survey results have shown fewer reports of burnout and improvements in workplace culture and employee well-being. Department leaders report positive retention trends since launching the initiative.

“We care about you. Yes, we want the phone to get answered. We want the job done. But also we want to make sure that you’re mentally and physically well.”

*Desmond Harris, Community Relations Coordinator,
Cobb County Department of Emergency
Communications*



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- ¹ NACo Analysis of the Federal Communications Commission – 911 Master PSAP Registry (2017)
 - ² Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025, August 28). Occupational Outlook Handbook: Public Safety Telecommunicators.
 - ³ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2024, October 1). State Focus on Bolstering the 911 Workforce.
 - ⁴ The University of Chicago Health Lab. (2022, February 28). Transform911: Transforming 911 Report.
 - ⁵ International Academies of Emergency Dispatch and National Association of State 911 Administrators. (2023) America's 911 Workforce is in Crisis.
 - ⁶ National Emergency Number Association and Carbyne. (2025, June 23). Pulse of 9-1-1 Survey Report.
 - ⁷ NACo in discussion with the National Emergency Number Association (July 2026).
 - ⁸ NACo County News. (2022, March 28). Cumberland County, Pa. Partners With Mental Health Provider for First Responders.
 - ⁹ Anderson County Sheriff's Office. Emergency Management: 911 Dispatch Center.
 - ¹⁰ Anderson County Sheriff's Office. Recruitment: Operation Jump Start.
 - ¹¹ Government Technology. (2025, December 2). AI Bot Takes Non-Emergency Calls in Lyon County, Kan.
 - ¹² NACo in discussion with Lyon County's Emergency Communications Center. (July 2026).
 - ¹³ NACo in discussion with Cobb County's Department of Emergency Communications. (July 2026).
 - ¹⁴ Cobb County Government. (2025, July 17). Cobb 911 Creates Wellness Lounge for First Responders.



For more information and resources, please visit
NACo's Behavioral Health Crisis Response Program Page

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