

Audit Report
April 25, 2019

911 Dispatchers: Understaffing Leads to Excessive Overtime and Low Morale



BERKELEY CITY AUDITOR



911 Dispatchers: Understaffing Leads to Excessive Overtime and Low Morale

Report Highlights

April 25, 2019



Findings

- It is taking longer than previous years for call takers to answer 911 calls and the Communications Center does not have enough call takers to answer the current 911 call volume. We also found that, with predicted population growth, the Communications Center would likely need additional resources in the future to maintain its emergency response services.
- Due to consistent understaffing, the Communications Center relies heavily on overtime to meet minimum staffing requirements, spending nearly \$1 million in 2017 on overtime.
- Morale in the Communications Center is low and dispatchers feel unsupported. We found that there are some resources available for staff to manage stress; however, dispatchers often do not have time to access them.



Recommendations

We recommend that the Police Department conduct a staffing analysis to determine the appropriate staffing levels, create a recruitment and continuing training plan for dispatchers, establish a call taker classification, and implement automated scheduling software to provide information to inform future budgeting decisions, decrease the reliance on overtime, and relieve the burden placed on overworked staff.

We also recommend that the Police Department implement programs to increase morale and communication. These include recommendations to establish routine meetings with dispatch supervisors, sworn police, and fire personnel, and to establish a comprehensive stress management program.

Objectives

1. To what extent does the Communications Center, which answers 911 calls, have sufficient staffing to handle workloads and service demands?
2. What contributes to overtime use?
3. How do working conditions affect morale?

Why This Audit Is Important

The Police Department Communications Center serves as Berkeley's 911 public safety answering point, receiving all emergency and non-emergency police, fire, and medical calls in the city and dispatching public safety personnel to respond as appropriate. To ensure the wellbeing of the public, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and dispatchers, the City must maintain a Communications Center that is appropriately staffed. Without sufficient staff, it takes longer for call takers to answer 911 calls. The faster the Communications Center can get a police officer, firefighter, or paramedic to the scene, the better the chances of a good outcome. The seconds it takes to answer and prepare a call for dispatch can mean the difference between life and death.



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Introduction

We identified workload capacity as an immediate concern to the City's operations and strategic planning in our fiscal year 2018 Audit Plan. We, therefore, included in our audit plan a series of audits that evaluated the City's ability to provide expected and critical services to the Berkeley community. To ensure the wellbeing of the public, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and dispatchers, the City must maintain a Communications Center (Center) that is appropriately staffed. Without sufficient staff, it takes longer for call takers to answer 911 calls. The faster the Center can get a police officer, firefighter, or paramedic to the scene, the better the chances of a good outcome. The seconds it takes a call taker to answer and prepare a call for dispatch can mean the difference between life and death.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were to determine:

1. To what extent does the Communications Center, which answers 911 calls, have sufficient staffing to handle workloads and service demands?
2. What contributes to overtime use?
3. How do working conditions affect morale?

We examined the Center's call volume data for calendar years 2013 through 2017, performed interviews, and conducted a survey to gain an understanding of the program. We specifically assessed minimum staffing levels, call answer performance, overtime, recruitment, retention, training, and morale. For more information, see p. 26.

Background

The Public Safety Dispatcher (dispatcher) is often the unsung first responder of the emergency response team. Dispatchers are highly trained professionals, who gather essential information from callers and dispatch the appropriate response team to the scene. They take control of situations that may be chaotic, stressful, confusing, and traumatic. They must be quick-thinking, organized, levelheaded, and confident in their abilities. Dispatchers are at the core of a coordinated emergency response and must make split-second decisions in order to ensure the safety of responders and the public.

The Center, run out of the Police Department, serves as Berkeley's 911 public safety answering point (PSAP), receiving all emergency and non-emergency police, fire and medical calls in the city and dispatching public safety personnel to respond as appropriate. To ensure the wellbeing of dispatchers, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and the public, the City must maintain a Center that is appropriately staffed.

Structure, Staffing, and Training

The Center is part of the Support Services Division of the Berkeley Police Department, overseen by a sworn police captain. The Center is staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year by a team of trained dispatchers under the direction of a non-sworn manager. Sworn personnel take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States and the laws of the state and local jurisdiction. This includes police officers and detectives. Non-sworn (civilian) personnel do not take an oath and have limited legal powers or none at all. This includes dispatchers and parking enforcement officers.

Figure 1. Berkeley Police Department Organizational Chart



Source: City of Berkeley 2018-2019 Biennial Budget

The 2018 City budget authorized 33 non-sworn full-time equivalent positions for the Center, including 28 public safety dispatchers, four supervisors, and one manager. At the end of May 2018, the Police Department had only filled 23.5 of the 28 authorized full-time equivalent dispatcher positions and was

actively recruiting for new hires. In addition to civilian dispatchers, the Center utilizes three additional Police personnel who work overtime as call takers to meet minimum staffing levels on an as-needed basis and dependent on their availability.

Dispatcher Roles

Dispatchers have four primary roles: call taker, records desk operator, fire radio dispatcher, and police radio dispatcher. All Berkeley dispatchers are cross-trained and may perform any function during a shift.

Table 1. Dispatcher Work Positions and Duties

Position	Duties
Call Taker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepts and processes inbound 911 and administrative calls for police, fire, and medical services as well as other services such as animal control Inputs call information into Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system and transfers the information to fire and police dispatcher staff
Records Desk Operator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitors and responds to radio transmissions on a designated channel Conducts warrants, license, and other checks on persons of interest and vehicles
Fire Dispatcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispatches all fire and medical related calls* requiring a response from firefighters or paramedics Maintains radio contact with field staff
Police Dispatcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispatches all police related calls requiring a response from law enforcement Enters all officer initiated incidents into CAD such as pedestrian and traffic stops Maintains radio contact with field staff

*Dispatchers route all medical calls requiring pre-arrival instructions to Alameda County.

Source: City of Berkeley Communications Center Manual

It is taking longer to answer 911 calls and there are not enough call takers.

It is taking longer for the City to answer 911 calls because the Communications Center (Center) does not have enough call takers. The number of budgeted dispatchers has remained the same even as call volume has increased. The Center uses a staff-forecasting tool, but has not conducted a thorough staffing analysis to determine the number of dispatchers needed on each shift and the total number of dispatchers needed to staff the Center 24/7. Without a thorough staffing analysis, the Police Department cannot inform future budgeting decisions of dispatcher positions.

It Is Taking Longer to Answer 911 Calls, Falling Below State Standard

The Center is taking longer to answer 911 calls. The faster the Center can get a police officer, firefighter, or paramedic to the scene the better the chances of a good outcome. The seconds it takes a call taker to answer and prepare a call for dispatch can mean the difference between life and death.

California has a state standard requiring public safety answering points to answer 95 percent of 911 calls within 15 seconds. The state standard does not apply to non-emergency calls. Call data from the State's Emergency Call Tracking System (ECaTS) indicates the Center did not meet the performance target in answering 911 calls in two of the last five calendar years (as shown in Table 2). The data shows that in 2017, dispatchers only answered 89 percent of calls within 15 seconds. If the Communications Center is not able to reach this call answer target, they risk losing State funding in the future.¹



Call taking is one of the four primary roles of a Berkeley

dispatcher. All dispatchers are cross-trained to perform any function. A call taker accepts and processes inbound 911 and non-emergency telephone calls for police, fire, and medical service. They input call information into the CAD system, which provides information to Police and Fire dispatchers. Call takers also answer and transfer calls intended for other Police units and other City departments.

¹ Funding from the State is contingent upon adherence to the state's mandatory standards including call answer times. In early 2016, the 911 Emergency Communications Branch of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services issued a review of fiscal and operational policies of the Berkeley Communications Center covering the time period of March 2015 through March 2016. The state found that the Communications Center was meeting the call answer standard and estimated that they will receive approximately \$161,000 in state funding over the next five years. This includes reimbursement for language interpretation calls, ECaTS expenses, annual training allotment, and maintenance/upgrades of the phone system.

Table 2. 911 Call Answer Performance

Calendar year	Percent answered within 15 seconds	Average answer time (seconds)	Total 911 calls (Police, Fire, Medical)	Average call duration (seconds)
2013	92%	9	49,579	81
2014	95%	9	54,599	80
2015	95%	9	54,190	88
2016	96%	8	52,520	91
2017	89%	10	55,587	100

Source: ECaTS data

Call Volume Has Risen but Staffing Has Stayed the Same

The Center is experiencing more calls, but staffing has not increased to keep up with the call volume. Rapid population growth in Berkeley since the 2010 Census is creating unprecedented challenges for public safety personnel as more people are calling 911. As Berkeley's population has risen, so has the number of calls into the Center, both emergency and non-emergency. In 2013, the Center handled 184,000 calls, including emergency, non-emergency, and outbound calls. There was a significant increase in call volume in 2017, rising to over 256,000 calls for the year (Figure 2). According to the data, the majority of this increase came from a rise in non-emergency calls into the Center and outbound calls from the Center. Call volume data does not explain why there was an increase and the Police Department could not provide support for the increase.

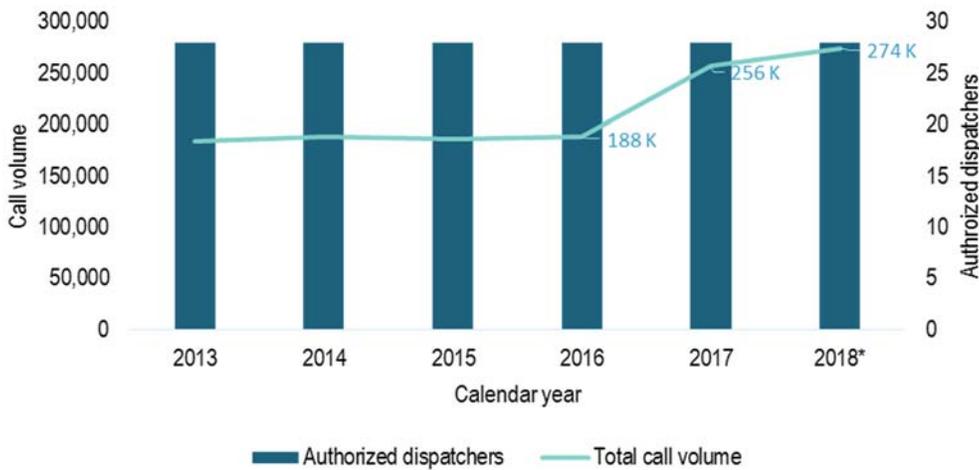
In early 2017, the Department installed a new phone system. According to the Department, they believe that the old phone system was capturing incomplete non-emergency call volume data and the newly installed system is capturing complete call volume data. The Department was unable to provide evidence to support this theory but did provide us with 2018 call data to demonstrate that the call volume continues to be much higher than captured before the phone installation. Regardless of whether the increase in call volume was an actual increase in calls or just the data captured, the Department has not increased staffing in response to the noted increase in call volume. The Center has not had an increase in budgeted dispatcher positions since 2004. The number of authorized dispatcher positions remains at 28.



In early 2016, the 911 Emergency Communications

Branch of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services issued a review of fiscal and operational policies of the Berkeley Communications Center covering the time period of March 2015 through March 2016. The state found that the Communications Center was meeting the call answer standard and estimated that they will receive approximately \$161,000 in state funding over the next five years.

Figure 2. Call Volume for Communications Center Increased with No Change in Authorized Staffing



*The Police Department provided us with only summary data for calendar year 2018. We did not assess the reliability of the summary data as it was not part of our audit scope. We provide it here because there was a significant increase in non-emergency and outbound calls after 2016, which the Department largely attributes to a new phone system, as well as an increase in calls. Providing the 2018 data for comparative purposes helps demonstrate the Department's hypothesis.

Note: Total call volume includes emergency, non-emergency, and outbound calls.

Source: City of Berkeley Biennial Budgets, ECaTS, and auditor analysis

Center Is Understaffed by One Call Taker Each Shift

Based on the Communications Center's current shift staffing model, the Center is understaffed by one call taker at all times of the day to handle 911 calls. The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) published a staffing guidelines report that we used to determine the adequate call taker staffing for the Center.² According to our analysis, the Center should have a minimum of three call takers on shift during normal hours and four call takers on shift during busy hours. However, the Center is not able to follow the NENA guidelines with current budgeted staffing levels. Instead, the Center must set its current minimum staffing levels to include only two call takers during normal hours and three call takers during busy hours. Management determines these levels based on the current minimum staffing and an analysis of call volume. Management stated that the current shift staffing levels are low compared to the call volume and they are unable to adopt higher minimum staffing numbers due to the consistent understaffing of dispatcher positions.

² We conducted the staffing analysis using the Erlang C mathematical formula and the results are based on 911 call volume; call duration; and queuing theory. For more information, see methodology section.

During this audit, the Police Department implemented a phone tree on the non-emergency lines in an effort to maximize the efficiency of call takers. The goal is to route calls for service needing a non-emergency response in the most expedient manner possible. This will help ensure that call takers are answering fewer non-emergency calls that they would normally transfer to a different agency or City Department. It is too early in the implementation to understand how the phone tree will affect the overall workload of call takers. A more in-depth analysis of non-emergency call volume is needed to understand the workload impact of these calls with the implementation of the phone tree.

Additional Resources Are Necessary to Maintain 911 Services in the Future

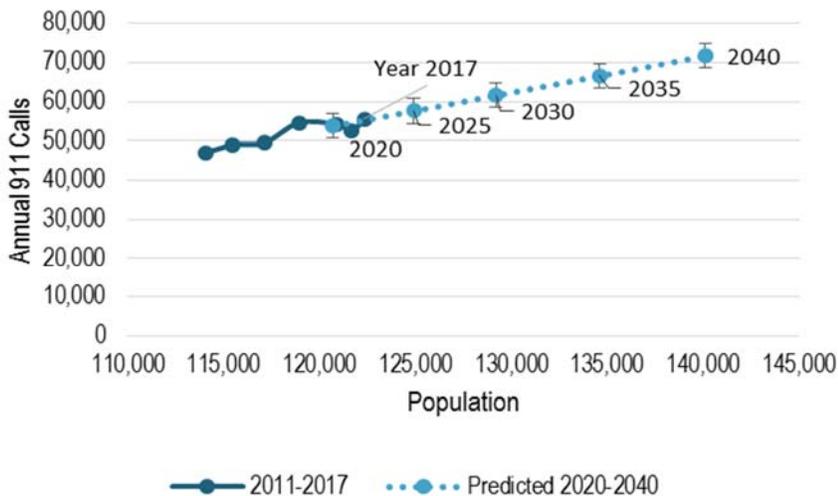
The City of Berkeley's population grew rapidly in the ten years following the 2000 Census. The population rose by almost nine percent to 112,580 according to the 2010 Decennial Census. The City continues to grow approximately one percent every year. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), projected Berkeley's population to grow 24.4 percent between 2010 and 2040, to about 140,100 people. If the City's population grows to 140,100 people by 2040, the Communications Center's annual call volume may grow to between 253,000 and 350,000 total calls and of those calls, 68,500 - 75,000 would be 911 calls (Figure 3).³ While population is a good indicator of 911 call volume, additional factors should be considered when planning for the future. Some of those considerations include crime rate, public access to affordable health care, and local attitudes on the use of 911.



Non-emergencies: General calls related to the Police or Fire Departments that do not pertain to an immediate threat to life or property. This includes situations that may be criminal in nature, but do not require immediate attention. These non-emergency calls include "cold-crimes," vehicle complaints, and routine civil matters.

³ Our analysis did not take into account additional factors that may influence 911 call volume.

Figure 3. 911 Calls May Grow Above 70,000 by 2040



Sources: US Census, American Community Survey, ABAG 2013 Projections, Auditor analysis

Next Generation 911 and Proposed Fire Department Changes Could Further Burden Call Center Capacity

Berkeley is preparing to upgrade to Next Generation 911 (NG911). The purpose for this upgrade is to create a more successful and reliable network of 911 systems nationwide that are able to accept voice, video, photo, and text messages. Some local jurisdictions, including San Francisco, Fremont, Hayward, and Alameda County, are already accepting 911 text messages. While the Federal Communications Commission encourages all call centers to begin accepting texts, it is up to each center to decide on a method of implementation. Berkeley is not yet set up to accept text messages but has started to make changes to prepare for NG911, including upgrading its systems. Additional staffing is likely necessary to handle the more complex service demands.

The Fire Department desires to add emergency medical dispatching capabilities to the Center, in keeping with regional standards. Currently, medical calls are transferred to Alameda County Regional Emergency Communications Center for this service. Providing in-house emergency medical dispatching would allow the Center to triage medical calls and provide immediate pre-arrival instructions from dispatchers with direct communication to responders. This will require additional resources, including staff, equipment, physical space, procedures, and training. Emergency medical dispatching will also increase call duration times as



An emergency medical dispatcher gathers information related to medical emergencies, dispatches the appropriate EMS response, provides assistance and instructions to callers over the phone prior to the arrival of emergency medical services, like how to administer CPR. They also communicate with responding units.

someone from the Center will need to stay on the line with the caller until the responding unit arrives. This will increase call time and, therefore, decrease the Center's availability to answer calls without sufficient increases in staffing.

The physical space the Center currently occupies is small and at capacity. There is no room to add workstations for dispatchers. To prepare for increases in call volume and services, Police can begin to plan now, including looking for a bigger space to run the Center. They will quickly outgrow their current resources with any increase in the minimum staffing levels.

Recommendations

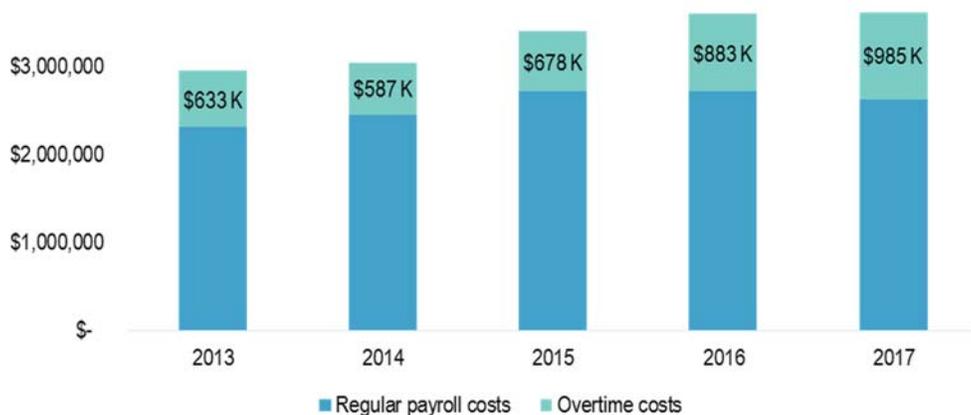
To address public safety service demands, we recommend the Police Department:

- 1.1 Conduct an annual staffing analysis of required minimum staffing levels and budgeted dispatchers to ensure budget staffing requests and scheduling efforts meet demand and limit the use of overtime where possible. Use the staffing analysis to communicate to Council and the public during the annual appropriations process:
 - Service level demands;
 - The full-burdened cost of budgeting for additional staff;
 - Whether there is sufficient funding available to budget for the additional staff or a shortfall (quantified in dollars); and
 - Additional staffing requests, if needed.
- 1.2 Use the staffing analysis performed in response to recommendation 1.1, to determine future resource needs of the Communications Center, including staffing, equipment, and physical space. Take into account planned changes to services and factors that may influence call volume.

The Communications Center relies on significant overtime leading to inadequate training and an unhealthy work environment.

Due to consistent understaffing, the Center relies heavily on overtime to meet service demands through minimum staffing requirements, spending nearly \$1 million in 2017 on overtime (Figure 4). Historically, recruitment and training processes left the Police Department unable to fill vacant positions in the Center. During this audit, the Department invested additional resources to improve department-wide recruitment efforts. There are further opportunities to strengthen the Department's recruitment and training efforts for dispatcher positions. The lengthy hiring process also contributes to the ongoing vacancies and related overtime costs. In particular, delays occur during the extensive background investigations when recruitments for police officers take priority over dispatchers.

Figure 4. Communications Center Total Annual Payroll vs. Overtime Costs, Calendar Years 2013-2017

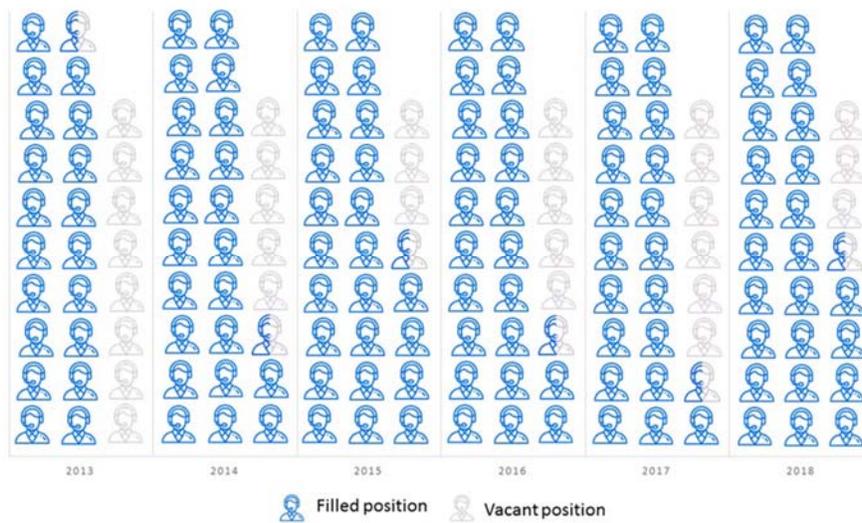


Source: City of Berkeley Cognos payroll data, Auditor analysis

Position Vacancies Lead to Excessive Overtime Use

Historically, the Center has struggled to reach full staffing of the current budgeted positions. Between 2013 and 2018, the Center had between 3.5 and 8 dispatcher position vacancies. In order to meet minimum staffing requirements, supervisors schedule existing employees for mandatory overtime to fill vacant shifts.

Figure 5. Dispatcher Positions Have Historically Been Understaffed, 2013-2018



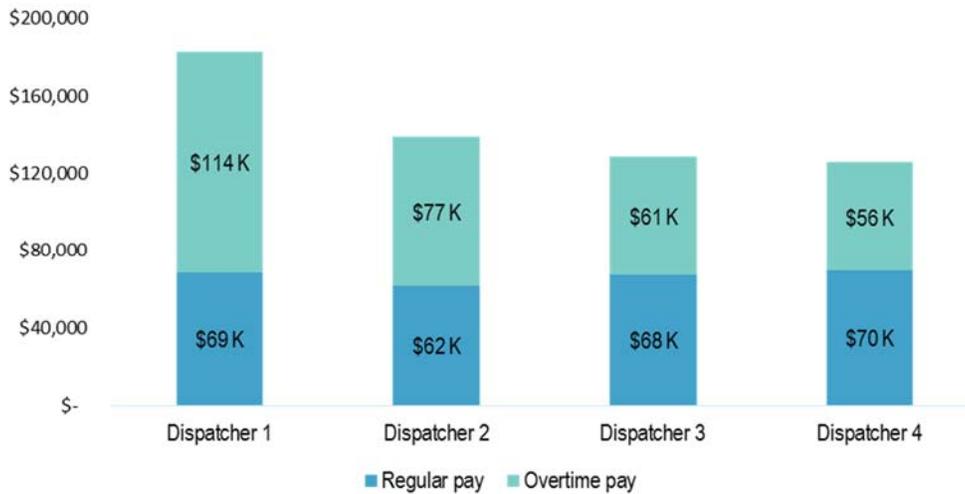
Source: City of Berkeley Human Resource staffing reports

If the Police Department fills all the vacant positions in the Center, they would be able to reduce the amount of overtime. The nearly \$1 million spent in overtime in 2017 is offset by the current budgeted vacant positions in the Center. However, even if Police fill all the vacant dispatcher positions, the Center would continue to be understaffed according to NENA staffing guidelines. We recognize that some amount of overtime is necessary for all public safety positions due to unplanned absences and events that may require an increase in staffing levels, but there is room to decrease the amount needed.

Excessive Overtime May Lead to Fatigue and Safety-Related Incidences

The four dispatchers working the most overtime in the Center received 40 percent of the 2017 overtime paid (Figure 6). This much overtime may contribute to worker fatigue and decreased quality of service.

Figure 6. Top Four Overtime Earners in Calendar Year 2017



Source: City of Berkeley Cognos payroll data

Although overtime is generally less expensive than hiring additional staff because overtime pay excludes benefits, there are important non-financial benefits to reducing overtime by hiring additional dispatchers. Dispatching is a high-stress job that requires dispatchers to be alert and use good judgement. Overtime, when used in excess, can inhibit these essential skills, threatening the safety of responders and the public. For example, in a traffic stop, dispatchers may need to tell an officer if someone is on parole or probation; has a warrant; has a weapons history; or is in a stolen vehicle. All this information allows the officer to make informed decisions about how to approach a situation safely. Therefore, dispatchers must be alert and ready to quickly convey information.

The continued use of overtime is not an ideal situation for any public safety position and exposes staff to an unhealthy work environment. Studies have shown that in law enforcement and across other industries, working excessively long work shifts, particularly those that are 12 hours or more, can lead to fatigue and safety-related incidents, and decrease quality of service, communication, and cognitive performance. By filling vacant positions, the Center can reduce their reliance on overtime and reduce the risk of employee burnout and potential workers compensation claims that may result from overworking.



The Communications Center's current staffing policy allows individuals to sign up for four voluntary overtime shifts at the beginning of each two-week scheduling period for up to 15 hours each. This is equal to a maximum of 60 hours of overtime over two weeks. When added to regular time, an individual could potentially work 70-hour weeks with shifts up to 15 hours in length. When supervisors do not have enough volunteers to work overtime, they schedule dispatchers to work mandatory overtime shifts.

"Our mandatory overtime creates a very stressful environment while at work and extremely poor health and quality of life outside of work. When can we sleep when we are working 14.5-16 hour shifts each day?" – Berkeley Dispatcher

Manual Scheduling Is Time Consuming and Subject to Errors

The Center's staffing processes are not automated. Supervisors are responsible for creating and maintaining manual schedules, including any overtime, or changes to the schedule due to absences. As a result, the task of meeting daily scheduling and staffing needs is cumbersome, time-consuming, and prone to human error. The manual process for filling overtime is even more complex as supervisors must adhere to complex union labor agreements and overtime policies. The supervisor in charge of scheduling said that it is a difficult job and it gets complicated when dealing with overtime and filling absences. She said that sometimes she makes mistakes and has to scramble to find someone to fill a position to reach minimum staffing. Automating the scheduling system will allow the Center to ensure that scheduling adheres to all policies.

Police Department Can Improve Dispatcher Recruitment Efforts

The Police Department is responsible for all recruitment efforts for the entire Department, not just those for dispatchers. The Department has shown a commitment to improving the recruitment process by dedicating resources to general Department recruitment efforts. The Chief of Police approved the creation of a four-person recruitment team within the Personnel and Training Bureau. The team will develop better branding and marketing of the Department and career paths for sworn and civilian positions.

The Police Department recently opened the Public Safety Dispatcher II classification to continuous recruitment; however, they do not continuously recruit for entry-level Public Safety Dispatcher I positions. Continuous recruitment of all dispatcher positions would allow prospective candidates to submit application materials at any time and the City to respond quickly to changing staffing needs.

Recruiting events are critical to finding potential applicants with the skills necessary to succeed at the job. The Personnel and Training Bureau attends career fairs and community events around the Bay Area to advertise police career opportunities to targeted audiences. Dispatchers have not routinely been involved in the recruitment process. The Police Department has created



The Fire Department manages firefighter scheduling with an industry-known public safety scheduling software called Kronos TeleStaff. TeleStaff functionality allows Fire to:

- Automatically fill vacancies based on organizational qualifications and availability
- Manage shift trades and leave requests
- Control and maintain staffing levels and rotations
- Manage the daily schedule by maintaining on-duty and off-duty personnel at all times
- Capture payroll data and export to third-party HR/payroll systems
- Provide manager and employee self-service access
- Increase oversight and save time currently spent on manual scheduling

marketing material for educating people about the Police Academy but there were no materials about a career in dispatching. Involving dispatchers in this recruitment process and creating unique marketing materials for dispatcher positions would allow the Department to better identify and engage potential recruits. The Department's recruitment webpage is outdated and lacks information about dispatching. Personnel and Training should engage in best practice marketing strategies including the use of websites and social media to engage with targeted audiences.

Background Investigations Cause Delays in Hiring

While the recruitment process can take months, mandatory background checks add even more time to the process. Candidates that pass the interview panel are assigned to an internal background investigator in the Department. When the Department has multiple background investigations to conduct, significant delays can occur. According to the Personnel and Training Bureau, the Department prioritizes backgrounds for sworn over non-sworn positions, and dispatcher candidates can fall to the bottom of the pile. During this delay, the Department may lose candidates to other agencies. Options to increase the processing of background investigations include adding staff time or contracting with an outside firm. There are private background investigation firms that could conduct all or some of the Department's recruitment background investigations to alleviate the workload of investigators, expedite the process, and retain more applicants.

Opportunity to Increase Trainee Retention

A majority of employee separations occur during dispatchers' first year while still in training. Under the current staffing model, dispatchers are cross-trained to work all four positions in the Center: call taker, records desk, police desk, and fire desk. If a trainee does not pass one phase, they are released from training even if they successfully passed other phases. The reason the Center requires all dispatchers to be cross-trained is because it provides the most flexibility in scheduling. There may be, however, an opportunity to retain qualified individuals as call takers, in order to provide current dispatchers with some workload relief.

Current and former management of the Center identified the Police Desk phase of dispatcher training as the most difficult part of training, stating that

Figure 7. Dispatcher Training



Source: City of Berkeley
Dispatcher Training Manual

people cannot handle the pace and stress associated with police calls. The training program for new hires is approximately nine months long with the Police Desk phase at the end (Figure 7). Our analysis of staff turnover revealed that only 45 percent of those hired as trainees in 2013-2017 successfully completed the training program to become permanent dispatchers.

Department managers reported that this is an improvement over previous years. In the current training program, trainees are terminated if they are not able to pass all phases of the program. Twenty-eight percent of the trainees were unable to complete the training program and exited between seven and nine months from their start date, approximately during the Police Desk phase of training.

Call taking is the first phase of training that dispatchers receive. This duty currently accounts for two or three staff positions on each shift. By changing practices to retain dispatchers who are able to pass call taking training but are not able to pass all training phases as call takers, the Center may be able to reduce overtime in the short term. Those individuals may later be able to resume training to advance to a fully cross-trained dispatcher if they desire.

Staffing Shortages Impact Ability to Meet Ongoing Training Requirements

The understaffing of dispatcher positions and the resulting need for dispatchers to work lots of overtime means less time for training. According to the Police Department’s Personnel and Training Bureau, the Center does not fully comply with California’s Police Officer Standards and Training (POST) ongoing training requirements. In such a highly technical profession with changing technology, it is vital that those answering 911 calls are receiving appropriate and adequate ongoing training.

Table 3. Compliance with State Training Requirements

Reporting Years	Total Dispatchers*	In Compliance	Not in Compliance
2013/2014	30	16	14
2015/2016	30	21	9
2017/2018	31	26	5

*Includes dispatchers who have separated from the City

Source: Berkeley Police Department Personnel and Training Bureau



California's
Commission of
Police Officer

Standards and Training (POST) established minimum training requirements for public safety dispatchers. Every dispatcher and supervisor is required to complete 24 hours of continuing professional training every two years to maintain, expand, and enhance knowledge and skills.

A lack of training means that dispatchers may not have the skills, knowledge, or abilities to handle calls, which could lead to serious consequences. In order to ensure that the Center is appropriately trained, the Department needs to increase recruitment efforts to attract quality candidates to fill vacant positions. In addition, adding call taker positions will allow the Center to reduce their reliance on overtime, relieving the burden placed on staff who are working excessive overtime and allow dispatchers more time to complete mandatory training.

Recommendations

In order to ensure well-rested and content dispatchers, and to reduce reliance on overtime, we recommend the Police Department through its recruitment actions:

- 2.1 Open all dispatcher positions to continuous recruitment.
- 2.2 Work with Communications Center staff to create a specific recruitment plan for dispatcher positions including recruitment events and marketing material. Use recruitment best practices to reach potential applicants and increase the number of applicants.
- 2.3 Identify and implement feasible options to improve turnaround time on background checks for dispatcher positions. This can include outsourcing background investigations or working with Human Resources to ensure that the Department is able to complete all background investigations in a timely manner.
- 2.4 Design a way to retain staff that are unable to pass the Police Desk training, for example, keep staff as Public Safety Dispatcher I and have them work as a call taker or create a new job classification for a call taking position.
- 2.5 Evaluate the results from dispatcher recruitment routinely (e.g., annually or at the end of a recruitment cycle) to determine areas for improvement. Update recruitment plans.

In order to ensure adequate staffing and well-trained dispatchers, we recommend the Police Department:

- 2.6 Implement an automated scheduling software that has built-in decision-making capabilities to automatically fill shifts based on specified qualifications and staff availability.
- 2.7 Decrease the concentration of overtime among dispatchers.
- 2.8 Develop and implement a Communications Center training plan to ensure compliance with POST training requirements. Evaluate training processes and update training plans routinely.



Working conditions adversely affect dispatcher morale.

All the dispatchers who responded to our survey stated that morale in the Center was low. According to staff, the major cause of the low morale is the understaffing of dispatch positions and subsequent excessive overtime needed to achieve minimum staffing. As the Center has continued to rely on overtime, staff have little to no time in their work days to complete ongoing training, build a healthy workplace culture, and access stress management resources. They also have less time off work to take care of their physical and mental health. Management reported that they have taken steps to address the low morale and provide resources to support dispatchers. However, there is more that needs to be done to ensure dispatchers have access to and participate in these resources.

Communication Improvements Can Help Morale

Communication is a key tool to a healthy work environment. The majority of dispatchers feel that they are not given opportunities to voice their concerns, ideas, and opinions. This has caused dispatchers to feel disconnected from supervisors and management. Shift work creates a challenge when it comes to communication because there is no time in the day when staff are all together. Additionally, the type of work does not allow the entire unit to be off work and communicate as a whole. In our interviews, supervisors said that there is a lack of communication because they work different shifts and this makes it hard to be on the same page. Supervisors recognized that this challenge likely causes communication issues up and down their chain of command.

Management has recognized the need for greater transparency about management decisions and appear to be committed to creating better communication practices in order to achieve that. There are opportunities to increase transparency by holding regular meetings with supervisors and management where information is shared and communication plans are made. This would help ensure that supervisors are communicating consistent information down to dispatchers and that supervisors have time to bring ideas, concerns, and issues to management. Center staff also expressed that there are communication barriers between dispatchers and sworn police officers. Staff reported feeling largely ignored and forgotten by the Department. The Center and Police Department previously had a committee that met routinely to

100% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that morale within the Communications Center is low.

73.33% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are given opportunities to voice concerns, opinions, and ideas.



Supervisors are directly responsible for training and conveying information to dispatchers. It is also the job of the supervisor to resolve issues and refer to management as necessary.

discuss issues between patrol staff and dispatchers and keep communication open. The committee has since stopped meeting. A meeting between patrol staff and the Center, if properly managed, could help dispatchers communicate with the Department, build rapport, and solve recurring issues.

Center staff reported having a good working relationship with the Fire Department. They feel that Fire is very mindful about how their policies affect dispatchers and will initiate discussions with supervisors to address changes and issues, and to solicit feedback. However, there is room to improve communication with Fire by including all Center supervisors in those routine discussions to ensure that all significant issues are discussed. Currently, one of the supervising dispatchers serves as the liaison to Fire and is responsible for this communication. While it is important to have a point person, the Center may benefit from involving all supervisors and management in more routine meetings with Fire.

Unaddressed Work-Related Stress Increases Risk to Department

There is no such thing as a good day in the Center. A bad day for most people is every day for a dispatcher. Dispatchers do not just hear when crimes or tragedies occur, they are on the phone with someone who was involved or witnessed what happened. According to the National Emergency Number Association, approximately 16.3 percent of dispatchers may be at risk of Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder.⁴ Experts identify risks associated with unaddressed 911 stress, including serious health issues, lower employee retention, impaired work performance, and declining morale in the workplace. All of these impacts have the potential to threaten the health of dispatchers and the ability of the Center to fulfill its mission to provide optimal emergency response to the public.

Experts have found that workplace satisfaction reduces the cost of employee turnover and sick leave while increasing performance and productivity. Low morale has been associated with the opposite. With mounting evidence that work-related stress is having more of an impact on 911 dispatchers, industry experts have established standards for a comprehensive stress management program.



The National Emergency Number Association provides

standards for creating a comprehensive stress management program, including:

- Stress management training for all staff
- On-site educational materials and resources about stress and related risks
- Information on the role of nutrition, exercise, and sleep in preventing stress disorders
- Written procedures for ensuring participation in post-trauma response, debriefing, and peer support
- A PSAP peer support program
- Personal health incentives program to promote employee investment in lifestyle changes and practices shown to prevent mental and physical disease

⁴ Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder is the specific stress experienced by an individual who has experienced a traumatic event involving a threat to the physical integrity of another person; the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person.

Dispatchers Are Tired of Dirty Workplace and Broken Equipment

Our survey and interviews revealed that poor equipment maintenance and workplace cleanliness are also contributing to employee dissatisfaction in the Center. There is currently no planned continuous maintenance on Center equipment. In addition to contributing to employee satisfaction, having working equipment is vital to the success of the City's emergency response. Implementing a maintenance plan will allow management to plan routine upgrades and replacement of equipment. Supervisors also commented on the lack of cleanliness in the Center. Overcrowded and cramped working quarters, as well as staff's frequent inability to leave their desks for lunch breaks, are likely contributors to the unclean space. The crowded conditions are likely to worsen as the Center expands to take on additional dispatchers. The Department may need to invest in additional cleaning services to address all sanitation issues.

Dispatchers Believe They Need Better Access to Stress and Wellness Resources

The Police Department has policies and practices that address workplace stress, promote wellness, and show appreciation for employees. There are some resources that dispatchers have access to, for example, recognition during National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week and the City Employee Assistance Program. However, there are other resources that dispatchers report that they have a hard time accessing: post-trauma response, peer support, incident debriefing, and use of the Department gym. Center staff reported that dispatchers do not have time to access many of these resources due to understaffing. Management reported that they have introduced new wellness resources including a healthy-meal delivery service, access to a mobile meditation application, and a physical meditation space. Management recognizes that they will need to continue to work towards improving these services and access to these services.

Center staff also stated that dispatchers do not receive adequate ongoing training. The Center should provide ongoing training on the structured call-taking process, including the management of suicidal callers and calls involving persons with mental illness, to ensure that dispatchers have the skills and knowledge to handle the calls and manage their own stress. In

86.67% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they receive the resources needed to effectively manage the stress of being a dispatcher.

60% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they receive adequate ongoing training to understand their evolving responsibilities and do their job well.

addition to their current stress management practices, the Police Department could benefit from adding practices to ensure that dispatchers have access to the resources they need to continue to do their job and remain healthy. Without addressing staffing and overtime issues, dispatchers will continue to not have time to access essential stress management resources. By creating a comprehensive stress management program specifically for dispatchers, the Center can make time for dispatchers to access vital stress management resources that are relevant to staff needs.

Management has voiced their commitment to increasing transparency and providing additional support to improve the environment. While the initial implementation of programs to improve morale will have financial costs, these can be offset by cost reductions related to sick time, resignations, and workers compensation claims. The City's investment in its people is critical to ensuring that the Center is prepared to respond to calls for service and effectively communicate information to public safety personnel.

Recommendations

In order to improve morale and communication, we recommend Communications Center management:

- 3.1 Create a comprehensive stress management program specifically for the Communications Center that includes the following:
 - Stress management training for all staff, 8 hours minimum during career
 - Access to on-site educational resources to help with stress and related risks, e.g., directory of local therapists specializing in treatment of stress and traumatic stress disorders and City programs that provide information on how and where to access help
 - Procedures assuring participation of staff in critical incidence stress management activities (e.g., debriefing sessions when involved in traumatic call events)
 - A Peer Support Program
 - Comprehensive, ongoing training on structured call-taking processes

- 3.2 Develop and implement plans to address workplace cleanliness and equipment maintenance and replacement.
- 3.3 Conduct regular supervisor level meetings to share information about operations and staffing. Use these meetings to improve understanding of the supervisor role, identify problems, discuss changes that may affect operations, and establish communications plans for distributing information to all staff.
- 3.4 Routinely have Police and Fire staff meet with all Center Supervisors to solicit feedback on Center operations and to address any issues. Use these meetings to improve understanding of the dispatcher role and current policies of public safety, identify problems that should be evaluated for further discussion, and discuss known and expected changes that may affect the Communications Center.

Management Response Summary

City Management agreed to our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In our meetings with Police Department management, they described their current and planned actions to address our audit recommendations. We found those verbal responses reasonable. For example, to address recommendations 1.2 and 2.4, Police Department management said they plan to request a new Call Taker position. This will help them hire staff who are able to handle call intake but may not be suited to handle police desk responsibilities. This will help reduce reliance on overtime.

The Police Department provided us with written summary information describing the conditions that led to our audit recommendations and identified some of their milestone dates. Some responses did not include complete, written corrective action plans or expected implementation dates as requested. Therefore, we will be working with Police Department management to obtain that information so that we can monitor their progress with implementing our audit recommendations. Please see Appendix III for the Police Department's written response to our audit recommendations.

Appendix I—Methodology and Statement of Compliance

Methodology

We audited the Communications Center's (Center) recruitment, staffing, overtime, retention, and training program for calendar years 2013 through 2017. We performed a risk assessment of the Center's practices and procedures to identify potential internal control weakness, including fraud risks, within the context of our audit objectives. To gain an understanding of the Center's operations and threats to performance and to achieve our audit objectives, we:

- Reviewed the Center's current minimum staffing requirements.
- Sat along during three dispatching shifts to observe operations.
- Interviewed the Captain of the Support Services Division, the Communications Center Manager, Dispatcher Supervisors, and Public Safety Dispatchers to gain an understanding of operations, staffing, and workload.
- Reviewed professional literature to identify common threats to the capacity of public safety dispatching agencies and best practices for staffing, recruitment, and stress management.
- Performed a regression analysis on estimated population growth and call volume.
- Analyzed call data by hour, including time to answer and duration on a call to understand call volume and call types for calendar years 2011-2017.
- Obtained and presented 2018 summary call data at the request of the Police Department to help demonstrate their hypothesis about the change in call volume post 2016.
- Ran a staffing analysis to determine the number of call takers needed to handle the current 911 call volume and compared those numbers to the current staffing.
- Analyzed the Center's use of overtime to meet minimum staffing requirements for calendar years 2013-2017.
- Calculated historic turnover and vacancy rates of dispatcher classifications for calendar years 2013-2018. This is one instance in which we were able to obtain 2018 data for analysis.
- Reviewed budget documents, written procedures, and common forms and reports used by the Police Department.
- Reviewed State and Department of Justice audits.
- Observed dispatcher candidate interviews and analyzed recruitment data to understand the recruitment and hiring process, including a number of applicants passing through each step of the recruitment process and the specific dates for various steps of the process for dispatchers hired.

- Interviewed Communications Training Officers to understand the training program and typical training timeframe for new dispatchers.
- Performed an anonymous survey of dispatchers to gauge morale and satisfaction with different aspects of their work environment.

We recognize that coordinated emergency response operations are complex, involving multiple City departments. The scope of this audit was narrow and looked only at the Communications Center role in answering 911 and non-emergency calls. We did not assess dispatching or emergency service response times, which are distinctly different from call answer times. When looking at answer times, we did not assess non-emergency calls as the California state standards apply to only 911 calls.

Explanation of Staffing Analysis

We used the National Emergency Number Association's PSAP Staffing Guidelines to analyze the Center's staffing level based on call volume. This method of determining how many persons should staff a PSAP looks at primary workload, which is considered to be 911 calls received. We used standard queuing theory to determine how many call takers should be available to process the calls. This queuing theory was created to account for call volumes where if the caller was blocked, then at least 85 percent of the time the caller immediately redials. This is the situation of a person seeking emergency help. The limitation of this analysis is that it does not take into account any factors that influence call handling and that are not in the queuing formula.

Data Reliability

We assessed the reliability of ECaTs data by reviewing them for reasonableness and completeness, interviewing data and data-system owners and managers, gaining an understanding of data access controls, and reviewing data system documentation. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. We did not include 2018 data in our reliability assessment. We included that data in Figure 2 at the request of the Police Department, but did not use it to support our audit findings, conclusions, or recommendations. We make that clarification under Figure 2.

We relied on US Census population and ABAG population predictions to support our finding regarding predicted increases to call volume. We considered both organizations to be known, reliable sources and, therefore, their data to be sufficiently reliable for our purposes. We recognized both the US Census and ABAG offer slightly differing predictive data. However, the purpose of our predictions is to give readers a general understanding of future impact with an understanding that actual population growth will be different. We do not expect this difference to be significant to the extent it impacts the purpose of our predictions, which is to support that the Center will need to expand along with population growth.

We assessed the reliability of payroll data by reviewing it for completeness, appropriateness, and consistency. We determined it is sufficient and reliable for the purposes of our work. The data captures the date of the hours, the staff member, position title, and hour code. We noted a limitation in the data in that the position title associated with individuals is their current title, which does not necessarily reflect the title at the time the hours were earned. This limitation does not significantly impact our use of the data because all four of the current supervisors were in their positions before 2013. In addition, we combined the Public Safety Dispatcher I and Public Safety Dispatcher II totals so our calculations are not impacted by when dispatchers were promoted from Public Safety Dispatcher I to II.

Statement of Compliance

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II— Dispatcher Morale Survey: Design, Efforts, and Results

We designed a survey to gain an understanding of dispatchers' satisfaction on a number of issues, with a particular emphasis on determining the overall climate of the Communications Center (Center), and assessing which factors are contributing to dispatcher satisfaction and which are detracting from their satisfaction.

To collect the information contained in this report, we invited 23 dispatchers to participate through the SurveyMonkey online survey platform. Over a two-week period, a total of 15 employees completed the survey, which represents a participation rate of 65 percent. Because our survey focus was on dispatchers perceptions, we excluded supervisors and management. We interviewed the four supervisors, the Center Manager, and the Captain of Support Services separately to gain an understanding of their perceptions and concerns.

We created our survey in SurveyMonkey, an online platform for creating, distributing, and analyzing surveys. We designed our survey to keep responses anonymous.

Survey Limitations

When we started designing this survey, we understood that there are inherent limitations in using survey data to gauge the morale of an organization. However, even with those limitations, providing an anonymous survey to employees was the most effective and efficient way to hear from a large number of employees in shift work who could responded freely. During our audit, we kept the following in mind:

- Many factors can impact an employee's frame of mind when completing the survey, which could influence their responses either positively or negatively.
- People who are dissatisfied are more apt to reply to the survey.
- Ongoing changes within the Center would impact perceptions day to day.
- Unless the survey achieves 100 percent response rate, some dispatchers' opinions may not be reflected in the quantitative analysis of responses.
- Despite our extensive preparation, dispatcher could have interpreted questions differently than we intended.

Because the overall goal was to set a baseline of the morale at a point in time, we determined that the above factors would not create a significant risk as to the accuracy of our audit findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The 65 percent response rate was a strong indicator that the results were reliable, and the responses agreed with comments made during interviews, including discussions with supervisors and management.

Table 1: Overall Survey Results of Dispatcher Morale

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
There are enough dispatchers on duty during each shift to handle call volume.	6.67%	6.67%	13.33%	40.00%	33.33%
I am not able to take my required breaks due to workload and staffing shortages.	26.67%	33.33%	13.33%	20.00%	6.67%
I am required to work too much overtime.	73.33%	13.33%	6.67%	0.00%	6.67%
I received adequate new dispatcher training to understand my responsibilities and to do my job well.	13.33%	40.00%	26.67%	13.33%	6.67%
I receive adequate ongoing training to understand my evolving responsibilities and do my job well.	0.00%	13.33%	26.67%	13.33%	46.67%
I would like to receive additional training to advance my knowledge and skills.	66.67%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%
I am compensated fairly for my work.	13.33%	33.33%	26.67%	20.00%	6.67%
I am given opportunities to voice my concerns, opinions, and ideas.	0.00%	6.67%	20.00%	13.33%	60.00%
I receive the resources I need to effectively manage the stress of being a dispatcher.	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%	26.67%	60.00%
The Communications Center operations written policies and procedures provide appropriate direction and guidance.	0.00%	6.67%	13.33%	13.33%	66.67%
The Communications Center written policies and procedures are applied to all personnel equally.	0.00%	0.00%	6.67%	26.67%	66.67%
I feel supported by Supervising PSDs and can count on them to fill in when workload increases due to training, staff absences, or call increases.	0.00%	6.67%	20.00%	13.33%	60.00%

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel supported by Supervising PSDs and can count on them to fill in when workload increases due to training, staff absences, or call increases.	0.00%	6.67%	20.00%	13.33%	60.00%
Supervisors contribute to a positive work culture.	0.00%	6.67%	20.00%	20.00%	53.33%
I have confidence in management's ability to perform their duties and run the Communications Center.	0.00%	0.00%	6.67%	26.67%	66.67%
Management contributes to a positive work culture.	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%	20.00%	66.67%
Overall, the morale within the Communications Center is low.	93.33%	6.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Appendix III—Recommendations and Management Response

1.1 Conduct an annual staffing analysis of required minimum staffing levels and budgeted dispatchers to ensure budget staffing requests and scheduling efforts meet demand and limit the use of overtime where possible. Use the staffing analysis to communicate to Council and the public during the annual appropriations process:

- Service level demands;
- The full-burdened cost of budgeting for additional staff;
- Whether there is sufficient funding available to budget for the additional staff or a shortfall (quantified in dollars); and
- Additional staffing requests, if needed.

Management Response: We will research other available analysis options to determine if we are using best practices by June 2019. A monthly and yearly analysis of staffing is helpful when determining best use of the current employees in terms of scheduling. We recognize that our current use of a manual scheduling process is not optimal and that we would be better served by an automated scheduling program. The Department has already begun to consider several automated scheduling programs to replace our current manual method.

1.2 Use the staffing analysis performed in response to recommendation 1.1 to, determine future resource needs of the Communications Center, including staffing, equipment, and physical space. Take into account planned changes to services and factors that may influence call volume.

Management Response: Decide on Communications Center expansion versus relocation by December, 2019. We will need to increase our staffing levels to meet NENA staffing recommendations. Future enhancements to the 911 system such as text to 911 and Next Generation 911 will increase our call times and further hinder our ability to meet NENA standards on call answer times. The Communications Center will need to either expand the space it currently occupies in the Public Safety Building, or relocate to a separate building in order to increase the number of consoles needed to accommodate additional required staff.

The Department has already begun discussion on the Communications Center's spatial needs. In 2018, we implemented a new Computer Aided Dispatch system in order to enable us to receive 911 calls via the upcoming Next Generation technology. The Call Taker proposal will be submitted to Human Resources and the Personnel Board.

2.1 Open all dispatcher positions to continuous recruitment.

Management Response: We hope to obtain approval from Human Resources by September, 2019. Open and continuous recruitment of all dispatcher positions has long been the desire of Management. There are several factors that make hiring dispatchers challenging. The hiring process itself is lengthy due to required testing of applicants, background investigation and physical exam. Because of our limited resources in terms of floor trainers, we cannot hire more than three dispatchers at one time or the trainer's become overburdened. The Public Safety Dispatcher training program generally takes 9-10 months to complete. Often, it is not until the latter months of training that deficiencies that will not allow a trainee to complete the program are discovered. Allowing for open and continuous recruitment would give us the ability to create a pipeline of applicants to "plug in" once a trainee either completes or is released from the training program.

Human Resources has already agreed to open and continuous hiring for lateral Public Safety Dispatcher II classification and Management has requested the same for both the non-lateral and Public Safety Dispatcher I classifications.

2.2 Work with Communications Center staff to create a specific recruitment plan for dispatcher positions including recruitment events and marketing material. Use recruitment best practices to reach potential applicants and increase the number of applicants.

Management Response: In progress since 2018, the marketing firm is expected to begin work by May of 2019. Recruitment of a compassionate, competent, talented and diverse workforce is a priority for the entire department, and has been a challenge over the last several years due to a variety of reasons. Creation of a more specific plan for dispatcher positions can help reach potential applicants and increase the total number of applicants. Management recognizes the importance of both hiring and retaining applicants through the training program as being a key element in overcoming the staffing shortage.

The Department created a Recruitment and Retention Team in 2018 in order to address the departmental recruitment needs. This was the first step in setting out a concrete plan. This team has developed goals and priorities, with very specific tasks. The goals include better tracking of recruitment efforts, creation of recruitment videos, attending recruitment events, hiring a marketing firm to assist with web design, employment brochures and literature, social media outreach and other advertising avenues.

2.3 Identify and implement feasible options to improve turnaround time on background checks for dispatcher positions. This can include outsourcing background investigations or working with Human Resources to ensure that the Department is able to complete all background investigations in a timely manner.

Management Response: In progress since 2018. In April of 2019 the Department contracted with a background investigation firm that can complete up to three backgrounds at a time with a one month turn around. The Department also hired a retired BPD officer to complete backgrounds on a part time basis. This retiree has extensive experience conducting background investigations for the Department. The Department is experimenting with now assigning multiple categories of backgrounds out at one time, instead of exhausting higher categories before moving on.

The long background check process has been an impediment to successful recruitment and hiring for some time. The above described Recruitment and Retention Team has also identified improving the background investigation process as a critical task. Plans were considered to dedicate current employees as background investigators, hire independent background investigation companies or do some combination of the two. The proposed plan to affect change in this area is to hire an independent but highly experienced background investigation firm that can rapidly complete quality background investigations, continue to use Department employees to complete background investigations, and also continually evaluate and adapt practices.

2.4 Design a way to retain staff that are unable to pass the Police Desk training, for example, keep staff as Public Safety Dispatcher I and have them work as a call taker or create a new job classification for a call taking position.

Management Response: We want to have our final proposal for the call taker and revisions to the PSD classifications by June and implement by fall 2019. Historically, many trainees have gained proficiency in call taking, demonstrated excellent customer service skills and professionalism, but could not complete the training program due to their inability to pass Police Desk training.

Hiring more full time call takers would improve staffing levels, greatly relieve overtime required by dispatchers, significantly reduce overtime costs and allow us to meet NENA minimum staffing requirements. Once the Call Taker classification is approved, it would help Management to potentially retain valuable employees by offering them a position in a different classification they are already qualified to work.

2.5 Evaluate the results from dispatcher recruitment routinely (e.g., annually or at the end of a recruitment cycle) to determine areas for improvement. Update recruitment plans.

Management Response: Evaluation and more robust data collection on applications began in late 2018. By the summer of 2019 the Department should begin to have an adequate data set to review. Recruitment has changed over the last several years, and competition for qualified candidates is great among agencies. Continual evaluation of Departmental efforts will be critical to staying abreast of best practices and successfully hiring quality candidates. The Department plans to improve tracking and review of the number of applicants, how successful applicants are through the process, and where they most often are “lost” in the process. The Department also plans to review these results in line with testing processes in order to adjust as necessary.

2.6 Implement an automated scheduling software that has built-in decision-making capabilities to automatically fill shifts based on specified qualifications and staff availability.

Management Response: As of April 2019, there have been presentations by two separate software vendors. There is a plan to research a third vendor’s software (Tyler Technology) at an upcoming annual conference. DoIT suggests implementing a scheduling software in line with other technology upgrades surrounding payroll (ERMA). The Department anticipates that review of available products and decisions as to whether to move to Implementation could occur in late Fall of 2019.

Implementation of a scheduling software could help relieve the current personnel engaged in scheduling, create a feeling of greater fairness and control which would be a morale boost. This would also allow for greater review over how much overtime individuals are working in order to ensure their wellness and that they are taking enough time off. The Department is interested in balancing the above opportunities with the challenges and expense of implementing a new software solution.

The Department has been communicating with and working alongside DoIT, union representatives and outside vendors to explore various scheduling software options. Efforts are also underway to identify best practices in other jurisdictions.

2.7 Decrease the concentration of overtime among dispatchers.

Management Response: Change in overtime distribution procedures implemented in 2018. For the past five years, the Communications Center's overtime has averaged roughly 300 hours per week in order to meet our minimum staffing requirements. Approximately 100 additional hours would be necessary to meet NENA minimum staffing levels.

Although we cannot reduce overtime levels until we hire more dispatchers and they successfully complete either the PSDII or call taking training program, in 2018 the scheduling supervisor was directed by the Communications Manager to re-order the way overtime is assigned in order to more equitably distribute overtime hours between all dispatchers, instead of the majority of hours falling to a portion of staff.

2.8 Develop and implement a Communications Center training plan to ensure compliance with POST training requirements. Evaluate training processes and update training plans routinely.

Management Response: In progress since January of 2019. The goal is that by end of 2019, all Communications Center Personnel will be on track with POST requirements (nearly half completed with all training hours at the halfway point of the training cycle).

Ongoing training of employees is a priority for the Department. The Department sees the value and benefit of these training opportunities for the employee's development and wellness, the Department's mission, and the quality of service the community ultimately receives.

In January of 2019 the Communications Center leadership team implemented a plan to track POST training requirements along with yearly Performance Appraisal Reviews. At each employee's PAR anniversary date, their supervisor will review the number of hours of training received to date. Additionally, Personnel and Training will conduct an annual review of all Communications Center personnel to track POST training time. Finally, one of the Public Safety Dispatch Supervisors was assigned the job to work as a liaison with Personnel and Training for scheduling POST classes as well as directly with dispatchers to locate and sign dispatchers up for course of interest.

3.1 Create a comprehensive stress management program specifically for the Communications Center that includes the following:

- Stress management training for all staff, 8 hours minimum during career
- Access to on-site educational resources to help with stress and related risks, e.g., directory of local therapists specializing in treatment of stress and traumatic stress disorders and city programs that provide information on how and where to access help
- Procedures assuring participation of staff in critical incidence stress management activities (e.g., debriefing sessions when involved in traumatic call events)
- A Peer Support Program
- Comprehensive, ongoing training on structured call-taking processes

Management Response: All Communications Center Staff to receive 8 hours training by December, 2019. The Department recognizes the negative effects of stress on employees and utilizes Peer Support Counselors, a Crisis Intervention Team as well as the Employee Assistance Program and most recently the Headspace website which promotes mindfulness and meditation.

Work with Personnel and Training to Expand current stress management toolset to include a mandatory 8 hour stress management course for all Communications Center staff.

3.2 Develop and implement plans to address workplace cleanliness and equipment and furniture maintenance and replacement.

Management Response: Beginning fall 2018, the Communications Center receives a deep cleaning on a quarterly basis. Standalone Hepa filters will be purchased by July 2019. Management recognizes the need for improvement in the cleanliness of the Communications Center.

3.3 Conduct regular supervisor level meetings to share information about operations and staffing. Use these meeting to improve understanding of the supervisor role, identify problems, discuss changes that may affect operations, and establish communications plans for distributing information to all staff.

Management Response: Fully operational by October 2019. Management recognizes the need for improved communication across all ranks. The Communications manager is in the process of creating a web based information portal which includes sections for polices, Supervisory blog, Communications Center blog, resources, health and wellness, new dispatcher training, and links to web based training opportunities for tenured staff.

3.4

Routinely have Police and Fire staff meet with all Center Supervisors to solicit feedback on Center operations and to address any issues. Use these meetings to improve understanding of the dispatcher role and current policies of public safety, identify problems that should be evaluated for further discussion, and discuss known and expected changes that may affect the Communications Center.

Management Response: May 2019. The Department recognizes the need and benefit of such meetings. Logistically this has been challenging due to the various shifts and workdays of personnel from other divisions. Invite Police and Fire staff to attend the weekly Supervisor meeting whenever problems are identified or whenever known or anticipated changes may affect the Communications Center.

Mission Statement

Promoting transparency and accountability in Berkeley government.

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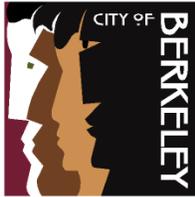
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Office of the City Auditor

CONSENT CALENDAR
May 14, 2019

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Jenny Wong, City Auditor *zw*
Subject: 911 Dispatchers: Understaffing Leads to Excessive Overtime and Low Morale

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend City Council request that the City Manager report back by November 19, 2019, and every six months thereafter, regarding the status of our audit recommendations until reported fully implemented by the Police Department.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

The Communications Center risks losing State funding if it is not able to reach call-answering targets. Investing in adequate staffing and additional resources will allow the Communications Center to answer 911 calls within those required timeframes. The cost of much-needed resources will depend on the outcome of the staffing analysis we recommend that the Police Department complete to determine appropriate staffing levels now and in the future.

Life should not be measured in dollars. Without sufficient staff, it takes longer for call takers to answer 911 calls. The faster that dispatchers can get a police officer, firefighter, or paramedic to the scene, the better the chances of a good outcome.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

It is taking longer than previous years for call takers to answer 911 calls. The Communications Center's staffing levels are not sufficient to meet current call demands and, with predicted population growth, the Center will soon need even more resources to maintain its emergency response service levels.

Due to consistent understaffing, the Communications Center relies heavily on overtime to meet minimum staffing requirements, spending nearly \$1 million per year on overtime. The Police Department works to fill vacant positions, but the hiring and training processes are lengthy and extensive. There are opportunities to improve those processes to reduce both the number of continuous vacancies and the significant reliance on overtime. Understaffing also leads to low morale in the Communications Center. Dispatchers say that they do not feel supported and that they do not have the time needed to take care of their physical and mental health. Police management has taken some steps to address the low morale, but there is more to be done to address dispatcher needs.

We recommend that the Police Department conduct a staffing analysis to determine appropriate staffing levels, create a recruitment and continuous training plan for dispatchers, establish a call-taker classification; and implement automated scheduling software to better inform future budgeting decisions, decrease the reliance on overtime, and relieve the burden placed on overworked staff.

We also recommend that the Police Department implement programs to increase morale and staff communication. These include establishing routine meetings with dispatch supervisors, sworn police, and fire personnel; and a comprehensive stress management program.

BACKGROUND

The Police Department Communications Center serves as Berkeley's 911 public-safety answering point, receiving all emergency and non-emergency police, fire, and medical calls and dispatching public-safety personnel to respond as appropriate. The 2018 City budget authorized 33 non-sworn full-time equivalent positions for the Center, including 28 public safety dispatchers, four supervisors, and one manager. The City has not added to the Communications Center dispatcher staffing levels since 2004.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Our office manages and stores audit workpapers and other documents electronically to significantly reduce our use of paper and ink. Our audit recommendation for the Communications Center to use modern staffing software could also reduce the use of paper and ink.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The seconds it takes to answer and prepare a 911 call for dispatch can mean the difference between life and death. Implementing our recommendations will enable dispatchers to answer calls within required timeframes by ensuring the Communications Center is appropriately staffed and supported.

CONTACT PERSON

Jenny Wong, City Auditor, City Auditor's Office, 510-981-6750

Attachments:

- 1: Audit Report: 911 Dispatchers: Understaffing Leads to Excessive Overtime and Low Morale, issued April 25, 2019