



## City of Phoenix

**To:** Ed Zuercher  
City Manager

**Date:** May 19, 2020

**From:** The 911/Civilian Response Workgroup

**Subject:** RECOMMENDED IMPROVEMENTS FOR 911 OPERATORS/DISPATCHERS  
AND OTHER CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES SUPPORTING FIRST RESPONDERS

### **Background**

Police Communications Operators and Fire Emergency Dispatchers work in psychologically stressful environments when managing highly emotional and demanding calls that often end with unfavorable results. The Strategic Information Workgroup and crime lab staff, who review body-worn camera, forensic imaging, and other crime scene evidence, also struggle with similar psychological stress. While current staffing numbers are down, many of these employees work in less than desirable, if not inadequate conditions while the City struggles finding sufficient qualified candidates to maintain minimum levels.

A “911/Civilian Response Workgroup” was formed to brainstorm ideas and find sustainable solutions that will improve the work environment, benefit employee well-being, foster overall satisfaction, increase retention, and enhance the ability to recruit more candidates.

The Workgroup was chaired by Human Resources Director Lori Bays and comprised of numerous employees from Police, Fire, Aviation, and Human Resources, members representing AFSCME Local 2960 and ASPTEA, staff from District 4, the Hunkapi Farm, plus a registered Health Psychologist who specializes in trauma with public safety employees.

The Workgroup met several times over the course of 8 months to develop the following recommendations for workspace, staffing, recruiting, wellness, and training improvements with the goal to better aid Communications Operators, Emergency Dispatchers, and other civilian employees supporting first responders.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Wellness Improvements**

911 staff often find difficulties coping with the traumatic events they encounter daily. How a person reacts to stress is manageable through wellness and prevention programs. Psychological well-being is crucial for a healthy and productive workforce, in addition to overall retention. Focusing on improvements in this area will be instrumental in preserving a robust and healthy workforce.

Recommendations:

- The Police Department schedules 6-month reoccurring wellness check-ins for sworn staff assigned special details to provide them additional assistance in coping with stress. A similar program can be offered to the civilian employees that support first responders.
- The Police Department implemented a pet therapy program, that was approved by Council in April, to provide comfort and decompression for staff. The first facility dog was trained and is expected to be fully functional by June. The program has been very well received and there are plans to expand this service with a second dog.
- Utilize an equine therapy provider that specializes in assisting first responders and others that struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These providers allow attendees to interact with horses as a way to manage symptoms. Several staff attended a recent six-week pilot session at one of the local facilities. Initial feedback has been extremely positive, and the participants found the program beneficial. Both the Police and Fire Departments should continue involving civilian employees that support first responders by scheduling annual field trips and family days to provide them and their families with opportunities to cope with their stressful environments.
- The Craig Tiger Act ensures traumatic event counseling is afforded to sworn firefighters and law enforcement officers. Since this Act would also benefit civilian employees that support first responders, a subcommittee chaired by Deputy Director of Benefits Audrey Ross was formed and developed similar criteria that is attached that should be considered for implementation. With Employee Assistance Unit help, Human Resources is working with our existing vendor, modifying the contract to include non-sworn personnel. Selected classifications need to be identified and additional budget funds would be required to add non-sworn personnel.
- Create a civilian position in the Police Employee Assistance Unit (EAU) to support non-sworn employees in need of assistance.
- Incentivize employees to come to work through small recognition such as providing food.

## **2. Staffing**

With the limited number of employees, management regularly struggles to maintain minimum staffing levels. Scheduling time off is a challenge as staff need to bid a year out for vacation. There are cases when employees work their regular day off simply to take another, scheduled work day off. Often, employees call out last minute with protected leave just to have a day off from work. This places additional burdens on the remain employees as call outs result in mandatory holdover, which compels employees to stay beyond their shift. It is estimated that in this career field the average burnout rate is 7 to 8 years. Improved staffing levels and retention strategies will relieve additional burdens placed on all employees within the workgroup.

Recommendations:

- Overstaff these workgroups to relieve the burden of mandatory holdover and provide greater flexibility to schedule time off. Overstaffing may also offer additional scheduling opportunities, such as flexible schedule options, which could further assist with attracting and retaining employees.
- A mentorship program was established in 2019 in Police Communications. The program provides new staff with assistance getting acclimated, as well as provide seasoned staff with additional avenues for psychological decompression. Expand this mentorship program into other work areas.
- Develop career paths that may offer progression within these classifications or a transition into other City positions.
- Consider offering sabbaticals for employees that have the need for an extended absence.

## **3. Recruiting/Hiring**

The City regularly struggles finding qualified candidates to fill 911 positions. Furthermore, the current recruitment process is long and cumbersome, frustrating many candidates that do apply. A subcommittee chaired by the Deputy Director of Talent Acquisition Judy Boros was formed to focus on marketing and recruiting improvements where several recommendations were developed. Some of these recommendations were recently implemented. As of February, applicants are no longer able to submit resumes. Rather, they now complete a series of screening questions to better assist hiring supervisors with collecting relevant information to reduce review time. Additionally, the need for two separate typing test are no longer required for the onboarding process. Candidates are now only required to successfully complete one test that captures more realistic typing abilities for better gauge of performance. Recruitment documents have also been refreshed and are now more dynamic and exciting. They promote “Making a difference!,” “Helping people!,” and “Being a hero!,” while using QR Codes, all in an effort to better target today's audience. The following are additional recommendations developed by the subcommittee.

## Recommendations:

- Implement a personality/psychological profile during the interview process to better assess a candidate's abilities to handle high-stress calls before hire.
- Further reduce the application-to-hire timeframe.
  - The Police Department currently performs a lengthy process for background checks that includes conducting a polygraph. Recent non-sworn positions in Fiscal Management and Public Affairs have been filled without the polygraph. Civilian hiring standards and the background packet have also been revised with additional efforts made in the Employment Services Bureau to assist with expediting the process. Although the combination of these changes has shown progress with getting candidates through the hiring process, most civilian positions still rely on the lengthy polygraph. The Police Department should continue evaluating its background check process and consider removing the polygraph requirement for additional non-sworn positions. The department may still rely on industry standards for critical items revealed in a background check to remove non-qualified candidates.
- Marketing strategies for larger candidate pools.
  - The recruiting team is now marketing both sworn and civilian positions simultaneously at job fairs. The team now steers candidates toward civilian opportunities when it becomes clear the sworn positions are not an appropriate fit. Efforts should continue to increase civilian candidate pools through these dynamic and engaged recruitment processes.
  - Promote alternative shift options such as 4/10 schedules and evening or night shifts. This will target audiences seeking non-traditional work/life balance needs, such as school and family. Many areas, to include COM, are now set up for 4/10 schedules to make them more attractive.
  - Promote the City's full benefit packages. Tuition reimbursement would attract candidates that are new to the workforce, relocating from another region, or were impacted by a layoff.
  - Advertise 911 job opportunities through Phoenix 11 programs like "On the Issues"; using Council office newsletters, and through District 4 community events/neighborhood fairs.
  - Advertise 911 job opportunities through other organizations' newsletters, such as the PTA & YWCA.
  - Partner with learning institutions that offer a certification program that may also be considered to hire above step 1.
  - The concept of Police Officers distributing recruitment information through business cards was first developed in 2017. The business cards need to be updated and reprinted.
  - Outreach to today's candidates that rely on the latest technology by utilizing text messaging to distribute recruitment information.
  - Educate the public on what 911 staff do and promote public-shadowing options such as *Ride-Along and Crime Scene Experience*.
  - Implement a civilian-version of the *Police Cadet Program*.

- Outreach to non-traditional groups.
  - Advertise throughout the Southern California region, which currently produces the highest number of transplants into the Phoenix area.
  - Continue coordinating with large companies that are experiencing layoffs/closures by directly soliciting job opportunities to their employees who may be a good fit for non-sworn positions. A recent example was in January when staff recruited at a local Macys call center being closed.
  - Expand marketing outreach into non-traditional local areas, such as the Arizona Opportunities Industrialization Center, Vocational Rehabilitation, UMOM, high schools, Opportunities for Youth, and Foster Care for when young adults reach 18 years old.
- Alternative employment options.
  - Offer part-time positions for employees that need a greater work-life balance due to other obligations, such as school or family. This option should be offered only after the employee becomes a qualified operator/dispatcher, with a further condition that a pre-determined number of hours be worked regularly to ensure job proficiency is maintained.
  - Jobshare was previously used, but managers struggled with the positions. Reevaluate using Jobshare as another alternative to traditional, full-time employment.
  - Tailor additional recruitment efforts toward non-traditional candidates that are seeking short-term job opportunities.
- Conduct a wage analysis against other organizations to remain competitive.
  - Create a Hire-Above Step 1 matrix as an additional incentive to offer candidates with more qualifications.
- Additional ideas to consider.
  - Attracting qualified candidates from other organizations can be difficult, as the City frequently offers a lower starting salary. Consider offering a lateral transfer option to better entice these employees. The COM bureau has been actively recruiting experienced personnel with prior call-taking and dispatch experience. Additionally, requests to hire above the minimum step have been used to attract experienced talent without having them start at Step 1. This has further incentivized staff from other agency to apply with the City.
  - New employees that completed training are sometimes poached by other organizations with higher salaries. Explore using a Non-Competitive Clause to guarantee employees remain with the City for a specified length of time once trained.
  - Promote the program that provides two shifts of “Smile Time” for every referral that results in a successfully filled sworn or civilian position.

#### **4. Training**

Training is considered an essential component of any position for continued development in knowledge, skill, effectiveness, and competence. Specialized training on tools and resources in managing psychological stress can be tailored for 911 staff.

Recommendations:

- Initiate training with staff as early as New Employee Orientation on the Somatic Response, available resources, and self-care techniques when dealing with stress. The Crime Lab has implemented this as a part of the onboarding process and has trained all existing staff. This has also been incorporated as a standard practice for new employees in the LSB.
- Utilize a behavior health or equine therapy provider to assist with normalizing the effects of stress. Introduce pet-therapy as a tool used for coping with stress.
- Mandatory, recurring training can be enhanced, that may include speakers and involve spouses/families, on ongoing self-care component to continually manage and normalize the experience and reaction to stress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a webinar series dedicated to vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue was conducted by the national Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (FTCoE). This webinar, funded by the National Institute of Justice, was made available to lab staff. Once the pandemic restrictions are lifted, connect with organizations that offer lectures dedicated to this topic.
- The Crime Lab developed a team of peer support members who went through CISM training. The team conducts wellness checks on staff who have responded to difficult scenes, child deaths, officer involved shootings, etc. While this program is still in development, it is very promising in providing peer support for team members and should be expanded.
- The Police Department conducts a Career Survival class during the Academy that teaches recruits on the psychological challenges they face. Offer a similar course for civilian employees that support first responders. Include a family component to also educate the family on how to cope.

#### **5. Infrastructure**

From the start, the Workgroup discussed the facilities that are used by 911 staff. The Property Management Bureau located at 102 E Elwood St. is used by Comm. Operators and described as dreary. Although much of the current office equipment is in poor condition, the recent installation of LED lighting provides a better atmosphere. As a result of a recent donation, grounding stations have also been provided for COM to assist with stress relief. Further investments to the workspace would positively impact overall employee well-being.

## Recommendations:

- Further improve the Property Management Bureau lighting by installing dimmers to allow employees to adjust the lighting as needed. Much of the office equipment, such as chairs, desks, and TVs, are either worn or broken and in need of replacement. New A/V and training equipment, plus portable tables would further assist this group. Adding active workstation equipment to promote cardiovascular circulation would also be beneficial, such as workstation treadmills, yoga balls, and sit-stand desks already offered at the Fire facility.
- The Quiet Room located at the Property Management Bureau was recently refurbished and found invaluable for decompression needs. Evaluate refurbishing the Quiet Room used by the Strategic Information Workgroup located in Police Headquarters at 620 W. Washington. Furthermore, consider building a Quiet Room for crime lab staff located in the Police Lab at 621 W. Washington. These groups review body-worn camera, forensic imaging, and crime scene evidence, all which can result in similar psychological stress. A room has been identified, however funding is needed.
- Evaluate building a Briefing Room for Comm. Operators at the Property Management Bureau. This space will be used to conduct daily briefings, group training, debriefing of critical incidents, and to highlight the great work and service provided by our Communication Bureau employees. Two existing office spaces can be repurposed at a cost of \$8,000 – \$10,000.

Applying any number of the above recommendations will assist the organization in offering sustainable solutions on improving the work environment for Communications Operator, Emergency Dispatcher, and other civilian employees supporting first responders. The 911/Civilian Response Workgroup is grateful to analyze these issues and provide the opportunity to develop these recommendations for improvements.

Attachment

## 911 Operator/Dispatcher Subcommittee November 12, 2019 Summary

Subcommittee charged with developing criteria for traumatic event counseling for non-sworn staff in Police & Fire that mirrors eligibility requirements in the Craig Tiger Act.

### SUBCOMMITTEE:

Audrey Ross (Chair), Jared Lowe, Court Hood, Sonya Valenzuela, Mark Bizik

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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

1. Visually witnessing death or maiming or visually witnessing immediate aftermath of such a death or maiming of one or more human beings;

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

1. *Audibly witnessing death or maiming or communication with direct party involved with such a death or maiming of one or more human beings;*
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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

2. Responding to or being directly involved in a criminal investigation of an offense involving a dangerous crime against children as defined in section 13-705;

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

2. *Actively participating in an incident during the act of an offense involving a dangerous crime against children as defined in section 13-705;*
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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

3. Requiring rescue in the line of duty where one's life was endangered;

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

3. *Providing instructions on lifesaving techniques;*
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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

4. Using deadly force or being subjected to deadly force in line of duty, regardless of whether police officer or firefighter was physically injured;

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

4. *Actively participating in an incident where deadly force in line of duty, regardless of whether police officer or firefighter was physically injured;*
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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

5. Witnessing death of another firefighter or police officer while engaged in line of duty;

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

5. *Actively participating in an incident involving the death of a firefighter or police officer while engaged in line of duty;*
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#### **CRAIG TIGER ACT:**

6. Responding to or being directly involved in investigation regarding drowning or near drowning of a child.

#### **PROPOSED NON-SWORN:**

6. *Audibly responding to or communicating with an individual involved in investigation regarding drowning or near drowning of a child.*
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- Crime Scene Technicians & Body-Worn Camera Unit staff would fall under all Craig Tiger Act criteria, except for 3 & 4.