

Emergency Communications

The Emergency Communications Department operates a centralized Emergency Communications Center (ECC) for the City of Lawton, Comanche County, and Fort Sill. Its mission is "to provide effective public safety services through the appropriate and timely dispatch of animal welfare, fire, police, medical, and rescue units."¹²⁰ Emergency Communications was part of the Police Department until the FY2019-20 budget when it was made into an independent department.

The Department serves law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services agencies across the County. Staff are expected to take and triage calls and dispatch first responders to emergencies 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In addition to emergency calls, staff respond to general City informational calls and requests from 3:30 PM to 7:00 AM during the week and from 3:30 PM Friday to 7:00 AM on Monday. These informational calls frequently pertain to issues like water main breaks and leaks, non-functional traffic signals, and utility locate requests.

Emergency Communications currently operates with a total authorized staffing complement of 35 positions, as illustrated in the following figure.

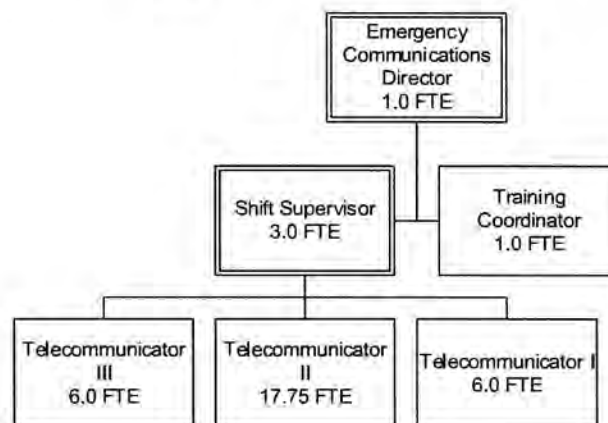


Figure 27: Emergency Communications Department Organizational Structure, FY2021

The Emergency Communications Director is responsible for providing oversight, guidance, and direction to all aspects of the Emergency Communications Department. The position oversees call processing and dispatch services to all agencies served by the Department. This requires regular interaction with the public and customer agencies. The Director is involved with the hiring of new positions and conducting performance reviews for all employees.

The Training Coordinator is responsible for designing and managing the Department's training program. This includes a six-week academy for probationary employees as well as ongoing employee training. The position is also tasked with quality assurance and regular review of Telecommunicator performance.

¹²⁰ City of Lawton Website, About Emergency Communications,
<https://www.lawtonok.gov/index.php/departments/emergency-communications/about-us>

The Department operates on a rotating 8-hour shift schedule. There are three shifts: day shift from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM, evening shift from 3:00 PM to 11:00 PM, and midnight shift from 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM. Telecommunicators work one of three shifts reporting to an assigned Shift Supervisor. Currently the Department targets six Telecommunicators and one Supervisor for the day and evening shifts, and five Telecommunicators and one Supervisor for the midnight shift. The minimum staffing required to operate is four Telecommunicators and one Supervisor. Shift Supervisors are expected to understand the roles and responsibilities of Telecommunicators and be able to perform call taking and dispatching as needed. In addition, Supervisors continuously review Telecommunicator activities for accuracy and completeness and investigate complaints as needed.

Staff are assigned to six stations within the Center that serve different specialties. It takes approximately one year to become competent in all six positions. These assigned roles are a dedicated call taking position, City of Lawton Police Department dispatch, County law enforcement dispatch, Fire and EMS dispatch, dispatch for wants and warrants for the Lawton Police Department and animal control, and dispatch for military police at Fort Sill. Although there is an assigned call taking position in the Emergency Communications Center, the calls for service volume at the ECC is more than a single call taker can handle. As a result, Telecommunicators at every position are expected to take calls for service and dispatch first responders simultaneously. This dual responsibility means that when call volume is high, Telecommunicators must focus their attention on calls for service from the public rather than ongoing radio communication with first responders.

There are three levels of Telecommunicator positions in the Department. Each position type has a different expected skillset. Based on a review of the job descriptions, below is a summary of the essential functions of each role:

- **Telecommunicator I** – Entry-level position. Receives and processes calls for assistance. Provides pre-arrival instructions to callers as appropriate. Monitors the status and availability of on-duty emergency personnel. Operates a two-way radio to dispatch police, fire, and medical responders.
- **Telecommunicator II** – In addition to Telecommunicator I functions, this position should have knowledge and mastery of all the roles within the ECC and the ability to train other employees.
- **Telecommunicator III** – In addition to Telecommunicator I and Telecommunicator II functions, this position should be able to assume the role of the Shift Supervisor as needed.

Core Services Matrix

The following table illustrates the core functions and services provided by the Emergency Communications Department and its staff. This list reflects key activities that account for significant staff time; it is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of activities performed by staff.

Table 60: Emergency Communications Department Core Services

Department Function	Program Area	Activities
Administration	Department Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare and monitor annual Department budget • Monitor shift attendance and schedules • Approve timesheets and leave requests
	Customer Agency Relationship Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly meet with customer agencies served by Emergency Communications • Address any issues or questions raised • Update protocols in partnership with customer agencies
Training	New Hire and Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train new hires on duties and different roles within the ECC • "Clear" staff on their ability to handle different roles within the emergency communications center and ability to train others • On-the-floor training conducted by other Telecommunicators

Department Function	Program Area	Activities
	Quality Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pull 5% of calls to assess the effectiveness of individual Telecommunicators • Provide training or adjust protocols to address trends and issues that emerge from audited calls
Operations	Emergency Call Taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field emergency calls from the public for law enforcement, fire, and medical calls • Collect the necessary caller and incident information to provide to first responders
	Emergency Dispatch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispatch the appropriate agency and unit based on call type, priority, and protocols • Monitor radio traffic and respond to requests for information from first responders • Provide updates and check-ins to first responders in the field during a call
	Non-Emergency Calls for Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field information calls when calls to the City are rolled to the emergency communications center after business hours • Dispatch appropriate crews or staff based on the nature of the non-emergency calls

Staffing

Staffing for the Emergency Communications function has remained flat for the last five fiscal years. Full-time and part-time positions have not changed. The following table shows the staffing levels for the Department since FY2017.

Table 61: Emergency Communications Department Staffing, FY2017 through FY2021

Staffing by Function	FY2017 Authorized	FY2018 Authorized	FY2019 Authorized	FY2020 Authorized	FY2021 Authorized	Percentage Change FY2017 to FY2021
Emergency Communications – Full-Time	34	34	34	34	34	0%
Emergency Communications – Part-Time	1	1	1	1	1	0%
Total	35	35	35	35	35	0%

Budget

The Department's budget has increased by about 10% since FY2017, primarily due to changes in personnel costs. This increase is due to differences in actual expenditures for salary cost compared to budgeted costs, likely because of vacancies in past years compared to budgeting for the cost of all allocated positions. Changes in capital outlay expenses are due to the purchase of a new Motorola call system. The following table shows the changes in expense by category for the last five fiscal years.

Table 62: Emergency Communications Department Expenses – All Funds, FY2017 through FY2021

Expense Category	FY2017 Actual	FY2018 Actual	FY2019 Projected	FY2020 Budget	FY2021 Budget	Percentage Change FY2017 to FY2021
Personnel Services	\$1,683,014	\$1,614,580	\$1,600,597	\$1,796,347	\$1,851,098	10%
Supplies	\$88,397	\$131,906	\$99,680	\$112,200	\$118,786	34%
Other Services and Charges	\$423,816	\$412,636	\$381,380	\$452,517	\$351,391	-17%
Capital Outlays	\$203,852	\$530,369	\$89,280	\$106,020	\$312,430	53%
Total	\$2,399,079	\$2,689,491	\$2,170,937	\$2,467,084	\$2,633,705	10%

Analysis and Recommendations

There are two broad areas that the Emergency Communications Department should address to better serve the public safety agencies that rely on its services. First, staffing and operations changes can be made to better address workload and capacity. Second, there is a need for the Department to ensure that it meets the expectations and performance standards of customers by engaging them to advise and inform the Emergency Communications Center. The recommendations below address these needs and opportunities in detail.

Staffing and Operations

Recommendation 87: Create dedicated call taking and dispatch roles.

The Emergency Communications Department serves two primary functions: fielding emergency and non-emergency calls for law enforcement, EMS, and fire and dispatching calls for service to law enforcement officers, firefighters, and ambulances in the field. Staff perform other functions, but call taking and dispatch are the primary workload drivers for Telecommunicators.

When evaluating call taking and dispatch functions, it is important to consider the nature of both duties. Although Telecommunicators are expected to perform both duties, these roles need to be discussed and analyzed separately. Call takers are only capable of answering one call at a time. They are responsible for dealing with members of the public who are often in states of panic and are tasked with extracting critical incident information to relay to first responders. Further, given the potential for a serious emergency, they are required to answer all calls in a timely fashion and work efficiently to avoid line blockage or dropped calls.

Dispatchers deal directly with first responders throughout the duration of a call or incident. They provide timely responses to questions and information requests from those first responders and are tasked with monitoring and supporting officers, firefighters, and paramedics in the field. They are often responsible for monitoring multiple incidents at a time. Dispatchers are able to monitor multiple incidents because requests for information, outside of the initial relay of incident information, require shorter bursts of engagement and communication.

Currently, the Department has 29.75 total authorized Telecommunicator FTEs. Telecommunicators work at six positions, or stations, within the ECC: call taking, wants and warrants for Lawton Police Department and animal control, Lawton Police main channel, law enforcement dispatch for all County agencies, fire dispatch for all agencies, and a military police channel for Fort Sill. Although there is an assigned call taking position in the ECC, Telecommunicators often both take calls for service and dispatch first responders simultaneously, depending on the volume of calls and their assigned station. As discussed previously, the different levels of Telecommunicator positions are expected to have different mastery of the

roles within the ECC, but each level is expected to be able to both perform the call taking and dispatching functions.

It is common for jurisdictions with relatively low call-volume and dispatch channel traffic to require Telecommunicators to both field emergency calls and monitor dispatch channels. However, this practice becomes more difficult to manage as the number of calls increases. Call taking requires dedicated and uninterrupted attention to each call. As call volume increases, Telecommunicators are unable to perform any additional tasks such as responding to officer or firefighter queries, which can create communications delays that can potentially result in safety concerns or impede effectiveness in the field.

To evaluate staffing for the ECC overall, call volume and response trends were evaluated. The City provided data for calendar year 2019, which included 102,368 distinct calls for service.¹²¹ Based on this data, calls for service begin to increase around 8:00 AM and remain elevated until 8:00 PM each day. The ECC receives about 15 calls per hour each day during this peak period, as illustrated in the following figure.

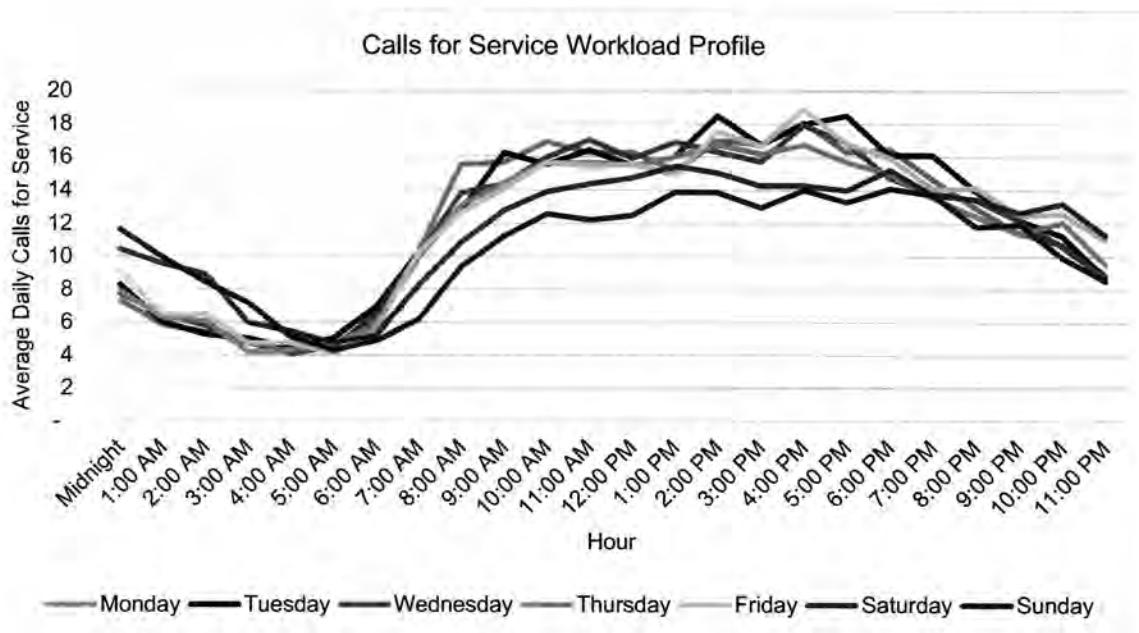


Figure 28: Calls for Service Workload Profile by Day of the Week, 2019

During peak hours, this represents an emergency call for service about every three minutes. The frequency of these calls increases the need for Telecommunicators assigned to dispatch to backfill for the call taker, which in turn reduces the ability for dispatch staff to communicate with first responders during the busiest times of the day.

To help increase responsiveness to inbound calls and preserve staff capacity to attend to dispatch functions, the Department should create dedicated call taking and dispatch roles. This would reduce the need for dispatchers to backfill for call takers. The Association for Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) is an international non-profit that serves the needs of public safety communications practitioners worldwide. APCO acts as a knowledge and best practices clearinghouse and training resource for

¹²¹ Self-initiated calls, those with the same received and dispatched time stamp, were excluded from this analysis because they do not impact the call taking workload. For example, a Police Officer conducting a traffic stop was captured in the Computer Aided Dispatch system but a Telecommunicator was not needed to initiate that action.

emergency communications agencies. According to APCO, most large dispatch centers seek to staff dedicated call taking and dispatch channels with separate personnel and utilize dispatchers as backup call takers should peaks in the workload necessitate a dual role.¹²² Based on the City's call volume, service area, and the number of customer agencies served by the Emergency Communications Department, it is appropriate to begin staffing the Department with dedicated call taker and dispatcher roles.

Eliminating the expectation that Telecommunicators perform both call taking and dispatch functions simultaneously creates significant advantages for the ECC and its customers. First, it allows the Department to focus resources on answering calls in a timely fashion during peak periods, which should correspond with quicker response times throughout the day. Second, it alleviates the need for dispatchers to break from their duties during busy periods to answer incoming calls. This allows dispatchers to maintain focus on assisting first responders and coordinating public safety personnel in the field. Enabling dispatchers to maintain this focus is critical to avoid miscommunications and errors, which could place personnel at risk or create unnecessary delays in providing assistance. Finally, moving toward fully dedicated call takers will align the Department with industry best practices and create clearer distinctions between operational roles within the ECC.

Recommendation 88: Improve the scope and use of Computer Aided Dispatch data to inform staffing analysis.

Staffing emergency communications functions is complex and requires careful consideration of several factors, including call patterns, service areas, leave usage, turnover and vacancies, and resource availability. The Department currently operates using three 8-hour shifts, which requires Telecommunicators to work five days on, followed by two days off. The current minimum shift staffing is five FTEs, including the Shift Supervisor. The Department currently targets seven FTEs for the day and evening shifts and six FTEs for the night shift.

Providing continuous coverage each hour of each day requires 2,920 staff hours per year, per position. There are 15 total positions that must be scheduled to achieve minimum staffing targets each day (five FTEs for each of the Department's three shifts). This means that the ECC requires 43,800 continuous staff hours each year to operate effectively, according to current minimum staffing targets (2,920 hours multiplied by 15 positions). Each full-time Telecommunicator is currently scheduled for 2,080 hours per year. Dividing 43,800 staff hours needed by 2,080 scheduled hours per year results in a need for approximately seven staff per shift.

However, two additional factors must be considered when assessing staffing for emergency communications. The first is leave usage. The City of Lawton's Personnel Policies and Procedures show that 2019 had 13 holidays, and staff can accrue up to 12 sick days annually and 10 to 25 vacation days depending on longevity.¹²³ Because actual leave data was not made available, it is assumed that staff utilize an estimated 296 leave hours per year, including holidays and 20 days (four workweeks) of vacation/sick leave. Although Telecommunicators are scheduled for 2,080 hours per year, they are actually available to work an estimated 1,816 hours per year. This means that for every Telecommunicator position scheduled, 1.15 Telecommunicators must be hired to provide continuous coverage. This ratio is known as the Department's staffing factor. Applying the staffing factor to the number of staff that must be scheduled each shift (seven) results in a need for approximately 8.05 staff per shift.

The second consideration is turnover. Each time a position becomes vacant, the Department loses the ability to provide continuous coverage as scheduled. While specific turnover data for the City was not made available, the latest available APCO benchmarks indicate that the average turnover rate for dispatcher positions in Oklahoma is approximately 21%. This means that for every Telecommunicator position scheduled, 1.21 Telecommunicators must be hired to account for turnover.

¹²² APCO Project Retains, Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Communication Centers Workbook, 2005

¹²³ City of Lawton, Personnel Policies and Procedures, 17-1-6 Leave

To calculate actual staffing needs to achieve the minimum staffing target, the number of positions required to operate a continuous schedule on each shift must be multiplied by the staffing factor and the turnover rate, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 63: Personnel Required to Achieve Current Minimum Staffing

Shift	Current Minimum Staffing Target	Number of Positions to Schedule	Staffing Factor	Estimated Positions Needed to Cover Leave	Turnover Rate	Estimated Positions Needed to Cover Turnover
Day	5	7	1.15	8.05	1.21	10.74
Evening	5	7	1.15	8.05	1.21	10.74
Midnight	5	7	1.15	8.05	1.21	10.74
Total	15	21		24.15		32.22

Based on this analysis, the Department requires approximately 33 total staff positions to consistently achieve its minimum staffing target throughout the year. The Department is currently staffed with 29.75 Telecommunicators and three Shift Supervisors, for a total of 32.75 personnel. Therefore, authorized staffing in the Department is largely sufficient to achieve current minimum staffing targets.

However, the analysis above assumes that the current shift schedule and staff deployment utilized by the Department is appropriate. This may not be the case, and it is important to ensure that minimum staffing requirements accurately reflect actual demands for service by evaluating call patterns and data related to call taking and dispatch.

The CAD data provided by the Department includes a wealth of information related to geography, call type, responding units, and other associated indicators. However, three specific data indicators are not currently tracked by the City, or for which information was not made available for this analysis. This prevents the completion of a thorough staffing analysis for call taking and dispatch functions. These indicators include the following:

- **Call taking responses that meet service level standards.** The Department does not currently utilize a formal service delivery standard for call taking. A common industry-wide practice is to strive to answer 90% of all calls to the ECC within 10 seconds. Without a formal service standard in place, it is difficult to determine whether the current level of service is acceptable to the community and the Department's customers.
- **A clear indication of activity type.** The CAD system does not readily distinguish between calls that were received but not dispatched, calls that were received and were dispatched, and self-initiated dispatch activity initiated by first responders. Knowing this information is critical because it allows the City to differentiate between workload that can be allocated to call takers (e.g., all inbound calls) and workload that should be allocated to dispatchers (e.g., all dispatched calls for service and self-initiated activities).
- **Radio airtime and/or transactions associated with calls.** One of the most effective methods for calculating dispatch staffing levels is to perform a channel block analysis. This analysis involves evaluating the percentage of time each radio channel is in use, also known as the number of radio transactions per channel, to ensure that first responders and dispatchers do not have to wait to communicate with each other. To conduct a channel block analysis, the amount of airtime each dispatch channel is in use or the number of radio transactions (transmissions from dispatcher to first responder or vice versa) is required. This information is particularly valuable in agencies that serve multiple jurisdictions, such as Lawton, because it allows the Department to more readily communicate how much time ECC staff spend managing calls for third-party customers and their associated radio channels.

Without the data indicators above, it is difficult to accurately assess the actual workload impacts placed on ECC staff throughout the day. Information regarding call volume and time on call is readily available, but the specific amount of time call takers and dispatchers must spend managing these calls cannot be gleaned from available sources. To ensure the City can accurately perform dispatch staffing analysis in the future, it is critical to begin tracking the indicators described above. Once this information is obtained, the Department should follow a multi-step process to calculate its staffing requirements.

First, it should ensure that a formal service delivery target is established. This should be done as a Departmental policy and can also be incorporated into internal service level agreements or external service agreements, as discussed in Recommendation 89.

Next, all external calls for service to the ECC should be evaluated to analyze how well the Department achieves the service level goal described above. It is appropriate to exclude self-initiated activities that involve first responders communicating directly with dispatchers for this analysis. When evaluating call for service patterns, it is important to calculate the average number of calls for each hour of the day. This information can be used to determine periods of the day when call volume is significant. To calculate the number of call takers needed, the Department should utilize a recognized industry queuing model, such as the Erlang Model,¹²⁴ to estimate minimum call taker staffing requirements throughout the day.

Once the number of call takers is calculated, the Department should examine the extent to which each dispatch channel is used each hour of the day. It is a common industry practice to staff one dispatcher per channel; however, it is appropriate to assign a single dispatcher to supervise channels with low activity. Determining the overall level of activity for each channel will help the Department determine whether the present number of channels is appropriate and what staffing adjustments may be needed to optimize coverage.

After call taking and dispatch patterns are established, the Department can calculate its minimum staffing requirements, including leave and turnover information, as described above. As a part of this analysis, the Department should consider alternative scheduling approaches (such as a 12-hour schedule), which may reduce the need to hire additional staff to provide appropriate coverage.

Accurately gathering and maintaining this data will require extensive collaboration with ITS. In recent months, the Emergency Communications Director has been meeting with ITS staff to discuss challenges and opportunities associated with the CAD. These meetings should continue, particularly as the City seeks to leverage the Tyler Technologies suite of software products to public safety departments, including the Emergency Communications Department.

As the City's ability to collect and analyze CAD information improves, the Emergency Communications Director should identify capable staff within the ECC who can assist with gathering and analyzing this information. However, if there is not appropriate capacity for analytics support within the Department, the Director should assess whether analytical needs can be met through the establishment of regular reports provided to the Director by Information Technology or if additional staff support is required. If additional staff support is required, the Department should engage the Police Department to evaluate potential opportunities for sharing analytical resources, such as leveraging the existing Crime Analyst position to assist with data collection and reporting for Emergency Communications functions.

¹²⁴ Westbay Engineers. Free Erlang Traffic Calculators. <https://www.erlang.com/calculator>

Governance and Training

Recommendation 89: Create a multi-jurisdictional advisory body to assist Emergency Communications and allow partners to report issues.

The Emergency Communications Department receives calls for service and dispatches first responders for the City Lawton, Comanche County, and Fort Sill. This service area includes City police and fire, County law enforcement, 19 volunteer fire departments,¹²⁵ two EMS agencies, and several municipal Police Departments in Comanche County. Comanche County also provides funding to support the Emergency Communications Center. In FY2021, this totaled \$526,741, about 20% of the Department's total budget and 55% of the City's General Fund commitment.

An important piece of the management of the ECC is understanding the needs of different customer agencies and establishing a method for them to raise concerns and have issues addressed. Due to the individual characteristics of each community served and the workload profiles of each agency, conflicts can arise in the desire for how similar calls are handled and dispatched. Before the FY2020 budget process, the Emergency Communications Department was part of the Lawton Police Department. As a result, the Police Chief led customer service efforts with public safety agencies and resolved conflicts that arose.

The Department does not currently interact with customer agencies regularly outside of dispatching first responders or dealing with complaints. With the establishment of Emergency Communications as an independent department within the City of Lawton, there is an opportunity to rethink how best to work with and meet the needs of customer agencies. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to establish an advisory body composed of Department customers. This advisory body should be tasked with improving day-to-day communication and resolving conflicts and concerns about the performance and practices of the Department. Advisory bodies are also a useful tool to help address and resolve service level disputes among the Department's customers.

To implement this recommendation, the Department will need to create an Interlocal Agreement that defines the roles and responsibilities of the new advisory body, as well as the representative members on the body. Membership at a minimum should include the City Police Department, City Fire Department, County Sheriff's Office, an EMS representative, and a representative chosen from the volunteer fire departments, for a total of five representatives.

The intention of the body is to provide a mechanism to ensure consistent service to all customer agencies. Once established, the body should begin a practice of meeting monthly with the Emergency Communications Director to review the totality of Department operations, ongoing projects, issues, and opportunities. This body should provide broad direction to the Emergency Communications Director, resolving service level disputes between customer agencies and providing input and adopting Department policies and procedures. To accomplish this, the Director should develop a formal agenda for each meeting that serves to address five key characteristics: 1) operations updates; 2) financial condition; 3) customer service/public relations; 4) special project updates; 5) performance indicators. These are summarized below:

- **Operations updates** – Describe the status of current or pending projects for the Department. Effort should be made to discuss progress on the existing work plan, outstanding items and the plan to address them, obstacles or challenges to success, and the requirements to overcome those issues.
- **Financial condition** – Every quarter, the Director should report the status of their operating budget and spending to date as compared to the prior year's spending. Current or projected unanticipated expenses should be discussed and, if necessary, guidance should be sought from the body for next steps. In addition, unanticipated cost overruns should be reported as they become evident.

¹²⁵ Comanche County Website, Volunteer Fire Departments, <https://comanchecounty.us/volunteer-fire-departments/>

- **Customer service/public relations** – Any current or projected issues that could affect the public, internal customers, or customer agencies should be discussed, and a plan for communication with the appropriate parties should be established.
- **Special project updates** – Status updates on any special projects should be reported during the meeting.
- **Performance indicators** – Every quarter, the Director should report the progress of executive-level performance measures for the Department. Executive-level performance measures are high-level indicators of program outcomes and costs compared to prior years and established goals. These indicators should be explicitly defined in the service level agreements detailed in Recommendation 90.

The Director should develop and maintain a comprehensive work plan and monthly report that can be shared and discussed with the governance body at the monthly meeting. This work plan should describe major projects and provide a clear and measurable pathway toward transparently communicating and resolving service level issues. This will provide a direct mechanism of accountability and will also strengthen the role of the body as the primary arbiter of service issues for the Department.

Creating this advisory body will require a willingness to collaborate from the leadership of the Department and the City of Lawton. Leaders in customer jurisdictions will also need to be willing to take on additional responsibility and commit to regularly engaging with the Department. This will be a change from the current operation of the Emergency Communications Department, but it will be important to ensuring that all customer agencies feel served and that the Director is provided the proper support and direction.

Recommendation 90: Develop formal service agreements with customer agencies.

Each public safety agency in the City of Lawton, Comanche County, and Fort Sill is an important customer and user of emergency call taking and dispatching services. As a result, it is reasonable for those agencies to have a clear expectation of services provided by the Emergency Communications Department and a mechanism to resolve issues efficiently and effectively. Likewise, it is reasonable for the Department to expect a clear and consistent definition of dispatch protocol from agencies and for the agencies to consistently adhere to those protocols.

The formal arrangement between the Department and customer agencies is unclear. The County currently contributes financially to the Emergency Communications Center budget. In FY2021, the County provided \$526,741 or about 20% of the Department's overall budget. Staff are trained on unique protocols for customer agencies, and when issues arise, they are brought to the Director, but there is a need for a more formal relationship between the Department and its customers.

There are several methods for doing this, and the approach may differ depending on each customer agency. For internal customers, such as the City Police and Fire Departments, it is appropriate for the Department to develop formal service level agreements that clarify expectations for both the agency and the Department. For outside agencies, the Department could develop Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) or leverage the interlocal agreement describing the creation of an advisory body, as discussed in Recommendation 89.

Regardless of the specific method used, these agreements should establish clear performance goals and expectations. Each agreement should clearly specify dispatch protocols for the customer as well as a formalized process, approach, and reasonable timeline to adjust dispatch protocols when the need arises. The agreements should clarify performance expectations and associated performance metrics that can be tracked and used to monitor and improve service quality. In addition to expectations, the agreements should also clearly communicate the method for customer agencies to raise and resolve any complaints or issues they experience with the Emergency Communications Center.

These agreements will create readily understood, clear standards regarding how the ECC should interact with its customers, provide services to partner agencies, and handle disputes or requests that impact operations. Additionally, establishing formal agreements will allow the Department to enhance quality assurance and training programs for Telecommunicators. Understanding and formalizing the standards by which Telecommunicators are evaluated will allow the Training Coordinator and Shift Supervisors to hold staff to these expectations. In other words, the agreements can act as a baseline against which performance can be measured and tracked.

The service level agreements should be reviewed and approved by the multi-jurisdictional advisory board. This body will provide direction and guidance to the Department and the Emergency Communications Director. By having the body review and evaluate service level agreements, they can establish consistency across agencies. Concerns with performance or expectations by customer agencies should be brought to the advisory body. Using the service level agreements, the advisory body can assess whether the Department is performing to expectations and develop a path forward if it is not. It is important to note that for agreements or items that require approval by the City Council, the body's approval will merely be advisory to City Council.

The Director will need to work with the City Manager, City Attorney's Office, and leadership of customer agencies to begin this process and draft agreements. These should reflect protocols for each agency and commitments from the Department. Once drafted, the agreements should be reviewed and approved by the advisory body and City Council, as needed. Using the agreements, the advisory body can assess whether the Department is performing to expectations and work with the Director to develop a path forward if it is not.

Recommendation 91: Establish a quality assurance program and ongoing training program.

Quality Assurance (QA) is an important part of the operation for any emergency dispatch center. QA programs consist of two focus areas to ensure call takers and dispatchers are properly prepared and performing well. First, all call takers and dispatchers should have a portion of their calls reviewed regularly to ensure they are performing to expectations and meeting the needs of the public and first responders. Second, understanding the high-volume call types for the operation as a whole allows leadership to prepare call takers and dispatchers for rare or infrequent call types. This preparation will make the organization confident it can handle any sort of call that might occur, no matter how frequent it is. QA should also provide a process and platform for call takers, dispatchers, and first responders to process difficult or stressful calls.

The Emergency Communications Department does not have a well-established QA program. The Training Coordinator's job description outlines quality improvement efforts as part of that position's responsibility, but the workload of training and onboarding new staff has not allowed adequate time for this work. There is an informal goal to review 5% of calls each week, but this is not regularly accomplished. This leads to a situation where calls that get reviewed are often only reviewed because a complaint was made from a partner agency. Currently, after a complaint, Shift Supervisors will review the call with relevant staff, including Telecommunicators and other management staff as needed. Outside of these case-by-case reviews, Shift Supervisors are not regularly performing QA work.

It is recommended that the Department establish a robust QA program that can be used to inform proactive, ongoing training for Telecommunicators. The QA program should be based on the APCO and National Emergency Number Association (NENA) guidelines for quality assurance programs. The focus should be on evaluating both Telecommunicator strengths as well as identifying areas for improvement and not be focused on punishment. APCO, in partnership with NENA, developed a standard to define the recommended components of a QA program within a public safety communications center. The standard

defines key features of an effective program. Those components, and the substantive elements of each as they relate to the Lawton Emergency Communications Department, are described below:¹²⁶

1. **Case Review Criteria:** The Department should establish the criteria under which incidents will be evaluated. All components of the incident should be evaluated by a manager and/or supervisor, including but not limited to call taking, data entry, dispatching, status keeping, and other key Telecommunicator tasks. Ideally, the work of each Telecommunicator would be evaluated at random and at specific intervals, and corrections and adjustments would be conveyed in recurring meetings between the Training Coordinator, Shift Supervisors, and Telecommunicators.
2. **Evaluation Guidelines:** The Department should establish standard evaluation guidelines defining minimum performance expectations for each rating category to ensure compliance with expectations and industry-recognized protocols. These expectations should be clearly defined, measurable, and effectively communicated to Telecommunicators. The case review process should apply directly to these evaluation guidelines, which should be informed by standard operating procedures. The process should adequately measure the quality and performance of the service provided. This process includes, but is not limited to, analysis of performance trends, compliance with protocols and standard operating procedures, customer service, optimizing the use of agency resources, the overall performance of each employee, and reviewing the operation as a whole.
3. **Program Monitoring:** In the normal course of business, the Department should review at least 2% of all calls for service and a random sampling of cases for each Telecommunicator. All cases involving "high acuity" should be reviewed. High acuity is defined as emergency situations that require an elevated or atypical response; they may involve loss of life, significant property damage, or are of such magnitude that they produce high-stress reactions in Telecommunicators and first responders. These reviews should occur as soon as possible after the receipt of the call and/or following the radio dispatch or at least within five days, notwithstanding extenuating circumstances that prevent such a review.
4. **Recordkeeping:** The Department should establish a recordkeeping system, including report forms and/or a computer-based data management system, to permit storage and subsequent evaluation of case records in a confidential manner. The quality assurance reviews should be maintained according to a recordkeeping or retention policy.
5. **Reporting and Feedback:** The Department should establish a mechanism for reporting quality assurance/improvement performance outcomes to the appropriate personnel regularly per agency and/or protocol guidelines. The Department should develop appropriate reporting systems to inform management and employees about performance levels and help identify areas of superior performance as well as areas for improvement and remedial action. The Department should develop a communication plan that defines the purpose of each report, the recipients, the sources of data, and the metrics used in case evaluations. Feedback to each Telecommunicator should be timely, accurate, and objective.
6. **Written Directives:** The QA program should be based on a series of written directives and standard operating procedures. Furthermore, the outcomes of the QA program should be proactively utilized to adjust and improve the Department's standard operating procedures.

The Department currently has several of the tools needed to implement these practices, including a recordkeeping system and CAD software, informal goals for reviewing calls, and clear guidelines for performance. However, the Department needs to formalize and expand upon these tools to create a robust

¹²⁶Standard for the Establishment of a Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement Program for Public Safety Answering Points, APCO & NENA.

QA program. There needs to be execution on the goal of reviewing 2% of all calls for service and an addition of reviewing high acuity calls. A formal reporting and feedback process should be established to the Director, advisory body, and individual Telecommunicators. The process and methodology for reviewing performance regarding calls for service should also be outlined as part of establishing the program. Lastly, the directives and procedures for the QA program should be formalized and adopted by the advisory body.

Implementing a QA program should not fall on a single position. The Director, Training Coordinator, and Shift Supervisors need to work together to establish the program and thereby incorporate data and performance into the regular operation of the Department. The regular review of 2% of Telecommunicator calls and all high acuity calls should be completed by these positions working together as a team, and the results of this work should be incorporated into an ongoing training program for Telecommunicators as described below.

An effective quality assurance program also serves as the basis of a good training program for ECC staff. The process of proactively monitoring the outcomes of calls provides a mechanism to ensure consistency of service and provides a useful structure for training curriculum design. The QA program should inform Department-wide training in addition to individual performance improvement. Regular review of calls and Telecommunicator performance should inform the type of training needed for staff. For example, a review of calls may show that Telecommunicators are incorrectly dispatching units for suspected electrical fires. Using this information, the Training Coordinator should organize a refresher training on the proper protocol for these call types. In addition, ongoing training can allow Telecommunicators to remain prepared for call types that require high acuity but are infrequent.

The value of a QA program is that it allows for continuous improvement and ongoing training for staff. It also creates a process for Telecommunicators to work through difficult calls, provide the training they need to perform when high acuity calls are received, assess outcomes of those calls, and provide the support for staff to process the stress of those calls. A QA program should allow for the Department to address customer service needs or issues as they arise, pulling past performance to inform how customer agencies want to be served in the future.

To implement such a program, the Training Coordinator should work in partnership with the Shift Supervisors. As a group, they should be able to identify and recommend performance standards to the Director, establish a regular pattern for review of calls and meetings with individual Telecommunicators, and create ongoing training based on the needs of the Telecommunicators. It is important that the Shift Supervisors support and help implement the ongoing training and quality assurance programs; their help is the only way to integrate QA into the day-to-day practices of the Department.