



Director's Corner:

Capt. David Poston



Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department

"911, what is your emergency?" 7.5 million times a year in North Carolina some variation of that question is asked by professional telecommunicators. The overwhelming majority of these calls are processed and dispatched without delay. Each of our PSAPs are accustomed to handling these incoming calls and have extensive operating procedures and training modules in place to prepare for the answers to "what is your emergency?". What happens to 911 when we have the emergency after the emergency?

"Life is like a box of chocolates."

Forrest Gump famously stated that life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get. That single thought is almost universally recognized, and perfectly describes the minute to minute life of a telecommunicator. Every call presented and every radio transmission received is unique and carries with it a risk that threatens the health and safety of our most valuable resource, our people. Orlando Telecommunicators never came to work expecting to deal with a mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub. Likewise, Baton Rouge telecommunicators didn't include a mass murder of police

officers in their Sunday morning plans. Dealing with the long-term psychological effects of one of these major events is a daunting but necessary task for PSAP managers. Fortunately, most Telecommunicators, and by design their leaders, never have to worry about these types of nightmare scenarios and the aftermath of emotional recovery. Or do they?

There are three types of threats that we face in each of our jurisdictions. No communications center is excluded no matter how small. No PSAP is fully prepared no matter how large. We all obviously recognize the two primary threats facing the emotional and psychological wellbeing of everyone in our environment. We all come to work knowing that today just might be the day that the one call comes in that creates the nightmare scenario. We have all played that out to some extent and are to some extent prepared for the worst and hoping for the best. We all recognize the need for post event debriefings and peer support if and when this happens. This is the demon tap dancing in the middle of the room. We all see it, we all recognize it, and we all know it has to be dealt with if and when that one call comes.

The second type of threat is finally receiving a level of attention that for years was overlooked. It is the understanding that although our telecommunicators will probably never deal with an Orlando or Baton Rouge situation, they face the constant barrage of life and death and misery on 911. A stream of CPR instructions; daily calls from distraught accident victims; a shift long assault on the senses and normalcy of life takes place in every PSAP, every day, without exception. Fortunately, and with the assistance of NENA and other professional organizations, procedures and recommendations for the long term care of PTSD are coming to the forefront. We are finally chasing this demon out of the dark and into the light to be addressed. Its time has come.

But what do we do about the third threat? This is the hidden demon, the one lurking out of sight and out of mind. It is the demon created by the instant 24 hour news cycle. This demon lives and feeds on our readily available social media and internet. The PTSD no longer lingers with only those directly affected by an event or those exposed to long-term stressors. The emotional injury created by a bombardment of our senses spreads and can harm those telecommunicators thousands of miles away from an incident.



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On October 1, 2017, a gunman opened fire into a crowded concert in Las Vegas Nevada killing 59. It was on October 2 that I totally realized there was a real and tangible effect on telecommunicators in Charlotte. That afternoon in our roll call, talk was centered on what our procedures were, how we would respond, what resources we would call. It was at that moment that one of our senior telecommunicators commented tearfully, "I don't know how I could deal with it." It was then I began to fully understand that events far removed from Charlotte still can rip at the emotional fiber of our Center. On September 11, most public places played news coverage nonstop of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Years later, and up to today, psychologist and medical professionals are dealing with the traumatic stress that watching coverage of this event created for scores upon scores of people. There are those who still fear flying or entering tall buildings; fears born out of 9/11 coverage. Becoming a Telecommunicator does not make one immune to such stress, in fact it adds layer upon layer to the emotional and psychological effects. After all, when a major event happens, we all know and understand what is also happening behind the scenes. Telecommunicators not only see the news, they can see the full length movie that took place in great detail. So how do we deal with the demon in hiding?

First, shine light on the situation. The old saying is that sunshine is the best disinfectant. There is probably no better piece of advice when dealing with a major event. Keep your employees informed. Any situational briefs that can be shared, share them. Take time to let them know you will keep them updated if you learn additional information. Make sure they have as full of an understanding as possible. If you don't have resources to provide a situational report, reach out to other agencies and seek this information.

Second, listen to what your employees are saying. "I don't know how I could deal with it" is much more than a passing comment. Be reassuring with everyone that they do have the skills and you do trust their ability to deal with a major event. Review all of the resources they have at their disposal. Remind them that no one is in this alone. Plan a tabletop exercise. Use this not only to test your readiness but also to bring out concerns. It is a great way to build confidence and uncover weaknesses.

Allow your employees to find an outlet. It has become our practice that after any major event, our communications center pre-

pare a small package to send to the affected PSAP. The healing process this brings has as much if not more benefit to us than to those who are receiving the package. It does not have to be an elaborate gesture. Sending a simple thinking of you card with your patch inside works great. Let each of your employees take a moment and write their thoughts and express what they are feeling.

Finally, don't ignore the obvious. Make sure to observe and listen to your employees. Don't take for granted that there are no lingering issues. In Charlotte, we are fortunate and blessed to have a full time psychologist available to us along with trained peer support and a very active chaplain program. They make frequent stops and check-ins within Communications. After major events, even those not directly related to Charlotte, they are in contact and available. Agencies have varying levels of resources internally; however support is only a phone call away. Reach out across the State if necessary. We are blessed with the level of professional relationships across jurisdictional lines in North Carolina. If you don't have someone experienced in peer support for a specific type of situation, someone else does.

In closing, I will share a valuable piece of wisdom I was given as new commander many years ago. Great technology and equipment will eventually fail you. Great people never will. It is up to us to as leaders to develop and maintain that greatness in our people. A large part of that is looking out for their health and mental well-being.