



Case Study: Fort Myers, Florida

AT A GLANCE

Location

Fort Myers, Florida

Challenge

The public safety answering point (PSAP) operated by the police department in Fort Myers handles more than 200,000 emergency calls annually. Low employee morale and a high staff turnover rate were impacting the PSAP's performance significantly and compounding existing staffing issues.

Solution

Mission Critical Partners (MCP) conducted a multi-faceted staffing study that identified several areas for Fort Myers to address to reduce staff turnover and improve PSAP performance. These include focusing on the concept of workforce optimization and its pillars of recruitment, hiring, training and retention, to fully staff the PSAP; adding a 24 x 7 shift supervisor position and installing a quality assurance (QA) program to ensure consistency of operations.

Results

The Fort Myers PSAP is on its way to being completely staffed, with all call-taker positions filled. Open dispatcher and shift supervisor positions were expected to be filled by the end of 2018. In addition, a QA/training manager has been promoted from within to begin revamping the telecommunicator training program.

MCP Helps Florida PSAP Resolve a 911 Staffing Crisis

Background

These are challenging times for public safety answering points (PSAPs). Many are dealing with funding shortfalls, others are wondering where they will find the money to implement Next Generation 911 (NG911) technology.

All of these are enough to keep PSAP officials awake at night. But staffing is the challenge that arguably is the most worrisome. Staffing always has been an issue for the 911 community. Given this, it should come as no surprise that the PSAP operated by the Fort Myers Police Department in Florida has been dealing with a significant staffing shortage of its own.

The Challenge

Fort Myers, a major tourist destination, is the county seat of Lee County in southwest Florida; it has a population of about 75,000 and encompasses about 49 square miles. The PSAP operated by the city's police department is one of four primary 911 communications centers in the area. It handles approximately 17,000 emergency calls each month, or more than 200,000 annually, in addition to more than 130,000 administrative calls.

The PSAP was authorized for 22 telecommunicators (six call-takers and 16 dispatchers), but over a five-year period averaged five call-takers and 12 dispatchers. The shortage affected the center's ability to perform significantly, as demonstrated by the following statistics:

- Call-answering times averaged 12 seconds in 2015 and 17 seconds in 2016, two metrics that fall short of the 10-second National Emergency Number Association (NENA) standard. Nearly a quarter of all calls fielded by the PSAP during the two-year period took more than 10 seconds to answer.
- Numerous calls rolled over to the PSAP operated by the Lee County Sheriff's Office, a transfer that occurs when answering times exceed 20 seconds.
- Approximately 22 percent of calls were abandoned altogether. Abandoned calls—which occur when the caller disconnects before the call is answered—are common in PSAPs. These calls require telecommunicators to attempt to establish contact with the caller to ascertain whether the call was accidental. Though no specific standard exists in the 911 community to govern abandoned call rates, it generally is accepted that keeping such rates under 8 percent is ideal.

The Fort Myers PSAP's attrition rate was about 19 percent, well above the industry average of 13 percent. Compensation is a key contributing factor. Telecommunicators were forced to accept a 5.25 percent pay cut

in 2010, and salaries have been frozen for the last six years. But other factors were having an equally big impact. One is the increased stress felt by telecommunicators due to the acute shortage that has existed over the last seven years. Another, cited often in exit interviews, is the inability to take vacation when wanted due to the lack of coverage.

Each factor contributed to flagging morale, which in turn contributed to the PSAP's diminished performance and high employee churn.

The Solution

Recognizing that something needed to be done, Fort Myers hired Mission Critical Partners (MCP) to assess the situation and make actionable recommendations to resolve the issues.

MCP's first step was to conduct a comprehensive staffing study that involves a proprietary, multimodal framework that considers workload, coverage of necessary operational positions and performance metrics. Statistical calculations are balanced with operational logistics to identify how many personnel are needed for a PSAP to meet its performance goals.

MCP applied NENA's staffing tool in concert with Erlang C calculations to assist in projecting the number of PSAP telecommunicators (call-takers, dispatchers, and supervisors) required to efficiently answer and dispatch emergency and non-emergency response. NENA's staffing tool considers call volume and other PSAP-specific data, such as incident volume and employee leave, to calculate baseline staffing needs. The Erlang C calculations consider the number of call-takers, the number of callers waiting in queue, and the average amount of time for each call.

MCP subject-matter experts then analyzed the resulting data in the context of the PSAP's operational configuration to determine staffing requirements. In the case of the Fort Myers PSAP, MCP recommended that the telecommunicator roster be increased to a minimum of 28 and a maximum of 32. A corollary recommendation called for the PSAP to discontinue its practice of hiring call-taker-only personnel. Hiring and training personnel who are capable of call-taking and dispatching will provide much-needed staffing flexibility that doesn't exist today.

More Than a Staffing Solution

The assessment was conducted with an eye toward workforce optimization, a concept that the firm embraces. Where staffing is about putting people in the seats, workforce optimization is about putting the right people in the seats and keeping them there for the long haul. It is a considerably more holistic approach that has four pillars at its essence: recruitment, hiring, training and retention. Each pillar is impacted by a variety of both internal and external forces that affect operations.

To that end, MCP's subject-matter experts made two additional recommendations designed to not only enhance operational performance but also personnel morale, which in turn will improve employee retention.

- The first was to create a shift supervisor position that would function on a 24 x 7 basis, resulting in the hiring and training of four additional personnel, a key role that Fort Myers did not have that is critical to ensuring operational efficiency and effectiveness.
- The second was to create a quality assurance/quality improvement (QA/QI) program, which would require creation of a QA/training specialist role. A QA/QI program ensures that call-processing guidelines are being followed correctly, and ensures consistency of operations by identifying problems and their solutions.

In today's 911 environment, having a QA/QI program is the recognized standard of care. Gaps in employee knowledge, consistency, or procedures are likely to be uncovered through a uniform, objective QA process, which will provide opportunities for improvement.

“The report backed up everything that I had been saying, and it was exactly what I needed. I had been sounding all the alarm bells, and [MCP's] study took us over the top in terms of getting buy-in from City Hall.”

– William Musante, Fort Myers Police Department

The Results

All call-taker positions have been filled and those candidates are scheduled to complete their training by the end of 2018. Meanwhile, three dispatcher positions remain open, but six candidates currently are in training, and those positions, as well as the open supervisor positions, also were expected to be filled by the end of 2018.

“This will be the first time in a decade—easy—that all call-taker and dispatcher positions will be filled with fully trained personnel,” said William Musante, lieutenant with the Support Operations Section of the Fort Myers Police Department.

Plus, the PSAP’s new communications manager and new QA/training manager were hired earlier in 2018—together they already are working collaboratively to revamp the telecommunicator training program. The QA/training manager is a veteran dispatcher with 26 years of experience at the PSAP who was promoted into the position.

The comprehensive assessment and recommendations report delivered to the Fort Myers Police Department paid immediate and impressive dividends, according to Musante.

“The report backed up everything that I had been saying, and it was exactly what I needed,” Musante said. “I had been sounding all the alarm bells, and that study took us over the top in terms of getting buy-in from City Hall. I couldn’t be happier.”



The Fort Myers PSAP, operated by the city’s police department, was experiencing a significant staff shortage that was leading to diminished performance, low employee morale and high turnover. MCP provided a comprehensive staffing assessment that has acted as a roadmap to helping Fort Myers take steps to solve its staffing issues and improve PSAP operations and performance.

About Mission Critical Partners

Mission Critical Partners is a professional and co-managed services firm that helps clients enhance and evolve their public safety systems and operations through extensive experience, knowledge and resources. By providing insight and support every step of the way, our clients are able to transform their mission critical operations, maximize the value of their investments and ensure optimal performance and success.

For more information, visit MissionCriticalPartners.com

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