



**Peter Prater, Hexagon's Safety & Infrastructure division UK, reports on technological advances supporting the wellbeing of first responders and why it is essential to take every opportunity to support mental and emotional wellbeing for these essential workers**

# Technology could play key role in reducing mental, emotional toll on public safety workers

**G**lobal population growth and urbanisation create significant challenges for public safety organisations, including the scale and frequency of complex emergencies. Marauding terrorist attacks are not the only threats. Disasters like Grenfell Tower, the boom in illegal raves, even power outages stretch public safety resources to their limit. At the same time, incidents considered significant a decade ago, such as knife crime, have become more routine.

Responders are forced to rely on the tools at their disposal, which often includes an avalanche of irrelevant information received by call-takers in outdated – and sometimes understaffed – emergency communications centres.

When seconds count, clear situational awareness is a luxury most organisations do not have. Often, in the early stages of a large-scale event, there are no field personnel providing relevant, timely details from the scene. The lack of real-time insights can lead to an increased risk of mental and emotional stress on first responders at all levels.

Following a major incident, leaders perform an after-the-fact analysis to examine an organisation's response, from the first call to the final report. It is during this analysis they find missed connections that could have potentially helped them avoid harm.



These missed connections, also known as operational blind spots, can haunt responders for years. Second-guessed judgment calls take a toll on the decision-maker. Over time, self-doubt can impact a responder's job performance and overall health, leading to missed workdays and higher turnover rates. Without proper help and support, those affected face a number of potential risks, including addiction, depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

## **Stress Within a Comms Centre**

Mental stress is different at each level of an organisation. Police officers, firefighters and medics might experience it from what they witness on the scene of an emergency. Analysts and tactical dispatchers face stress because it is their job to inform and direct responders in dangerous, life-threatening situations.

Comms centre call-takers and dispatchers, however, experience stress from several entry points because they are truly the first link in the public safety chain.

Depending on the nature of the emergency, caller emotions range from relaxed to hysterical, and each call presents a new set of challenges. If the caller is in an unsafe or dangerous situation, call-takers and dispatchers are inundated with audible trauma. They must cut through the noise and emotion to not only calm frantic callers, but also acquire relevant information to pass on to responders.

*“Without proper self-care or attention from supervisors and managers, call-takers who face extreme mental and emotional stress can easily slip into depression and burnout”*



means to reduce mental and emotional stress, including access to counselling resources. Other considerations include adequate staffing and scheduling matched to demand to ensure personnel are not overloaded and have time to unwind.

### How Technology is Helping

While some people protest that technology will be society's downfall, there are many technological advances supporting the wellbeing of first responders around the globe. Particularly in deriving valuable insights from the routine data generated through daily operations.

Data analysis, for example, enables comms centre managers to analyse hours worked by their staff, as well as the number and type of calls received. This can help align resources to workload and identify staff in need of time off. Modern computer-aided dispatch (CAD) solutions could help ease the burden on users. By providing a simple unified interface, call-takers and dispatchers can quickly access and assess diverse information and act accordingly.

Tools that leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning offer new levels of assistive insights to dispatchers. Autonomous, background processes can quickly and effectively scan for similarities, anomalies, links and patterns across the entirety of calls coming into the comms centre. These capabilities act as a second set of eyes, reducing stress on both comms centre veterans and new employees still building their knowledge base.

### Looking Forward

Across the globe, police officers, firefighters and medics face physical dangers, in addition to the mental and emotional toll associated with their jobs. Comms centre call-takers and dispatchers, however, are on the frontline of every emergency. They routinely hear the screams, cries and pleas for help from people experiencing a life-changing event. That is why it is essential to take every opportunity to support mental and emotional wellbeing for these essential workers.

Ensuring proper care is the responsibility of agency leaders and comms centre managers, and modern tools can help mitigate pressures and instil confidence in decision-making. Though technological capabilities clearly contribute to the ongoing effort to protect the wellbeing of those who work to protect us, there is still much work to be done.

Finally, there is the emotional and mental stress of not always knowing the outcome of a call. In the case of life-or-death situations, call-takers and dispatchers often question if they made the right decision and if they did everything they could to render the right aid. Following traumatic, large-scale emergencies, second-guessing can take a significant toll.

Without proper self-care or attention from supervisors and managers, call-takers who face extreme mental and emotional stress can easily slip into depression and burnout. If ignored for long periods of time, it not only affects job performance, but it can also affect physical health and mental wellbeing.

### A Growing Concern

Fortunately, awareness around mental health and wellbeing for public safety workers is growing within agencies and the public. Organisations like BAPCO and the Blue Light Programme are shedding light on the issue and providing information resources. Prince William, who previously worked as a pilot for the East Anglian Air Ambulance Service, has highlighted the need to enhance support services for responders, while also creating a culture where people feel comfortable to talk about what they are going through.

Governments are also stepping up their efforts. The College of Policing developed a £7.5m Welfare and Wellbeing Project to ensure support services for every officer by 2021.

Agency leaders can also take steps to ensure call-takers and dispatchers have the

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