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Allegheny County Controller

**Performance Audit to Evaluate the Adequacy
and Effectiveness of Measures in Place to
Ensure the Well-Being of 911 Professionals
for the Period January 1, 2023
through September 30, 2024**

August 22, 2025

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April 15, 2025

Chief Matthew J. Brown
Allegheny County Emergency Services
150 Hookstown Grade Road
Coraopolis, PA 15108

Performance Audit to Evaluate the Adequacy and Effectiveness of
Measures in Place to Ensure the Well-being of 911 Professionals
for the Period January 1, 2023 through September 30, 2024

Dear Chief Brown:

We have applied procedures to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of measures in place to ensure the well-being of 911 professionals. Our procedures were applied to the period from January 1, 2023, through September 30, 2024. However, our review of certain data was extended through December 31, 2024. Our engagement was performed in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards*.

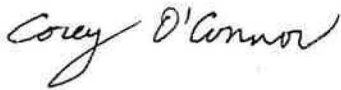
As we performed our procedures, we identified a number of conditions that suggest improvements can be made in the measures being put forth to protect the well-being of 911 professionals. We have offered recommendations to assist in remediating these conditions, which should positively impact the well-being of 911 professionals as well as the provision of 911 services in Allegheny County. The results of our procedures are included in the attached report.

Chief Matthew J. Brown
April 15, 2025

We would like to thank the management and staff of Allegheny County Emergency Services for their courtesy and cooperation during our engagement.

The Controller's Office would also like to thank the many Telecommunications Officers and Shift Commanders who staff the 911 Call Center around the clock, rain, snow, or shine, to keep our County safe. They are the first people to whom we turn in emergencies, and their quick decision-making and their thoughtfulness makes a real difference in people's lives. We sincerely hope that as a result of our audit, changes will be made that will positively impact their well-being.

Kind regards,



Corey O'Connor
Controller



Lori A. Churilla
Assistant Deputy Controller, Auditing

cc: Honorable Patrick Catena, President, County Council
Honorable John F. Palmiere, Vice-President, County Council
Honorable Sara Innamorato, County Executive, Allegheny County
Mr. John Fournier, County Manager, Allegheny County
Mr. Grant Gittlen, Chief of Staff, Allegheny County
Mr. Kenneth J. Varhola, Chief of Staff, County Council
Ms. Sarah Roka, Budget Manager, County Council

I. Introduction

Allegheny County Emergency Services (ACES) supports the people and first responders of Allegheny County through prevention, preparation, protection, response, and recovery from man-made and natural emergencies, as well as acts of terrorism. ACES is organized into four Divisions, Emergency Management, 911 Communications, Fire Marshal, and Fire Academy. ACES' 911 Communications Division administers Allegheny County's 911 Call Center located in Moon Township, PA. The ACES Division of 911 Communications is committed to serving the County's emergency needs through a variety of technologies including computer-aided dispatch, public safety radios, and the telephone system with integrity, cooperation, and concern for the welfare of all.

911 calls in Allegheny County are answered by call-takers. While the Call Center strives to maintain staffing to quickly respond to all 911 calls, incidents can occur that require 911 calls to be held in a queue temporarily until they can be answered. For example, a particular 911 incident may be viewed by many observers, and many 911 calls may be received at the same time about the same incident. While a recording advises 911 callers to remain on the line for the fastest service, some 911 callers ignore the recording, hang up the phone, and then immediately call 911 again. This causes these 911 callers to lose their place in the queue, which means that it will take longer for their call to be answered. **If your 911 call is not answered immediately, you must remain on the line to receive emergency service as soon as possible.**

Telecommunications Officers (TCOs) who work in Allegheny County's 911 Call Center begin as call-takers. They receive eight weeks of classroom call-taker training, and if they pass the classroom training, they receive six to eight weeks of on-the-job training. The various types of 911 incidents require call-takers to ask specific questions, and often many questions. Some 911 callers have expressed frustration about this, as it seems to the callers that the call-takers are taking too much time to provide emergency assistance. However, call-takers must ask all the questions applicable to each incident to help ensure that first responders are dispatched to the proper locations, and that first responders will have all the information needed to effectively and safely respond to the emergencies. Some frustrated callers complain to the call-takers, often using profanity, but this only delays the provision of emergency service. **To receive emergency assistance as quickly as possible, 911 callers should quickly answer all of the call-taker's questions to the best of their ability, especially questions about the location of the emergency.** Once the location and nature of the emergency is obtained from the 911 caller, the call information is routed to dispatchers who contact the appropriate first responders and provide them with the needed information. TCOs trained as call-takers are eventually trained as dispatchers in one or more of the three dispatch disciplines: police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS). Training in each discipline varies by type but can take up to six weeks, and TCOs must be approved by their Communications Training Officer to be able to work a dispatch workstation for that discipline.

Allegheny County is mandated to comply with the requirements of Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Act 78 of 1990, the *Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act*, and attempts to meet or exceed the guidelines contained in that Act. The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) is a not-for-profit organization that empowers its members and the greater 911 community to provide the best possible emergency response through standards development, training, thought leadership, outreach, and advocacy. NENA has developed various standards

I. Introduction

pertaining to the operation of 911 service, and Allegheny County Emergency Services is aware of those standards, and believes they are a valuable reference. Allegheny County Emergency Services has not adopted those additional standards, however, as its primary focus is complying with the requirements of the Pennsylvania *Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act*.

NENA has developed a standard designed to help ensure the well-being of 911 professionals. As described in the NENA standard, 911 emergency telecommunicators commonly experience four types of stress on the job:

1. Acute traumatic stress - experienced during incident-related exposures to stressors including callers and field responders in perceived life-death scenarios, or scenarios involving potential serious harm. Exposure to such stress can lead to acute stress disorder (ASD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or if experienced indirectly, secondary traumatic stress (STS), known also as vicarious traumatization.
2. Acute, frequently recurring stress *without traumatic elements* – experienced in response to lesser, yet still demanding stressors (e.g., non-emergency calls from citizens, conflicts with coworkers, and difficult work conditions).

Both forms of acute stress can contribute to compassion fatigue and chronic stress response.

3. Compassion fatigue - a combination of vicarious traumatization and burnout that results from the cumulative psychological impacts of acute stress (see 1 and 2 above) over time.
4. Chronic stress response - involves the repeated and excessive activation of the body's acute stress response leading to biochemical/hormonal changes that may result in metabolic syndrome, seriously impaired health, and problems in performance and quality of life. These risks depend on the individual's history, resilience, resources, and available support.

A 2015 study of 911 telecommunicators in the United States identified symptoms of clinical depression and PTSD in 24% of the population, rates four to five times greater than the rate for adults in the general U.S. population. Newer research points to more extensive stress impacts including obesity and other physiological conditions. 911 professionals may be at high risk of chronic life-threatening diseases due to struggles with chronic sleep deprivation and chronic stress.

Although ACES has not adopted the NENA standards, management should have measures in place to help ensure the well-being of 911 professionals. The primary goal of our performance audit was to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of such measures.

II. Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives

Our performance audit objectives were:

- To conduct a survey of the 911 professionals involved in call-taking/dispatching to identify potential weaknesses in the measures in place to protect their well-being.
- To determine whether the job training provided to 911 professionals involved in call-taking/dispatching is adequate to prepare them for their job duties.
- To determine whether the 911 Operations Center has a positive workplace culture.
- To determine whether 911 professionals are being required to work excessive hours, and whether the 911 Operations Center provides for adequate flexibility in scheduling.
- To determine whether the 911 Operations Center is utilizing technology that enables viewing of 911 incidents, and if so, how exposure to incident-related imagery is being managed.
- To determine whether 911 professionals are being provided with the recommended minimum of eight hours of stress resilience training.
- To determine the types of mental and physical health supports being made available to the 911 professionals and assess their adequacy and effectiveness.

Scope

Our performance audit covered the period from January 1, 2023 through September 30, 2024. However, our review of certain data was extended through December 31, 2024. We conducted the audit in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Methodology

The methodology used to accomplish our audit objectives included, but was not limited to, the following procedures:

- Reviewed the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard to Protect the Well-being of 911 Professionals (NENA-STA-002.2-2022).
- Reviewed the current union contract.

II. Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

- Interviewed management to gain an understanding of 911 Call Center operations.
- Toured the Call Center.
- Surveyed Telecommunications Officers (TCOs) regarding areas pertinent to their well-being, including training, workplace environment and culture, and mental and physical health supports.
- Reviewed the call-taker classroom training materials and evaluated whether the content, length, and quality of the training is sufficient to prepare the call-takers for the job duties.
- Gained an understanding of the scheduling process and overtime and leave time policies applicable to the Call Center.
- Gained an understanding of the process that management has used to determine the full staffing level, and used headcount, leave time, and other data to conduct our own staffing analysis.
- Reviewed TCO attendance records for our audit period, including call-offs, no-shows, and the leave time taken.
- Inquired regarding the utilization of technology at the Call Center that would permit TCOs to view 911 incident-related imagery (noting that the technology is not currently being utilized).
- Determined that the classroom training materials include eight hours of stress resilience training.
- Interviewed a randomly selected sample of TCOs regarding areas pertinent to their well-being, including training, workplace environment and culture, and mental and physical health supports.
- Our audit also included an assessment of internal controls that are significant within the context of our audit objectives. Any significant findings related to internal control are included in the findings and recommendations.
- Applied other procedures as deemed necessary.

We conducted our procedures from November of 2024 through of 2025. We provided a draft copy of this report to the Chief of Allegheny County Emergency Services for comment. His response begins on page 19.

III. Findings & Recommendations

Finding #1

The 911 Center Needs to be Fully Staffed

Criteria: Erlang calculators (which are based on the work of a Danish mathematician who was proficient in statistics and engineering) are generally accepted as an appropriate means for determining the number of telephone operators needed to maintain coverage at any given call volume. By entering Call Center-specific data (such as incoming call rate, call duration, time range, etc.) into an Erlang calculator to determine the number of call-takers necessary for each shift, and then adding the number of dispatchers needed each shift to staff all of the required dispatch workstations, the number of Telecommunications Officers (TCOs) necessary to staff each shift at the Call Center can be determined. Taking pass days (days off) and leave time (vacation, sick, personal days, etc.) used by the TCOs into account should enable the calculation of the ideal total number of TCOs that the Call Center should have on staff for all shifts.

Full staffing facilitates the training of TCOs in the various dispatch disciplines. As the number of TCOs who are able to staff each type of dispatch workstation increases, it becomes less likely that mandatory overtime will be required. Mandatory overtime can adversely impact the well-being of 911 professionals.

Condition: The Call Center currently has a maximum staffing level of 259 TCOs. However, the average number of TCOs on staff during 2023 and 2024 was 243 and 249, respectively. It is difficult for management to maintain TCO staffing near the maximum staffing level as new TCOs are trained in classes of up to 18 trainees and management is unable to predict when TCOs already on staff might retire, resign, or be terminated. Our analysis of the data suggests that even the current maximum staffing level of 259 TCOs is not sufficient to most effectively operate the Call Center at the present time. When we performed our own staffing analysis, we determined that the ideal TCO staffing level for 2024 was actually 262 TCOs. The same type of analysis indicates that the ideal TCO staffing level for 2025 is 275 TCOs.

Cause: Management used an Erlang C calculator to identify the number of call-takers necessary for each shift and the result was 14. We reperformed the procedure and obtained the same result. The 14 call-takers were added to the 35 dispatchers needed to staff all of the dispatch desks during each shift such that 49 TCOs were determined to be necessary to staff each shift. Management then multiplied 49 by five, a factor that it believed to be appropriate, to arrive at an ideal staffing level of 245. However, as we performed our own analysis of the ideal staffing, we determined that the factor used by management did not take into account all of the leave time used by TCOs, which means that 245 TCOs would not have been sufficient to most effectively operate the Call Center. As the Call Center sought to

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operate at that staffing level, it was found that 245 TCOs was not an adequate number, as a significant amount of overtime, including mandatory overtime, was necessary.

Several years ago, when management discussed the need for additional TCO staffing with the County Manager and Budget Office, management was advised that the Call Center could have up to 260 TCOs on staff. There is no calculation that supports 260 TCOs as the ideal Call Center staffing and the additional amount of TCOs that could be added to the staff was arbitrarily determined. Management determined that an additional CAD technician would be necessary if 15 more TCOs were to be added to the staff, but since that position was not in the budget, one of the additional 15 TCO positions was converted to a CAD technician position. This made 259 TCOs the maximum TCO staffing.

Effect: Staffing below the ideal staffing level has made it challenging to train TCOs in the various dispatch disciplines. Recent staffing increases have resulted in far less overtime mandates than were experienced as a result of short staffing during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, overtime mandates are still necessary and voluntary overtime is still very high.

Recommendations: Management should perform an ideal staffing analysis that takes all of the pass days and leave time used by TCOs into account on an annual basis to help ensure that the Call Center operates most effectively. Management should also immediately hire and train more TCOs and increase the frequency of hirings/trainings if necessary, so that the Call Center's average staffing level will not fall below the ideal staffing.

**Management's
Response:**

See page 19 for management's response.

III. Findings & Recommendations

Finding #2

The Peer Support Team Needs to be Expanded

- Criteria:** The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard to Protect the Well-being of 911 Professionals (NENA-STA-002.2-2022, Section 2.3) indicates that peer support programs should be a component of a 911 Call Center Comprehensive Stress Resilience Plan. Additionally, proper peer support programs utilize trained staff to provide confidential emotional support upon request of an employee without administering advice or solutions. Peer support is not a substitute for professional counseling but serves to diffuse stress and staff conflicts while encouraging people to move toward responsible solutions and professional therapy assistance as needed. The standard also indicates that, in the absence of adequate stress management resources and supports, 911 professionals may self-medicate their distress at high rates, leading to abuse of and addiction to various substances.
- Condition:** The 911 Call Center's peer support team currently consists of just three team members. Peer support team members are not available on every shift throughout the work week.
- Cause:** There were up to nine peer support team members in the past. However, over time, peer support team members have retired, resigned, or been terminated and have not been replaced. Management was not aware that the number of peer support team members had decreased to just three. We were advised that a number of TCOs have expressed an interest in becoming members of the peer support team. However, due to a lack of effective communication, the Peer Support Coordinator believed that there was no funding available to train new peer support team members.
- Effect:** None of the three peer support team members work the night shift, and each team member has two days off per week, which means that there are several shifts each week where team members are not regularly available to TCOs. We have been advised that, from time to time, peer support team members have asked other experienced TCOs who are not trained peer support team members to provide support to struggling TCOs. This subjects both the untrained TCOs and Allegheny County to the risk of liability associated with potential unfavorable outcomes. In addition, some TCOs have expressed concern about obtaining peer support because they don't know whether what they discuss will remain confidential.
- Recommendations:** Management should immediately provide for the training of additional peer support team members and take steps to ensure that peer support is only provided by trained peer support team members. Management should also ensure that the training provided to peer support team members includes maintaining the confidentiality of support discussions. In addition,

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management should put measures in place to provide for disciplinary action if peer support team members are found to be improperly sharing confidential information from support discussions.

**Management's
Response:**

See page 19 for management's response.

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Finding #3

Shift Commanders Need to be Trained and Coached to Identify and Support Struggling Telecommunications Officers

Criteria:	The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard to Protect the Well-being of 911 Professionals (NENA-STA-002.2-2022, Section 1.2) indicates that in the absence of adequate stress management resources and supports, 911 professionals may self-medicate their distress at high rates, leading to abuse of and addiction to various substances. If a Shift Commander can recognize signs of struggle (like fatigue, anxiety, or reduced attention), it allows for early intervention, which can help prevent mistakes that might affect the safety of the public or first responders. Supporting TCOs can not only improve their performance but also promote a healthier work environment and a more effective emergency response system.
Condition:	Several Shift Commanders work each shift in the Call Center and oversee the TCOs in a supervisory capacity in addition to performing other functions. Although Shift Commanders will have previously served as TCOs and have familiarity with the various stressors associated with call-taking and dispatching, they are not specifically trained to identify and support TCOs that may be struggling.
Cause:	The training provided to new Shift Commanders does not include these components of training.
Effect:	Struggling TCOs may go unnoticed and unassisted, and their ability to handle stressful situations is critical. Struggling TCOs might be dealing with burnout, stress, or personal challenges that can impact their decision-making, communication skills, or overall performance.
Recommendations:	Management should ensure that the training provided to Shift Commanders includes training in how to identify and support struggling TCOs. It may be practical for Shift Commanders to be provided the same training that the peer support team members are expected to obtain. Management should also take steps to ensure that Shift Commanders periodically walk the floor to identify TCOs that may need support.
Management's Response:	See page 19 for management's response.

Finding #4

Telecommunications Officer Training Needs to be Improved

Criteria: As the first point of contact during a crisis, the ability of TCOs to respond swiftly, accurately, and with empathy can significantly impact the outcome of an emergency situation. Therefore, training programs for TCOs should be comprehensive and up to date.

Training in the various dispatch disciplines (fire, police, or EMS) and working directly with first responders provides call-takers with a better understanding of the needs of first responders and the importance of obtaining all of the relevant information. Therefore, regardless of whether they are training call-takers or dispatchers, Communications Training Officers (CTOs) should ideally have years of experience as TCOs, including experience in one or more dispatch disciplines. In addition, the work histories of CTOs should demonstrate that they are highly skilled and reliable team members, familiar with the applicable protocols and the technological resources used to perform their job duties, and capable of imparting both technical knowledge and interpersonal skills to the less experienced TCOs.

However, even with the best trainers, it should be expected that some trainees may not be able to learn to perform the job duties effectively, in which case they should not be allowed to perform those duties. Continuous on-the-job training, and retraining, when necessary, should be properly implemented to help ensure public safety and the safety of first responders.

Condition: CTOs must currently have 18 months of full-time experience and meet other requirements, such as successful completion of the ACES standardized CTO course, successful completion of an in-house interview, and demonstration of a minimum score of 90% for call entry. CTOs at one time were required to have 24 months of full-time experience. We interviewed 16 TCOs from a list of 25 randomly selected 911 professionals and asked questions regarding areas pertinent to their well-being, including training, workplace environment and culture, and mental and physical health supports. We initially randomly selected 25 of the 911 professionals because it was our expectation that some of the selected individuals might decline to participate in the interview process, or not be available to us due to their pass days, use of leave time, or for other reasons. While there are currently 52 TCOs currently able and willing to serve as CTOs, six of the more experienced TCOs we interviewed are currently unwilling to serve as CTOs. Although it appears that all 52 of the current CTOs have been trained in at least one dispatch discipline (fire, police, or EMS), being trained in at least one dispatch discipline is not currently a CTO requirement. The pool of available TCOs includes many TCOs with significant experience, but we

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observed that most of the CTOs utilized to conduct the most recent call-taker on-the-job training had just a few years of experience.

TCO trainees who have not demonstrated that they can handle call-taking effectively after six weeks of on-the-job training are typically not terminated but are given two additional weeks of on-the-job training.

It appears that continuing on-the-job training/retraining is not being implemented effectively. For example, although management advised us that dispatchers are to message call-takers to request any information needed by first responders that the call-takers have not obtained, four of the TCOs we interviewed who work as dispatchers told us that dispatchers have been instructed not to message call-takers directly for such information because it is perceived as bullying.

Cause:

We were advised that the CTO experience requirement was not lowered as a result of a limited number of TCOs that meet the CTO requirements willing to serve as CTOs. We were also advised that a variety of factors may influence which CTOs are selected to train TCOs in call-taking and dispatching. These can include the shift that the CTO works, whether the CTO has leave time scheduled during the planned training period, and whether the personalities of the CTO and the trainee are compatible, among other factors. However, this does not entirely explain the predominant use of CTO trainers that have less experience as TCOs. Four TCO interviewees told us that CTOs have been asked to sign off on TCO trainees they did not believe were capable of or ready to serve as call-takers or dispatchers. While management advised us that pressure had been applied to pass trainees under the former training manager, the four TCOs we interviewed advised us that this is still occurring. Four TCO interviewees also told us that they believe that the \$1/hour of additional compensation for serving as a CTO is too low given the additional risk/burden associated with serving as a CTO, as CTOs are also held responsible for trainee mistakes that they fail to identify and help correct.

Management is unable to predict when TCOs will retire, resign, or be terminated. Consequently, it can be challenging to maintain staffing levels. With the technology resources and the regular training staff available, the Call Center is currently limited to training up to 18 new hires as call-takers in each training class. This, combined with the amount of time and cost associated with training, creates a strong incentive to retain all trainees.

We do not know why what management advised us about the desired way for dispatchers to obtain missing information is inconsistent with what we heard from the dispatchers whom we interviewed. However, since management has indicated that dispatchers should message call-takers

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directly to obtain missing information, dispatchers should be using that method to obtain such information.

Effect:

Four TCOs we interviewed that work as dispatchers told us that some call-takers who have completed TCO training are routinely not obtaining information from callers that they need to obtain, including questions about weapons at the location. It could be that some of the less experienced on-the-job trainers are not reinforcing what the trainees have learned during the classroom training.

A strong incentive to retain all call-taker trainees may be leading the Call Center to retain some trainees who cannot perform the call-taker job duties effectively.

Dispatchers not messaging call-takers directly to obtain information needed by first responders has likely resulted in a longer time or failure to obtain and relay such information, which can adversely impact the safety of the public and first responders.

Recommendations: Management should:

- Increase the amount of experience TCOs are required to have to serve as a CTO,
- Take steps to ensure that CTOs are not being pressured to sign off on trainees they do not believe are able to effectively perform their job duties,
- Attempt to get more experienced and highly skilled CTOs by effectively communicating to those TCOs how building leadership experience, training and coaching skills, and further developing their communication skills can benefit both them and the workplace. (This may be easier if management were to advocate for higher compensation for CTOs),
- Ensure that enough TCOs are being trained to fully staff the Call Center (see Finding #1). This would reduce the incentive to retain TCOs who may not be performing their job duties effectively.
- Ensure that dispatchers are aware that messaging call-takers to obtain missing information needed by first responders is necessary to help ensure the safety of the public and first responders and is the proper procedure.

Management's Response:

See page 19 for management's response.

Finding #5

Management Needs to Take More Steps to Develop a Positive Workplace Culture

Criteria: The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard to Protect the Well-being of 911 Professionals (NENA-STA-002.2-2022, Section 2.1) indicates the management of 911 workplace conditions should include fostering a positive work environment and organizational culture which is essential for the mental well-being of staff and the overall effectiveness of emergency services.

Condition: We requested that all TCOs on staff at the Call Center complete a survey we had developed regarding areas pertinent to their well-being, including workplace environment and culture, and mental and physical health supports. We only received survey data from 136 respondents. When we inquired regarding how the TCOs would describe the overall culture of their workplace, the TCOs responded as follows:

27 (20%) – Very Negative
54 (40%) – Negative
38 (28%) – Neutral
15 (11%) – Positive
2 (1%) – Very Positive

When we inquired regarding how comfortable the TCOs feel discussing mental health and stress with their supervisors, the TCOs responded as follows:

52 (38%) – Very Uncomfortable
27 (20%) – Somewhat Uncomfortable
25 (18%) – Neutral
19 (14%) – Somewhat Comfortable
13 (10%) – Very Comfortable

When we inquired regarding the types of support systems available to the TCOs, only 63% of the respondents identified the Employee Assistance Program (which is actually available to all Allegheny County employees) as available to them, and only 55% of the respondents identified peer support as available to them.

We also interviewed 16 TCOs from a list of 25 randomly selected 911 professionals and asked questions regarding areas pertinent to their well-being, including training, workplace environment and culture, and mental and physical health supports. We initially randomly selected 25 of the 911 professionals because it was our expectation that some of the selected individuals might decline to participate in the interview process or not be

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available to us due to their pass days, use of leave time, or for other reasons. Thirteen TCO interviewees told us that the Call Center does not have a positive workplace culture.

Cause:

We observed that management does communicate to the 911 professionals the types of support available to them when they start work at the Call Center. However, the types of support available to them are not routinely communicated. Six TCO interviewees told us that management does not walk the Call Center floor enough to interact with the staff and observe Call Center operations. When we inquired of the TCOs as part of the survey about the primary sources of stress in their role (the TCOs were able to select more than one) the results from the 136 respondents were as follows:

- 94 (69%) – Fear of Making a Mistake That Could Result in Disciplinary Action
- 89 (65%) – Inadequate/Ineffective Management Support
- 62 (46%) – Fear of Making a Mistake That Could Result in Harm To Others
- 49 (36%) – Inability to Sleep Well
- 46 (34%) – Emotional Toll of Calls
- 46 (34%) – Long Work Hours/Lack of Flexibility in Work Hours/Inability to Take Leave Time
- 43 (32%) – High Call Volume
- 43 (32%) – Other Work Environment Elements (i.e. Noise Level)
- 36 (26%) – Relationships with Coworkers

Most notably, of the 136 TCO survey respondents, 94 (69%) indicated that fear of making a mistake that would result in disciplinary action was a major stressor for them. Twelve TCO interviewees also expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which discipline is being administered. Ten TCO interviewees told us that management does not do enough to make TCOs feel appreciated.

We are aware that management has taken some measures to show all TCOs appreciation for the good work that they do. Management observes National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week every year during the second week of April. Management typically provides TCOs with a number of catered meals during this week and has drawings for various prizes. We also observed a big banner in one of the Call Center hallways thanking the TCOs for the good work that they do. We were advised that the union contract prohibits management from providing individual TCOs with monetary rewards (such as bonuses or gift cards) for excellent performance. We are aware that management has found a number of ways to recognize individual TCOs for excellent performance that do not involve financial compensation. For example, stork pins are issued to TCOs who assist in the successful delivery of babies. Management advised us that it is reluctant

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to use social media to recognize individual TCOs because management is unable to listen to all of the 911 calls each day and is therefore unaware of some of the excellent work that was likely performed. TCOs would likely feel slighted if they observed another TCO being recognized for something that they had also done, like assisting in the delivery of a baby. Management did provide us with a few examples of commendations that were issued to TCOs who performed well and were included in their files.

While we agree that management should be taking more steps to improve the workplace culture, management is not entirely responsible for the current culture. Management, Shift Commanders, and TCOs all share the responsibility for making the Call Center a great place to work. TCOs should arrive at work on time wearing clothing permitted by the dress code and perform their job duties to the best of their ability while showing all of their coworkers' respect. Although Shift Commanders have a lot of job responsibilities, they should make time each day to walk the floor and check in on TCOs to see whether they are doing OK or need assistance, and to help resolve any disagreements. Management should make time to walk the floor and make sure that these things are happening. If they do so, they are likely to find even more ways to express their appreciation for the good work being performed.

Effect: The lack of a positive workplace culture does not serve to protect the well-being of 911 professionals.

Recommendations: Management should routinely communicate the types of support resources that are available to the 911 professionals, make time to walk the Call Center floor to make sure that the Call Center is operating effectively, and find more ways to express their appreciation for the hard work performed by TCOs and Shift Commanders.

Shift Commanders should make time each day to walk the floor and check in on TCOs to see whether they are doing OK or need assistance, and to help resolve any disagreements.

TCOs should arrive at work on time wearing clothing permitted by the dress code and perform their job duties to the best of their ability while showing all of their coworkers' respect.

Management's Response:

See page 19 for management's response.

V. Conclusion

Overall, the results of our audit suggest that Allegheny County Emergency Services can and should do more to protect the well-being of its 911 professionals. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Act 78 of 1990, the *Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act*, with which Allegheny County is mandated to comply and to which it is most attentive, is primarily focused on the successful provision of quality 911 telephone service and not on protecting the well-being of 911 professionals. While the availability of limited funding for 911 services can make it challenging just to meet the requirements of the Act, and full adoption of the NENA standards may not be feasible, Allegheny County Emergency Services should try to implement more of the measures recommended by the NENA Standard to protect the well-being of 911 Professionals. Some measures to protect the well-being of the County's 911 professionals can be implemented at limited cost. For example, training new peer support team members would only require a minimal one-time training cost, and TCOs could realize benefits from that training for years. The time that trained peer support team members would spend with TCOs who need support would also not result in additional cost.

Developing a positive workplace culture is a key component to protecting the well-being of 911 professionals, according to the NENA Standard. Developing a positive workplace culture involves creating an environment where respect, support, collaboration, mental health awareness, professionalism, and ongoing development are integral parts of the daily work experience. A strong, positive culture helps ensure that TCOs are well-prepared, resilient, and capable of delivering high-quality services during crises, while ensuring their own well-being and job satisfaction. Management should exert significant efforts in this area.

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

SARA INNAMORATO
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

April 15, 2025

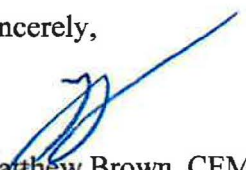
Ms. Lori Churilla
Assistant Deputy Controller, Auditing
436 Grant Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Ms. Churilla,

Enclosed for your review are my responses to the recommendations on pages 7 through page 17 of the report entitled *Performance Audit to Evaluate the Adequacy and Effectiveness of Measures in Place to Ensure the Well-being of 911 Professionals for the Period January 1, 2023 through September 20, 2024*.

If you have any questions or comments, please email me at matthew.brown@alleghenycounty.us or call me at 412-473-2303.

Sincerely,



Matthew Brown, CEM, CFPS
Chief

MATTHEW J. BROWN, CEM, CFPS, CHIEF
DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

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Finding #1 The 911 Center Needs to be Fully Staffed

- Management should perform an ideal staffing analysis that takes all of the pass days and leave time used by TCOs into account on an annual basis to help ensure that the Call Center operates most effectively. Management should also immediately hire and train more TCOs and increase the frequency of hirings/trainings if necessary so that the Call Center's average staffing level will not fall below the ideal staffing.
- *Response: ACES Management will work with the County Manager's office and the Budget office to review the possibility of adding additional Telecommunicator positions.*

Finding #2 The Peer Support Team Needs to be Expanded

- Management should immediately provide for the training of additional peer support team members and take steps to ensure that peer support is only provided by trained peer support team members. Management should also ensure that the training provided to peer support team members includes maintaining the confidentiality of support discussions. In addition, management should put measures in place to provide for disciplinary action if peer support team members are found to be improperly sharing confidential information from support discussions.
- *Response: ACES Management agrees and has begun taking steps to improve the Peer Support Team including additional members and needed training. Additional training has been scheduled for May 2025. We have always supported our Peer Support group, but we can make a better effort to improve and sustain the Peer Support efforts.*

Finding #3 Shift Commanders Need to be Trained and Coached to Identify and Support Struggling Telecommunications Officers

- Management should ensure that the training provided to Shift Commanders includes training in how to identify and support struggling TCOs. It may be practical for Shift Commanders to be provided the same training that the peer support team members are expected to obtain. Management should also take steps to ensure that Shift Commanders periodically walk the floor to identify TCOs that may need support.
- *Response: ACES management is working with the Department of Human Services to provide training and guidance. The real issue at this level of supervision is peer perception and when a TCO wants or needs assistance, which can be difficult to determine for any individual.*

Finding #4 Telecommunications Officer Training Needs to be Improved

Management should:

- Increase the amount of experience TCOs are required to have to serve as a CTO,
- *Response: This continues to be an ongoing discussion with our Professional Development / Training team.*
- Take steps to ensure that CTOs are not being pressured to sign off on trainees they do not believe are able to effectively perform their job duties,

- *Response: Command staff has addressed this with the Professional Development Manager to ensure this is not happening.*
- Attempt to get more experienced and highly skilled CTOs by effectively communicating to those TCOs how building leadership experience, training and coaching skills, and further developing their communication skills can benefit both them and the workplace. (This may be easier if management were to advocate for higher compensation for CTOs),
- *Response: Management will work with the Union and Allegheny County administration during contract negotiations to raise the CTO pay rate.*
- Ensure that enough TCOs are being trained to fully staff the Call Center (see Finding #1). This would reduce the incentive to retain TCOs who may not be performing their job duties effectively.
- *Response: Training on many topics, at many levels, is constantly performed all year long. The training needs change regularly, including regulatory changes that take priority, and are monitored by the 911 Division Chief and the training team.*
- Ensure that dispatchers are aware that messaging call-takers to obtain missing information needed by first responders is necessary to help ensure the safety of the public and first responders and is the proper procedure.
- *Response: This has been communicated several times in the past and is being reiterated again to confirm dispatchers are aware. Our recent roll over to the last of three standard call taking protocols on April 7 should provide improvements on this matter.*

Finding #5 Management Needs to Take More Steps to Develop a Positive Workplace Culture

- Management should routinely communicate the types of support resources that are available to the 911 professionals, make time to walk the Call Center floor to make sure that the Call Center is operating effectively, and find more ways to express their appreciation for the hard work performed by TCOs and Shift Commanders.
- *Response: Management will look for ways to add to the existing incentives provided to the 911 center staff. Management has and continues to add many opportunities of recognition of everyone within our department. Some examples include new TCO class formal graduations, well done notifications to the TCO's and Shift Commanders over many types of incidents, focused joint efforts during the holiday season, special events and TCO week annually. These are just a few examples that we continue to improve and expand on. The same holds true for walking the floor of the call center. Every effort at many levels of management is made to interact with the room, informally and formally. We will always work to improve these conditions.*
- Shift Commanders should make time each day to walk the floor and check in on TCOs to see whether they are doing OK or need assistance, and to help resolve any disagreements.

- *Response: We will continue to stress this need with the Shift Commanders. It is very important that the Shift Commanders engage with the TCO's.*
- TCOs should arrive at work on time wearing clothing permitted by the dress code and perform their job duties to the best of their ability while showing all of their coworkers respect.
- *Response: Management agrees.*