Recruitment and Retention Study Series

Telecommunications Officers

January, 2004

Recruitment and Retention Study Series

Telecommunications Officers

January, 2004

Prepared by:
Douglas L. Yearwood
Director, North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

North Carolina Sheriffs' Education & Training Standards
Commission

North Carolina Criminal Justice Education & Training Standards
Commission

North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Executive Summary

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel.

Based on the planning group's recommended plan of action a research study team was assembled which consisted of staff members from the three criminal justice commissions. The study team held several meetings and decided that the most appropriate course of action would be to conduct several smaller studies with each targeting the unique attributes and distinct features associated with recruiting and retaining sworn police personnel, sworn sheriff's office personnel, detention officers and public safety telecommunications officials. Thus, this report is one of four in a series which examine the issue of recruitment and retention among North Carolina's public safety agencies.

A three part, 22 item survey was developed by the study team and administered to 130 telecommunication centers which were randomly selected based upon a stratified sampling technique which divided the state's centers into four groups based on the number of full-time telecommunications personnel. One hundred and nineteen surveys were returned producing a response rate of 91.5 percent.

Over one-half (52.9%) of the responding telecommunicators described their agency's recruitment initiatives as being neutral. One in five (20.2%) described their agency's efforts as somewhat passive while 7.6 percent reported passive recruitment efforts. Slightly less than 17 percent (16.8%) noted that their respective agencies followed strategies which they perceived as being aggressive. Only two respondents (1.7%) suggested that a strongly aggressive recruitment effort was being implemented by their telecommunications' offices.

The most frequently employed recruitment technique was word of mouth (N=112) with 94 percent of the respondents indicating that this was the preferred method which their respective agencies used to recruit potential telecommunicators. The second most common recruitment technique was newspaper advertising (N=96, 80.7 %), followed by recruiting through the local personnel job listings (N=87, 73.1%) and use of the Internet (N=72, 60.5%). Recruitment through the Police Corps program and through radio and television advertising were less frequently used.

The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth (X=6.53), newspapers (X=5.14) and local personnel listings (X=4.99). Job fairs, the Police Corps program and radio/television advertising were perceived to be the least effective techniques suggesting that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, telecommunications agencies use what works the best for finding potential applicants.

Only 23 (19.3%) respondents noted that their respective offices currently have a backlog, or waiting list, of potential applicants. Of those agencies that do maintain waiting lists the number of individuals on these lists ranged from one to 211 with the average size of the telecommunicator backlog being 14.4 applicants.

Respondents were also asked to report the number of applicants that apply for each vacant telecommunicator position. The number of applicants, per position, ranged from one to 111 with the average number of applicants being 10.9 per vacant telecommunicator position.

Survey participants were given the opportunity to express ideas about improving future applicant pools; i.e. what policies, standards, programs and other plans could be developed in order to recruit more highly qualified telecommunications professionals. The most frequently suggested method for improving applicant pools was to increase current salaries and adopt standardized, structured and graduated pay scales. Education and training were also mentioned frequently with numerous respondents suggesting that telecommunicators should complete the basic certification course before being considered for employment. Stricter screening of applicants was also suggested with many respondents requesting state standards in the areas of psychological and cognitive testing. The ability to manage and handle stress was also considered extremely relevant and was mentioned, along with computer skills, as another area for pre-employment testing and as screening techniques to better identify qualified applicants.

The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. The most common barriers were agency budget restrictions (71.4%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (49.6%), specific duties associated with the job (38.7%), and competing with the private sector (27.7%). A lesser number of agency respondents reported that prior criminal histories (26.9%), agency size (24.4%) the current cost of living (22.7%) and agency location (15.3%) were problematic.

The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which telecommunication centers hire applicants who have already completed the basic telecommunicator certification course, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their training after employment. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to completing the basic certification course ranged from zero to 100 percent with 70 (58.8 %) agencies hiring all of their applicants first and then sponsoring their training after employment. Across the entire study sample the average telecommunications agency hires 23.8 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a certification program with the remaining 76.2 percent of the new hires being employed prior to completing the certification course.

Turnover rates, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 67 percent with an average telecommunicator turnover rate for those agencies in the sample of 16.4 percent. The majority of the survey respondents (57.8%) noted that their respective agency turnover rates have remained stable over the past three years. Slightly more than 20 percent of the agencies experienced an increase in telecommunicator turnover during the last three years while a comparable number of agencies experienced a declining turnover rate during this period.

Vacancy rates, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 100 percent with the average vacancy rate for telecommunicator positions being 8.2 percent. As with turnover rates the majority of the survey participants noted that their telecommunicator vacancy rates remained stable over the past three years (58.3%). Approximately one out of every four agencies experienced increasing vacancy rates during this period while less than 20 percent experienced decreasing vacancy rates over the course of the last three years.

Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective.
The most popular retention strategy was annual pay increases, irrespective of job performance, i.e. longevity and cost of living adjustments (80.7%). Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (68.9%) followed by assigning favorable work shifts (66.4%) and formal award and recognition ceremonies (65.5%).

The top two reasons offered by the respondents as to why their respective agencies lose telecommunicators were poor salaries (58%) and shift work which can lead to stress and job burnout (47.1%). Other reasons included: losing telecommunicators to the private sector, retirement, relocation to follow a spouse, leaving to create a family and medical complications.

Respondents were given a list of possible attrition factors with the leading attrition factor being identified as agency budget restrictions (84%), followed by transfers to other law enforcement agencies (69.7%), the specific duties associated with the job (58%), accepting positions in the private sector (57.1%) and retirement (50.4%).

A more in-depth examination of attrition and lateral transfers revealed that leaving the telecommunications field for work in the private sector was the most common attrition factor within this group with 63 percent of the respondents noting that this occurred within their respective agencies. Accepting employment with a larger law enforcement agency was more prevalent than other types of transfers within the law enforcement community. Of those agencies that lost telecommunicators less than one-third lost these professionals to smaller law enforcement agencies.

Irrespective of why telecommunicators resign, the length of service ranged from less than a month to 240 months with the average telecommunicator terminating employment after serving in this capacity for 30.9 months. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years and six months exists in which telecommunication centers and agencies can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize their attrition rates by retaining officers beyond this time period.

A series of policy-relevant research questions were examined using the survey data in an effort to further delineate recruitment and retention issues among the state's telecommunicators. Answers to these questions, actual quantitative survey data and the respondents' qualitative suggestions for improving recruitment and retention were compiled and analyzed to produce a series of five policy implications and recommendations. These included launching a more aggressive recruitment campaign, implementing more in-service training courses to include stress management, as well as developing other advanced training courses at the local community colleges. Recommendations also included studying the effects of shift work on telecommunicators and tightening the applicant screening procedures to include cognitive skills and psychological testing. Efforts should be directed at continuing discussions regarding the requirement that all telecommunicators complete basic training prior to employment.

Introduction/Study Rationale

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel. As part of this planning endeavor members of the three commissions were divided into four focus group teams – professional development, public policy, funding, and recruitment and retention. Each team reviewed the major issues and obstacles in their respective areas, outlined a series of goals and objectives, and concluded by formulating a specific plan of action to attain their stated goals. A summary of the work conducted by the recruitment and retention team is provided below with this report being a direct product of the focus team's recommendations.

Topics of Discussion

The recruitment and retention working group identified six major areas of discussion during the joint planning session:

1. Recruitment and retention of law enforcement and correctional personnel.

2. Law enforcement retirement.

3. Establish minimum screening standards for entrance into BLET.

4. Certification versus licensing.

5. State subsidized salary increases linked to professional certificate program.

6. Minimum salary for law enforcement officers.

Recruitment and Retention Objectives

Following the group's discussion of these topic areas, ten concrete objectives were delineated:

1. Develop partnerships with colleges and high schools (early recruitment).

2. Enhance the ability to identify and attract quality applicants.

3. Establish stronger minimum screening standards for BLET.

4. Become more competitive with the private sector.

5. Public recognition through marketing of the criminal justice profession.

6. Conduct a study which examines the recruitment and retention of criminal justice personnel.

7. Become more competitive with the private sector relative to compensation packages, i.e. salary, take-home vehicles, retirement plans and benefits.

8. Adequate resources relative to staffing, equipment and training.

9. Develop work environment competitively relative to overall employee wellness.

10. Review and further develop career opportunities.

Plan of Action

The focus team outlined a specific plan of action in order to achieve its objectives and better improve the recruitment and retention of criminal justice personnel in North Carolina. This plan consisted of the following key components:

1. Encourage criminal justice administrators to identify key decision-makers in schools for the purpose of developing early recruitment strategies and partnerships.

2. Assemble a recruitment and retention study team consisting of staff from the three commissions.

3. Develop a marketing strategy and disseminate recruitment packets.

4. Provide fiscal resources to support legislatively mandated initiatives.

5. Develop and implement a wellness program for criminal justice employees.

6. Develop and implement a program for upward and lateral mobility at all levels.

Based on the planning group's recommended plan of action a research study team was assembled which consisted of staff members from the three criminal justice commissions. The study team held several meetings and decided that the most appropriate course of action would be to conduct several smaller studies with each targeting the unique attributes and distinct features associated with recruiting and retaining sworn police personnel, sworn sheriff's office personnel, detention officers and public safety telecommunications officials. Thus, this report is one of four in a series which examine the issue of recruitment and retention among North Carolina's public safety agencies.

Methods

Survey Instrument

A three part, 22 item survey was developed by the study team with the first section of the questionnaire presenting questions which addressed the issue of recruiting telecommunications officials. The survey items dealt with recruitment strategies and techniques, the number of applicants and the extent to which the responding agency had a backlog or waiting list of potential candidates. Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on what course(s) of action should be undertaken to improve the recruitment of these officers and to build a more qualified applicant pool.

Part two addressed the issue of attrition and retention and included questions which were designed to detail the responding agency's turnover and vacancy rates and how these have varied over the past three years. Other questions focused on obstacles which hinder successful recruitment, techniques for retaining personnel and reasons why officers leave the agency. Respondents were also given the chance to offer suggestions for improving personnel retention.

The final section of the questionnaire allowed the agencies to note any concerns, comments or suggestions regarding all recruitment and retention issues which they felt should be brought to the attention of the three commissions. Respondents were also queried to determine if the responding agency conducted closeout interviews upon an applicant's exit from the agency.

Survey Sample

A list of North Carolina's public safety telecommunications agencies was provided by staff of the Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission and was used as the basis for selecting those agencies which would be included in the survey sample. The list

was divided into four groups, or quartiles, based upon the median number of telecommunications personnel.
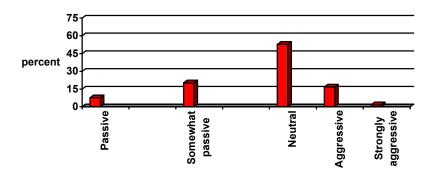
A proportionate number of agencies, relative to the percent of agencies in each of the four groups, were sampled and selected to receive a copy of the survey in the mail. A total of 130 surveys were distributed with 36 (27.7 %) going to agencies with more than 11 officers, 33 (25.4%) to agencies with seven to 11 telecommunicators and 28 (21.5%) being mailed to agencies with four to six telecommunicators. The remaining 33 surveys (25.4%) were mailed to the state's smallest telecommunications agencies as defined as having fewer than four telecommunicators.

Results

A total of 119 surveys were completed and returned by individuals from the sampled telecommunications' offices. This equates to a 91.5 percent return rate for the study.

Recruitment Issues

Figure 1   Perceived Strength of Agency Recruitment Strategy

As Figure 1 depicts over one-half (52.9%) of the responding telecommunicators described their agency's recruitment initiatives as being neutral. One in five (20.2%) described their agency's efforts as somewhat passive while 7.6 percent reported passive recruitment efforts. Slightly less than 17 percent (16.8%) noted that their respective agencies followed strategies which they perceived as being aggressive. Only two respondents (1.7%) suggested that a strongly aggressive recruitment effort was being implemented by their telecommunications' offices.

The most frequently employed recruitment technique was word of mouth (N=112) with 94 percent of the respondents indicating that this was the preferred method which their respective agencies used to recruit potential telecommunicators. The second most common recruitment technique was newspaper advertising (N=96, 80.7 %), followed by recruiting through the local personnel job listings (N=87, 73.1%) and use of the Internet (N=72, 60.5%). Recruitment through the Police Corps program and through radio and television advertising were less frequently used (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1 also depicts the average effectiveness rating for the nine recruitment techniques which were listed in the survey. The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth (X=6.53), newspapers (X=5.14) and local personnel listings (X=4.99). Job fairs, the Police Corps program and radio/television advertising were perceived to be the least effective techniques suggesting that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, telecommunications agencies use what works the best for finding potential applicants.

Table 1   Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Word of mouth	112	94.0 %	6.53
Newspaper	96	80.7 %	5.14
Personnel listings	87	73.1 %	4.99
Internet	72	60.5 %	3.79
Community College	54	45.4 %	2.74
Auxiliary/Reserve Force	53	44.5 %	3.11
Job Fairs	49	41.1 %	1.94
Radio/TV	45	37.8 %	1.42
Police Corps	39	32.8 %	.77

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all recruitment techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

When asked to explain the most beneficial recruitment strategies the respondents overwhelmingly noted that word of mouth was the most effective technique. It was even more effective when the telecommunicators personally knew the potential applicants and discussed open positions with individuals who were already employed in law enforcement, fire and emergency services positions. Several respondents noted that newspapers were effective for generating a large applicant pool but on many occasions these applicants were not highly qualified or in some cases ineligible because of existing criminal histories.

Only 23 (19.3%) respondents noted that their respective offices currently have a backlog, or waiting list, of potential applicants.   Of those agencies that do maintain waiting lists the number of individuals on these lists ranged from one to 211 with the average size of the telecommunicator backlog being 14.4 applicants.

Respondents were also asked to report the number of applicants that apply for each vacant telecommunicator position. The number of applicants per position ranged from one to 111 with the average number of applicants being 10.9 per vacant telecommunicator position.

Survey participants were given the opportunity to express ideas about improving future applicant pools; i.e. what policies, standards, programs and other plans could be developed in order to recruit more highly qualified telecommunications professionals.
The most frequently suggested method for improving applicant pools was to increase current salaries and adopt standardized, structured and graduated pay scales. Education and training were also mentioned frequently with numerous respondents suggesting that telecommunicators should complete the basic certification course before being considered for employment. Stricter screening of applicants was also suggested with many respondents requesting state standards in the areas of psychological and cognitive testing. The ability to manage and handle stress was also considered extremely relevant and was mentioned, along with computer skills, as another area for pre-employment testing and as screening techniques to better identify qualified applicants.

Illustrative comments are provided below:

- " Recognize the telecommunicator as a true emergency service professional. Pay packages as an incentive. Extended benefits and retirement packages as provided for current law enforcement."

- " Increase salaries and working conditions. "

- " Increased salary bases-example is Chicago PD which required minimum of 5 years line experience before reassignment-telecommunications was the highest non command position."

- " Develop a public safety curriculum at the community college level offering classes such as typing, psychology, computer programs, social behavior etc. "

- " Telecommunicators should have basic training on the same order as certified law enforcement officers. "

- " It would be good if there was a training program for telecommunicators at area community colleges like BLET. "

- " Increase base pay and minimum standards-i.e. reading and comprehension standards-would mean fewer applicants but maybe more qualified. "

- " Offer a course similar to BLET where the student can obtain all necessary certifications i.e. DCI, Telecommunicator-EMD-typing-stress management-etc. "

- " Offer telecommunicators class at least once per year at local community colleges or fire schools. "

- " Have a structured pay scale and abide by it. There are never any merit increases therefore no incentive to remain or continue to be more productive also very little incentive for promotion. "

- " Make training easier to get to and more of it. "

- " Maybe some type of certificate or degree program at the community college level for Emergency Service Telecommunicators. "

- " Typing, hearing, psychological tests required. "

- " Develop consistent training & standards for all telecommunicators regardless of agency type; develop AA degree in community colleges.

- " Prospective applicants should complete certification course FIRST before applying; statewide testing standards (skills, motor, cognitive) for all applicants who interview. "

- " Mandatory basic telecommunicator certification across all communication centers in N.C. "

- " Courses to have applicants pre-qualified before interviewing; better defined guidelines to get fully qualified applicants. "

- " Statewide certification of all telecommunicators. "

- " Certified as such; should be certification across the board for both sheriffs and police. "

- " Community colleges should start certification course versus sending everyone to the Justice Academy. "

The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. As Figures 2 and 3 suggest the most common barriers were agency budget restrictions (71.4%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (49.6%), specific duties associated with the job (38.7%), and competing with the private sector (27.7%). A lesser number of agency respondents reported that prior criminal histories (26.9%), agency size (24.4%) the current cost of living (22.7%) and agency location (15.3%) were problematic.

Figure 2   Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates
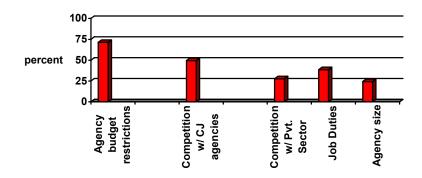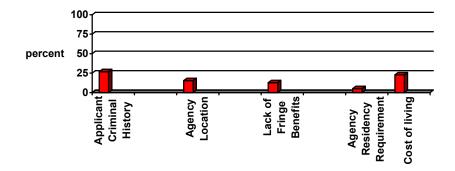

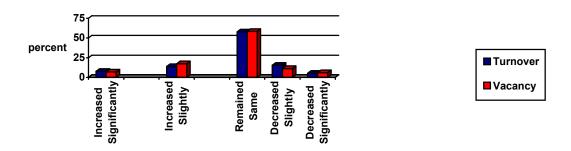Figure 3   Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates

Other barriers included the perception that telecommunications is not seen as a true profession, drug testing, the lack of free and readily available training, and the fact that many applicants lack a true awareness of the job duties and heavy responsibilities.

The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which telecommunication centers hire applicants who have already completed the basic telecommunicator certification course, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their training after employment. Survey questions addressed both sides of the coin by soliciting participants to state the percent of both pre and post-certification hires. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to completing the basic certification course ranged from zero to 100 percent with 70 (58.8 %) agencies hiring all of their applicants first and then sponsoring their training after employment. Across the entire study sample the average telecommunications agency hires 23.8 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a certification program with the remaining 76.2 percent of the new hires being employed prior to completing the certification course.

Attrition and Retention Issues

Turnover rates, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 67 percent with an average telecommunicator turnover rate for those agencies in the sample of 16.4 percent. As Figure 4 reveals the majority of the survey respondents (57.8%) noted that their respective agency turnover rates have remained stable over the past three years. Slightly more than 20 percent of the agencies experienced an increase in telecommunicator turnover during the last three years while a comparable number of agencies experienced a declining turnover rate during this period.

Figure 4   Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years

Vacancy rates, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 100 percent with the average vacancy rate, for telecommunicator positions, being 8.2 percent. As with turnover rates the majority of the survey participants noted that their telecommunicator vacancy rates remained stable over the past three years (58.3%). Approximately one out of every four agencies experienced increasing vacancy rates during this period while less than 20 percent experienced decreasing vacancy rates over the course of the last three years.

Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique which is used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective.
As Table 2 reveals the most popular retention strategy was annual pay increases, irrespective of job performance, i.e. longevity and cost of living adjustments (80.7%). Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (68.9%) followed by assigning favorable work shifts (66.4%) and formal award and recognition ceremonies (65.5%).

Survey participant ratings on the effectiveness of the six retention techniques are also provided in Table 2. As a general rule the most frequently used retention techniques were also perceived to be the most effective with the exception of promotions which were perceived to be the least effective technique for retaining telecommunicators.

Table 2   Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Annual pay increase irrespective of performance	96	80.7%	4.96
Education/training agency expense	82	68.9%	4.60
Assigned favorable work shift	79	66.4%	4.25
Formal awards, recognition	78	65.5%	3.29
Annual pay increase performance based	73	61.3%	4.71
Promotions	63	52.9%	2.27

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all retention techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

The top two reasons offered by the respondents as to why their respective agencies lose telecommunicators were poor salaries (58%) and shift work which can lead to stress and job burnout (47.1%). Other reasons included: losing telecommunicators to the private sector, retirement, relocation to follow a spouse, leaving to create a family and medical complications.

Suggestions for improving retention rates corresponded to these problems with the majority of the respondents noting that increasing pay and making current pay rates more competitive would improve telecommunicator retention. Reducing the number of hours per shift or offering more flexible scheduling was proffered as another means for reducing attrition. Selected comments are listed below.

- " Need more pay and additional personnel. "

- " More recognition -better salary-more in service classes by NCJA. "

- " County set a better pay plan-Implement steps like T/C I -II-III-Hire more people to help reduce work load. "

- " Increase pay and benefits-Possible incentive program-Pay in relation to job responsibilities, implement pay grade-step program in relation to training/education attained. "

- " Creation and implementation of a career ladder with a minimum of 3 steps in each grade for telecommunicators and shift supervisors. "

- " Make telecommunicator part of law enforcement retirement so the retirement is the same. - More classes on stress management. "

- " Education opportunities. Paid overtime. Stress management. "

- " Standardized training for all agencies. "

- " Better training, stress test, provide sample of policy and procedures to applicants.

- "Recognition for a job well done, County policy for pay increases, Have annual training in all aspects of telecommunications. "

- " Competitive salaries, flexible scheduling, increase staffing levels. "

- " Increases based on performance; more staff to distribute workload; stress mgmt training. "

- " Certified training; more staff, shorter work hours, salary based on experience & certifications.

- " Salary plan; increase staff to shorten shifts, implement supervisory positions. "

Table 3 depicts the causal factors for telecommunicator attrition and the number of respondents who noted that these factors directly impacted upon their agency and its telecommunicator workforce. The leading attrition factor was agency budget restrictions (84%), followed by transfers to other law enforcement agencies (69.7%), the specific duties associated with the job (58%), accepting positions in the private sector (57.1%) and retirement (50.4%).

Table 3　　　　Causal Factors for Telecommunicator Attrition Rates

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Agency budget Restrictions	100	84.0%
Transfer to another law enforcement agency	83	69.7%
Specific job duties	69	58.0%
Left for private sector	68	57.1%
Retirement	60	50.4%
Unrealistic officer expectations	56	47.1%
Prior criminal history/ Decertification	56	47.1%
Lack of fringe benefits	53	44.5%
Cost of living	52	43.7%
Agency location	42	35.3%
Agency residency requirement	40	33.6%

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all attrition factors which affect their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

Thirty-two of the survey respondents noted that agency budget restrictions accounted for 50 percent or more of their total attrition rate while 22 respondents noted that 50 percent or more of their agency attrition rates were explained by telecommunicators leaving for employment in the private sector. Approximately one-fourth of the surveyed agencies lost at least 50 percent or more of their total telecommunicator workforce to transfers to other law enforcement agencies while 17 agencies lost 50 percent or more of their telecommunicators as a result of the specific job duties such as stress and shift work. Thus the data suggest that agency budget restrictions, accepting employment with other law

enforcement agencies and the private sector, as well as the specific duties associated with telecommunications, are significantly driving attrition rates for this profession.

Table 4 presents a more detailed breakdown for the attrition factors of accepting employment in the private sector and transfers to other law enforcement agencies. Leaving the telecommunications field for work in the private sector was the most common attrition factor within this group with 63 percent of the respondents noting that this occurred within their respective agencies. Accepting employment with a larger law enforcement agency was more prevalent than other types of transfers within the law enforcement community. Of those agencies that lost telecommunicators less than one-third lost these professionals to smaller law enforcement agencies.

Table 4   Telecommunicator Attrition Rates – Lateral Transfers and Private Sector

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Employment within private sector	75	63.0%
Employment with larger law enforcement agency	71	59.7%
Employment with same size law enforcement agency	47	39.5%
Employment with state law enforcement agency	45	37.8%
Employment with smaller size agency	37	31.1%

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all possible lateral transfer types which affect their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

Irrespective of why telecommunicators resign the length of service ranged from less than a month to 240 months with the average telecommunicator terminating employment after serving in this capacity for 30.9 months. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years and six months exists in which telecommunication centers and agencies can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize their attrition rates by retaining officers beyond this time period.

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to discuss or note any comments related to the recruitment and retention of telecommunicators. Few responses were given but did include the following:

- " Telecommunicators not treated as professionals, should get same benefits as police officers. "

- "Local governments need to recognize importance of job and compensate accordingly. "

- " Community colleges should start course on emergency call taking or dispatching for those interested. "

- "Sheriffs Standards should offer a wider range of classes in more locations. "

- " Consider mandatory state certification for ALL. "

Research Questions

1. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of their recruitment strategies?

No, telecommunication agencies with low attrition rates do not differ significantly from agencies with high attrition rates in terms of how often they use the various recruitment strategies. However, those agencies with lower attrition rates demonstrated a tendency to use the Internet and Auxiliary/Reserve forces slightly more than agencies with higher attrition rates.

2. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of how each group rates the effectiveness of their recruitment strategies?

Yes, but only for one of the nine recruitment strategies included in the study. Paradoxically those agencies with higher attrition rates tended to rank the effectiveness of the Internet as a recruitment tool much higher than those agencies with lower attrition rates.

3. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of how each group rates the effectiveness of their retention strategies?

No, agencies with higher attrition rates do not differ significantly from those agencies with lower rates in terms of how the effectiveness of the retention strategies are perceived. Both groups perceive each of the six retention strategies as outlined in the survey as being equally effective, or equally non effective, in terms of retaining telecommunications personnel.

4. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of how long employees stay in the organization before resigning?

No, surprisingly, length of stay does not differ significantly for the two groups. While the length of stay was longer (31.5 months) in agencies with lower attrition rates compared to the length of stay in agencies with higher rates (26.9 months) this difference was not statistically significant.

5. In terms of recruitment techniques and their perceived effectiveness do agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies differ from those with neutral and passive recruitment strategies?

No, significant differences do not exist between agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies and those with neutral or passive strategies in terms of which recruitment techniques they use nor in the perceived effectiveness of these techniques.

6. Do agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies have lower turnover and vacancy rates when compared to those agencies employing neutral and passive recruitment strategies?

No, surprisingly, turnover and vacancy rates are not significantly related to the magnitude of an agency's recruitment strategy. Agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies do not have significantly lower turnover and vacancy rates as one would postulate.

7. Do agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies retain telecommunicators longer when compared to agencies with neutral and passive strategies?

Yes, agencies with aggressive strategies do differ significantly from those with passive strategies. Those agencies with passive strategies retain telecommunicators for an average of 44 months versus agencies with aggressive strategies which retain telecommunicators for a significantly lesser amount of time (20 months). Thus, agencies which are losing personnel within a quicker time frame tend to be more assertive, as one would predict, in their recruitment efforts. Agencies with neutral strategies do not differ significantly from agencies with aggressive strategies or from agencies with passive strategies.

8. Do agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies differ from those with neutral and passive strategies in terms of the size of their respective waiting lists or backlog of applicants?

    Yes, aggressive agencies have significantly fewer applicants on waiting lists (X=2.4) versus agencies with passive recruitment strategies (X=59.7). Agencies with passive strategies also have significantly larger backlogs compared to agencies reporting neutral recruitment strategies (X=4.0). No significant differences existed between aggressive agencies and neutral agencies.

Discussion and Policy Implications/Recommendations

Survey findings indicate that less than 20 percent of the telecommunication agencies and centers are currently engaged in aggressive recruitment efforts. Over one-half of these agencies' formal recruitment endeavors are best described as neutral with the remaining agencies demonstrating passive recruitment efforts.

Recommendation # 1

A more aggressive and proactive recruitment strategy should be adopted and implemented by those agencies which are losing employees within a relatively short time after their initial hiring date and by those agencies which do not have sizeable applicant pools. As part of this increased outreach an intense public relations campaign should be launched with the goal of educating the public, and many law enforcement officers as well, as to the specific nature of telecommunications and the level of precision that are required for working in this field. Professionalizing the telecommunicator's duties and responsibilities would enhance the quality of applicants and enable members of the public and criminal justice system to realize that this profession requires more than simply talking on the phone and radio.

In addition to salary disparity and other pay equity issues, stress and burnout were frequently cited as a major causal factor for turnover among the state's telecommunicators. While increasing salaries would have a positive beneficial impact upon lowering turnover, current economic situations and agency budget restrictions preclude this from occurring in all but a few organizations and jurisdictions.

Recommendation # 2

Given the low probability of increasing salaries across the state, an alternative for reducing turnover and consequently bolstering retention would be to implement a greater number of in-service training programs oriented specifically to addressing stress and burnout within the telecommunications profession. Stress management courses should be encouraged.

In a similar vein respondents requested that more education and in-service training opportunities be created for telecommunicators. The positive value of allowing officers to pursue their education and attend in-service training has been documented with benefits accruing for both personnel and their respective agencies. Indeed 68.9 percent of the respondents noted that their agencies currently use this technique and reported its effectiveness for retaining telecommunicators as being second only to annual pay increases.

Recommendation # 3

Study the feasibility of and need for implementing more basic and in-service training courses and opportunities in the area of telecommunications. This should include developing courses at the local community colleges as well as expanding training currently offered by the North Carolina Justice Academy.

Perhaps one of the driving forces behind telecommunicator attrition due to stress and burnout is the nature of the work environment; specifically the impact and effects of shift work. Indeed, slightly less than one-half, 47%, of the respondents specifically attributed turnover to shift work.

Recommendation # 4

Research the effects of shift work on the telecommunicator position with an emphasis on comparing and contrasting the 8-hour shift with the 12-hour shift. Various personnel scheduling patterns and techniques should be examined with an emphasis on how these can aggravate or mitigate telecommunicator stress and job burnout.

Survey responses indicate that a percentage of the respondents desire heightened standards as related to the applicant screening process with some even suggesting that all applicants be required to complete the basic telecommunicator course before beginning employment.

Recommendation # 5

Initiate discussions on intensifying or tightening applicant screening with an emphasis on requiring cognitive skills assessment and psychological testing as part of the application process. Perhaps pilot test a telecommunicator assessment/simulation center at the Justice Academy and select community colleges. Continue discussions on the feasibility and costs associated with requiring all telecommunicators to complete basic training prior to employment.