



OPEN WAVELENGTH

Creating a Culture of Wellbeing in Canadian Dispatch Centres

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A recent national study found that 24% of Canadian public safety communicators, including 9-1-1 dispatchers, screened positive for symptoms consistent with PTSD. Nearly half reported clinically significant symptoms of depression or anxiety (1). These statistics don't exist in a vacuum. They illustrate what your coworkers and teams are actively going through and emphasize a need for real change in the field. These are the professionals who answer the most desperate calls for help, who talk people through unimaginable situations, who carry the weight of other people's worst days. Despite this life-saving work, telecommunicators often don't get the same recognition or support as the officers, paramedics and firefighters they dispatch.

When a dispatcher's mental health suffers, the greater effects are not limited to job performance. A lack of wellness support negatively impacts how emergency responders interact with coworkers, their own families and the public they serve.

Why Don't People Seek Help?

Before we can make positive changes to the culture of wellness in telecommunications, we need

to understand what's preventing people from getting the help they need.

- **Stigma:** In public safety, there is a strong culture of resilience and toughness. The fear of professional consequences and judgment from peers can make reaching out for help feel like you're admitting you're not cut out for the job.
- **Access barriers:** A lack of providers who understand first responder trauma, high costs, long wait times, and few services specifically tailored to what dispatchers deal with make it even harder for operators to get help.
- **Self-denial:** Working a high-stress job like telecommunications can desensitize you and make it harder to recognize when you need help. Coupled with stigma, it can be easy for operators to convince themselves that they don't need additional support.
- **Procedural barriers:** Finding a provider, scheduling appointments, and navigating the health-care system can become overwhelming when you're already in crisis.

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To establish a program that people will benefit from, these barriers need to be addressed head-on.

The Five Pillars of a Successful Wellness Program

When we look at effective wellness programs across Canadian agencies, they tend to share five core elements:

- **Early identification:** This component emphasizes the need for wellness programs to be proactive rather than reactive. Tracking exposure to traumatic incidents and watching for behavioural changes can help personnel before they're in a state of crisis, not after.
- **Case management:** Offering targeted resources and implementing a structured follow-up system helps ensure that no one is overlooked.
- **Peer support:** When someone who's been through similar experiences reaches out, it can help encourage staff to open up and address their mental health struggles. Peers can bridge the gap between struggling alone and seeking professional help.
- **Supervisor oversight:** Leadership sets the tone for wellness culture. They're often the first to notice when someone's struggling, and they need the training and tools to respond appropriately.
- **Self-service content:** On-demand resources, self-assessments and coping strategies empower personnel to take control of their own wellbeing. These tools should be available whenever someone needs them, not just during business hours.

How Technology Can Support Mental Wellness

Rather than implementing a siloed system that creates more responsibilities for telecommunicators, wellness tools can be thoughtfully integrated into already established workflows.

Efficient call-handling systems reduce workload stress and swivel chair processes. Your computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system and records management system (RMS) are already capturing data on exposure to difficult calls. What if that data could automatically trigger a peer support check-in when someone hits a certain threshold? This allows leadership to address cumulative trauma in a proactive way.

Mobile wellness apps provide 24/7 access to resources, an important feature for shift workers. When a 9-1-1 operator needs support at 3 a.m. after a traumatic call, resources need to extend past the 9-to-5 business day.

Integrated and purpose-built wellness technology can help bridge the gap between telecommunicators and mental health support. For individuals, this means mobile access to self-care techniques and agency-tailored resources. For peer support teams, it means automatic triggers based on exposure data. Most importantly, integration needs to be seamless and provide value to its users. If wellness tools feel like another burden during an already stressful shift, telecommunicators won't benefit from them.

What We've Learned from Implementation

Successful wellness programs share common characteristics. Leadership and frontline staff need to believe in the beneficial impact of their mental health offerings. Staff feedback, along with CAD and RMS data, can help you refine your processes and adapt them to better serve your personnel.

Successful wellness programs are holistic, addressing physical and mental health, and acknowledging their connection to an operator's overall wellness. Content is kept up to date, with resources that understand the realities of modern telecommunications. These programs offer variety, realizing that support is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Peer support, counseling, and self-directed resources help to meet each staff member in a way that best serves them.

In order for a wellness program to truly benefit telecommunicators, it must be built on trust and confidentiality. Your staff should be confident that reaching out for help won't negatively affect their careers down the line.

Successful programs spotlight authentic storytellers. Lifting up real people who are open to sharing their experience helps reduce stigma more than any policy statement. Call centre programs can also improve from outside influences. Small and large agencies face different challenges, but starting a conversation about successes and shortcomings can help you refine your department's program.

Lastly, recognize that a good wellness program does more than support your current team. It can be an effective tool for recruiting new staff and helping improve retention within the field.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Canadian agencies are starting to recognize that dispatcher wellness isn't a just a nice feature, it's a foundational part of a successful call centre. The statistics on 9-1-1 operator mental health are alarming, but they also represent an opportunity for meaningful change.

By implementing evidence-based wellness programs built on the five pillars and integrating technology thoughtfully, agencies can create a culture where seeking support is encouraged, and personnel have the resources they need to thrive. Investing in a wellness program pays dividends in reduced turnover and improved morale. When dispatchers are supported, they can better support their communities in moments of crisis.

The question is no longer whether to implement a comprehensive wellness program, but how to choose one that best supports your staff. Telecommunicators serve on the invisible front lines of emergency response. They are the voices that calm panicked callers and the hearts that bear the weight of their communities' most difficult days. Their dedication and investment in our communities deserve our unwavering commitment to their well-being.

References

1. Howe E, Czarnuch S, Ricciardelli R, Leduc N. Exploring Canadian Public Safety Communicator Mental Health Help-Seeking Behaviors. *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*. 2025 Mar 19;35(2).