

White Paper

# 5 Ways COVID-19 is Reshaping Emergency Communications Centers

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The operations and working standards of emergency communications centers (ECCs) have changed, maybe forever. Teams are being forced to rethink and adapt in order to persevere in the new normal.

## Introduction

Without question, 2020 was a year of change. What became new daily routines were previously unimaginable, priorities have been reordered, backup plans now have contingency plans, and there are new awkward uncertainties surrounding even our most basic interactions.

And while much hasn't changed to the mission of public safety communications, the operational perspective has had to be reimagined at a breakneck pace. New constraints and forced flexibility are leading the charge toward tomorrow. Aside from tightening budgets, unpredictable call volumes, and new directives, we're witnessing a historic shift in the way agencies must operate, as well as how they interact with each other and the communities they serve.

Historic changes are taking place at Emergency Communications Centers (ECCs or "PSAPs") around the globe. Here are just a few of the key trends occurring as a result of all that's changed in such a short period.

### 01. Rising Need for Mobile Capabilities

Maintaining communications during the pandemic has tested our ingenuity and resolve. Almost overnight, agency leaders have had to rework substantial parts of their operating strategies and business models.

With increasing body substance isolation (BSI) and social distancing precautions at work and limits on face-to-face dealings with the public, agencies are now handling more requests over the phone. And in some locations, community members are directly communicating with officers and emergency personnel via text, image sharing, and streaming applications.

Of course, this equates to a greater reliance on technology. In turn, agencies have begun the arduous task of equipping personnel with communication tools that are securely encrypted and have rich media capabilities. In addition to traditional LMR, more LTE devices, remote consoles, and broadband connections are being deployed in centers worldwide. For example, the Northeast Emergency Communications Center (NECOMM) in Missouri (USA) [deployed portable kits that enable employees the flexibility to perform all three of the PSAPs primary functions \(i.e., 9-1-1 call handling, computer aided dispatch \(CAD\) and radio communications\) from remote locations](#), including their personal residences when and as needed<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, as the public health crisis rages on, there's a growing demand to keep employees connected while, at the same time, lessening the need to share spaces or equipment. Although many agencies continue to rely solely on their traditional comms centers, others are activating their backup centers and exploring ways to enable essential personnel to work remotely. For example, the [911 Communications Center in Chatham County, Georgia](#)<sup>2</sup>, is utilizing both its primary and backup sites to help minimize exposure and ensure proper distancing protocols are in place throughout shifts.

Still, despite the successes, many ECCs lack the capacity for remote operations. In fact, a recent [NENA survey](#)<sup>3</sup> revealed, only 37% of respondents possess the capabilities to support PSAP operations either at separate government facilities or remotely from home. This finding is profoundly concerning, given the number of crises that could necessitate moving emergency communications offsite.



# 37%

ECCs that possess the capabilities to support operations either at a separate facility or remotely at home.

## 02. Renewed Calls for Alternative Funding

Despite the benefits of a technology boom, these upgrades translate to unexpected costs. Without question, the push for Next Generation capabilities is gaining momentum at a far greater pace than anticipated. To compensate, public safety agencies are restructuring priorities and stretching budgets past the breaking point. Often, this means taking funds away from other critical programs or purchases.

For instance, a follow-up [NENA survey](#)<sup>4</sup> reported nearly 40% of respondents are experiencing a change in purchasing plans due to COVID-19 impacts. A combination of inevitable budget cuts and tax shortfalls being the primary force behind scaling back. Given the uncertainty and ambiguities resulting from the public health crisis, the mounting financial challenges could prove unsustainable over time.

That's why there's a growing call for [federal programs to fund and support Next-Gen](#) communications. Yet, it remains to be seen whether these efforts will be

successful. In the interim, other funding pathways may include applying for government loan programs, such as those provided by the USDA<sup>5</sup>. Either way, it's crucial to explore options and understand grant and loan program dynamics before pursuing any of these routes.

Looking ahead, there's no denying smart technology is empowering change in this new reality. However, without the financial means available to facilitate these crucial upgrades, technology changes could signify a financial nightmare for public safety agencies everywhere.



# 40%

Experiencing a change in purchasing plans due to COVID-19 impacts

## 03. Increasing Demand for Partnerships

As ECCs continue to experience the strain of operating at high capacity for longer durations, more regions are exploring shared solutions. For example, PSAPs in [Indiana](#) and [Virginia](#)<sup>6</sup> have been leveraging ESInets to route calls through various 9-1-1 districts to balance resources and ensure service continuity throughout the pandemic.

Along these lines, agency leaders are now also constructing protocols and policies that can be adopted and applied across jurisdictional lines. And while every region is different, updates tend to include universal agreements concerning information collection, reporting, and scene management protocols.

Further, although reducing disparities is a primary goal, there are countless benefits to developing a unified approach. Not only does having a streamlined set of regional directives help communication personnel align tactics and strategies across borders and disciplines, but these documents also create unity and cohesion by assisting agencies in ensuring they are providing a baseline standard of training and care.

## 04. Shifting Focus Towards Intelligence

Today's pandemic is shedding light on the fact that the terms 'call taker' or 'radio operator' barely scratch the surface of what goes on behind communications center doors. In truth, communications personnel do more than just answer calls; they collect and analyze data and translate information into intelligence to determine and undertake the appropriate action.

Aside from emergency operations, communication centers are quickly becoming the central information hubs for community leaders, responders, and the public. Not only are staff fielding both emergency and non-emergency calls, but communications professionals are acting as the bridge between public safety officials and the community. PSAP staffers provide vital updates, guidance, and reassurance to the public. They also collect, assess, investigate, and disseminate critical information to in-field responders and area health officials.

To this end, the combination of analytical thinking and emotional intelligence has helped position emergency communications professionals as the go-to members of their organization. During an IWCE webinar wrap-up,

Tyrell Morris, executive director for the Orleans Parish Communications District, touched on the extent of his staff's duties<sup>7</sup>. "We began creating registries for special needs. We took a registry of people who needed home deliveries. We began to become the central place for information for everybody and really embraced that. And this, my friends, is the new normal for communications centers. We no longer are just sending police, fire, and EMS. We are becoming the central hubs of information for entire governments," said Morris.

In sum, today's ECCs have evolved from their legacy designation as merely call centers. Whether dealing with a natural disaster, human threat, or public health crisis, communication centers function as mission critical intelligence operations.

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- Tyrell Morris, executive director, Orleans Parish Communications District

## 05. Heightened Emphasis on Health & Safety

Growing concerns for the health and safety of personnel are leading to big changes in the way communications centers look and feel. Gone are the densely packed workstations and hidden dust bunnies of yesterday. Now console positions are cleaner, free of clutter, and spaced for social distancing. In addition, some agencies have also installed new air filtration and UV light sanitizing systems throughout their building's workspaces and common areas. What's more, hand sanitizer and disinfecting stations now occupy prime real estate.

Moreover, because both the [CDC](#)<sup>8</sup> and [OSHA](#)<sup>9</sup> call for safe work practices, such as increased health screening and monitoring for communications staff, masks and temperature checks have become part of everyday life. That said, meeting these new regulations has been challenging. Besides ongoing supply shortages, discrepancies over whether 9-1-1 staff qualify as first responders continues to pose regional obstacles in

securing PPE. In a [recent interview](#)<sup>10</sup>, NENA CEO Brian Fontes described the staffing situation as dire. "The 9-1-1 workforce was already stretched thin before this crisis, and we cannot afford to see our nation's PSAPs decimated by this pandemic," explained Fontes.

Consequently, in efforts to stave off workforce shortages, many ECCs are doing their best to lessen the chance of exposure by revamping their shift schedules and sick leave policies. For example, instead of normal rotations, some agencies are adjusting their rosters to allow for longer shifts across fewer workdays. Others have instituted hazard pay and increasing PTO benefits for personnel affected by public health crises. While it's too soon to tell whether these changes will be effective, the sheer level of commitment involved demonstrates how the emergency services community comes out in force to protect their members.



The 9-1-1 workforce was already stretched thin before this crisis, and we cannot afford to see our nation's PSAPs decimated by this pandemic

- Brian Fontes, NENA CEO

## Looking Ahead

Moving forward, there is little doubt—COVID-19 will leave deep scars on our nation's first responders and emergency service organizations. However, the lessons learned through these trials continue to spark ingenuity, drive technological enhancements, and boost resilience throughout communities and across the world.

Still, in adjusting to this new normal, we must also remember, we can't change the past, but we can control our approaches towards [preparedness and mitigation](#)<sup>11</sup>. Equally important, our response and recovery strategies must also prioritize situational awareness and build upon the principles of resourcefulness, flexibility, perseverance, and hope. To this degree, it will be paramount to direct some of our efforts inward.

Along with taxing so many, the pandemic has spotlighted rifts in operational continuity. Because of this, the industry will need to work beyond agency-specific efforts to address recruitment and retention concerns, alongside responder health and well-being. That said, non-profit organizations and industry resources are doing their part to extend funding and access to supportive services to

those on the front lines. For example, [The National Police Foundation launched a COVID-19 grant relief program](#) to specifically benefit first responders (including emergency communications personnel) and their families during COVID-19. Similar programs should follow.

Rounding out, the still developing events beginning in 2020 will continue to change the landscape of emergency communications. While there is bound to be some hard lessons and lasting impacts, perhaps we will find some solace in the clarity and ingenuity spawned from the mutual goal of protecting our fellow responders and serving our communities.

For more information concerning further funding and grant opportunities, visit [911.gov](#). Similarly, for additional PSAP resources related to the pandemic, stop by NENA's [COVID-19 page](#).

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