Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers

Summary

Dispatchers receive calls for emergency and non-emergency assistance.

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What Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers Do

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers, also called 9-1-1 operators or public safety telecommunicators, answer emergency and nonemergency calls.

Work Environment

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers work in emergency communication centers. Dispatchers must be available around the clock, so they often have to work evenings, weekends, and holidays. Overtime and long shifts—sometimes 12 hours—are common. The pressure to respond quickly and calmly in alarming situations can be stressful.

How to Become a Police, Fire, or Ambulance Dispatcher

Most police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers have a high school diploma. Many states require dispatchers to become certified.

Pay

The median annual wage for police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers was $36,300 in May 2012.

Job Outlook

Employment of police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers is projected to grow 8 percent from 2012 to 2022, about as fast as the average for all occupations. Although the prevalence of cellular phones has increased the number of calls that dispatchers receive, consolidation of call centers has increased responding efficiency. Job prospects should be good as the stressful nature of the job results in many workers leaving this occupation.

Similar Occupations
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Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers, also called 9-1-1 operators or public safety telecommunicators, answer emergency and nonemergency calls.

**Duties**

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers typically do the following:

- Answer 9-1-1 telephone calls
- Determine the type of emergency and its location
- Decide the appropriate response based on agency procedures
- Relay information to the appropriate first responder agency
- Coordinate the dispatch of emergency response personnel to accident scenes
- Give over-the-phone medical instructions before emergency personnel arrive
- Monitor and track the status of police, fire, and ambulance units
- Synchronize responses with other area communication centers
- Keep detailed records about calls

Dispatchers answer calls when someone needs help from police, fire fighters, emergency services, or a combination of the three. They take both emergency and nonemergency calls.

Dispatchers must stay calm while collecting vital information from callers to determine the severity of a situation and the location of those who need help. They then give the appropriate first-responder agencies information about the call.

Some dispatchers only take calls. Others use radios to send appropriate personnel. Many dispatchers do both.

Dispatchers keep detailed records about the calls that they take. They use computers to log important facts, such as the nature of the
incident and the name and location of the caller. Some location data is automatically entered into the system from GPS in cell phones and physical addresses of landline phones.

Some dispatchers also use crime databases, maps, and weather reports when helping emergency response teams. Other dispatchers monitor alarm systems, alerting law enforcement or fire personnel when a crime or fire occurs. In some situations, dispatchers must work with people in other jurisdictions to share information and transfer calls.

Dispatchers must often instruct callers on what to do before responders arrive. Many dispatchers are trained to offer medical help over the phone. For example, they might help the person on the line to provide first aid at the scene until emergency medical services arrive.

Work Environment

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers work in a communication center, often called a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP).

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers held about 98,500 jobs in 2012.

Dispatchers work in communication centers, often called Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP).

About 82 percent of dispatchers worked for local governments in 2012—the majority employed by law enforcement agencies and fire departments. Some dispatchers work for state governments or for private companies.

Work as a dispatcher can be stressful. They often work long hours, take many calls, and deal with troubling situations. Some calls require assisting people who are in life-threatening situations, and the pressure to respond quickly and calmly can be demanding.

Work Schedules

Most dispatchers work 8- to 12-hour shifts, but some agencies may use 24-hour shifts. Overtime is common in this occupation.

Because emergency calls can happen any time, dispatchers are required to work some shifts during evenings, weekends, and holidays.

How to Become a Police, Fire, or Ambulance Dispatcher
Most police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers have a high school diploma. Many states require dispatchers to have certification.

**Education**

Most dispatchers are required to have a high school diploma. In addition, candidates must pass a written exam and a typing test. In some instances, applicants may need to pass a background check, lie detector and drug tests, as well as tests for hearing and vision. Most states require dispatchers to be U.S. citizens, and some jobs require a driver’s license. Both computer skills and customer-service skills can be helpful. The ability to speak Spanish is desirable in this occupation as well.

**Training**

Training requirements vary by state. The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) can provide information on which states require training and certification.

Some states require 40 hours or more of initial training and some require continuing education every 2 to 3 years. Other states do not mandate any specific training, leaving individual localities and agencies to conduct their own courses.

Some agencies have their own programs for certifying dispatchers; others use training from a professional association. The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO), the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), and the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch (IAED) have established a number of recommended standards and best practices that agencies often use as a guideline for their own training programs.

Training is usually conducted in both a classroom and on the job, and is often followed by a probationary period of about 1 year. However, this may vary by agency as there is no national standard of how training is conducted or the length of probation.

Training covers a wide variety of topics, such as local geography, agency protocols, and standard procedures. Dispatchers are also taught how to use specialized equipment, such as a 2-way radio and computer-aided dispatch (CAD) software. Computer systems that dispatchers use consist of several monitors that display call information, location mapping, relevant criminal history, and video depending on the location of the incident. They often receive specialized training to prepare for high-risk incidents, such as a child abduction or a suicidal caller.

**Licenses, Certifications, and Registrations**

Many states require dispatchers to be certified. The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) has information on which states require training and certification. One commonly required certification is the Emergency Medical Dispatcher (EMD) certification, which enables dispatchers to give medical assistance over the phone.

Dispatchers may choose to pursue additional certifications, such as the National Emergency Number Association’s Emergency Number Professional (ENP) or APCO’s Registered Public-Safety Leader (RPL) certifications to prove their leadership skills and knowledge of the profession.

**Advancement**

Dispatchers can become senior dispatchers or supervisors before advancing to administrative positions, in which they may focus on a specific area, such as training or policy and procedures.

Additional education and related work experience may be helpful in advancing to management-level positions.
Important Qualities

**Ability to multitask.** Responding to an emergency over the phone can be stressful. Dispatchers must stay calm to simultaneously answer calls, collect vital information, coordinate responders, use mapping software and camera feeds, and assist callers.

**Communication skills.** Dispatchers work with law enforcement, emergency response teams, and civilians. They must be able to effectively communicate the nature of an emergency and coordinate the appropriate response.

**Decision-making skills.** Dispatchers must be able to choose wisely between tasks that are competing for their attention. They must be able to quickly determine the appropriate action when people call for help.

**Empathy.** People who call 9-1-1 are often in distress. Dispatchers must be willing and able to help callers with a wide range of needs. They must be calm, polite, and sympathetic, while also quickly getting information.

**Listening skills.** When answering an emergency call or handling radio communications, a dispatcher must listen carefully. Some callers might have trouble speaking because of anxiety or stress.

### Pay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers</th>
<th>Median annual wages, May 2012</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers</td>
<td>$36,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
<td>$34,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office and administrative support occupations</td>
<td>$31,510</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

The median annual wage for police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers was $36,300 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount, and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $23,190, and the top 10 percent earned more than $56,580.

Most dispatchers work 8- to 12-hour shifts, but some agencies may use 24-hour shifts. Overtime is common.

Because emergency calls can happen any time, dispatchers are required to work some shifts on evenings, weekends, and holidays.

### Job Outlook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers</th>
<th>Percent change in employment, projected 2012-22</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers</td>
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</table>
Employment of police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers is projected to grow 8 percent from 2012 to 2022, about as fast as the average for all occupations.

The prevalence of cellular phones has increased the number of calls that dispatchers receive, and this trend is expected to continue. A growing elderly population should also result in more emergency calls, requiring more dispatchers.

It is expected that Next Generation 9-1-1—a service that allows people to communicate through text and video messages with emergency dispatchers—will be implemented in the coming years. This development should also increase demand for dispatchers as emergency call centers will take in more information.

However, most police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers are employed by local and state governments. Therefore, any future budget constraints will likely limit the number of dispatchers hired in the coming decade.

**Job Prospects**

Overall job prospects should be favorable because the work of a dispatcher remains stressful and demanding, leading some applicants to seek other types of work.

Although employment growth will generate some job openings, the majority of positions will come from the need to replace the large number of dispatchers expected to transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

Those with good communication and computer skills should have the best job prospects.

### Employment projections data for Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers, 2012-22

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<tr>
<td>Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers</td>
<td>43-5031</td>
<td>98,500</td>
<td>106,200</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7,600</td>
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**SOURCE:** U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

### Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>JOB DUTIES</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</th>
<th>2012 MEDIAN PAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Air Traffic Controllers</td>
<td>Air traffic controllers coordinate the movement of air traffic to ensure that aircraft stay safe distances apart.</td>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
<td>$122,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMTs and Paramedics</td>
<td>Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics care for the sick or injured in emergency medical settings. People’s lives often depend on their quick reaction and competent care. EMTs and paramedics respond to emergency calls, performing medical services and transporting patients to medical facilities.</td>
<td>Postsecondary non-degree award</td>
<td>$31,020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Customer Service Representatives

Customer service representatives handle customer complaints, process orders, and provide information about an organization’s products and services.

High school diploma or equivalent $30,580

Contacts for More Information

For more information about police, fire, and ambulance dispatcher training and certification, visit

Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials

International Academies of Emergency Dispatch

National Emergency Number Association

U.S. Department of Transportation’s National 911 Program

O*NET

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