The Calm During the Storm:

Identifying the Principles and Techniques

of De-Escalation among Police Dispatchers

by

Carlena A. Orosco

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Michael D. White, Chair
Henry F. Fradella
Danielle Wallace

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ABSTRACT

Dispatchers are the first point of contact for most citizens seeking police services, as well as the lifeline for officers in the field. Their ability to navigate high-stress situations and obtain information from callers is essential to the successful distribution of police resources. Though central to policing, research on dispatchers is quite limited, including the techniques they use to keep callers and officers calm. De-escalation is also underexplored in policing, but recent evaluations of de-escalation training have shown some promise for applications in the field, and reductions in use of force and citizen injuries. Until this project, the nexus of dispatching and de-escalation has not been explored in a way that provides insight from experts in the field who use a subset of skills and techniques to resolve volatile calls and radio transmissions. Using survey responses and semi-structured interviews with peer-nominated Top Dispatch De-Escalators in Tempe, Arizona, this exploratory, mixed-methods study is the first to provide a nuanced perspective of the ways dispatchers de-escalate elevated callers and officers in the field to resolve incidents peacefully. Results from the general survey indicate that dispatchers act professionally when interacting with citizens, care about callers, and treat them with respect. Communication, staying calm, and patience were ranked as the most important de-escalation tactics used in dispatching, with compromise being the lowest. Themes gathered from interviews with Top Dispatch De-Escalators shed light on the qualities embodied by an exceptional de-escalator, including listening and communication skills, transparency, and the ability to regulate emotion. Results also provide insight into the barriers that may prevent de-escalation, and recommendations for police agencies looking to bridge the gap that exists between dispatchers, other department personnel, and the community. Findings

shed light on the mental health-de-escalation nexus that exists, and the importance of improving conditions for dispatchers which has direct implications for one's ability to de-escalate. This study is the first to examine front-end de-escalation that occurs on the dispatcher side, revealing a missing link in the overall understanding of de-escalation and highlighting the crucial role of dispatch in reducing the potential for violence between community members and police.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing mom. Through the highest of highs, and the lowest of lows, your love and support have never wavered. From the days of hanging my spelling tests on the refrigerator as a little girl, to this final achievement of a doctoral dissertation, you have remained by my side.

I love you more than words can accurately express.

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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

THE INVISIBLE GATEKEEPERS

Dispatchers are the first point of contact for many citizens seeking police services, and they play a crucial role in effective police response. Dispatchers must interpret information expeditiously and precisely, and their decision-making often sets the tone for how a given incident will unfold upon officer arrival, impacting both officer and community safety (Regehr et al., 2013; Sewell & Crew, 1984) with potentially life-altering consequences (Hollway, Lee & Smoot, 2017; Taylor, 2020). Dispatchers are required to assess the nature of a call and the level of risk (Gillooly, 2020), classify the incident (Simpson & Orosco, 2021), coordinate and prioritize officer responses, and continue to manage the incident until it is resolved -all while operating under extreme time constraints.

Though not in a physical sense, dispatchers are the first on the scene. As such, the communication, critical thinking, and situational awareness abilities required to be an effective dispatcher resemble those of their sworn counterparts (Burke, 1995; Doerner, 1987; Meischke et al., 2018). Dispatchers have been labeled street-level bureaucrats (Antunes & Scott, 1981) for their ability to receive calls, obtain information from often hysterical callers, interpret details, and classify a response based on perceived seriousness (Antunes & Scott, 1981; Garcia & Parmer, 1999; Gillooly, 2020; Gilsinan, 1989; Manning, 1982; Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Orosco, 2021).

Unfortunately, little research attention is given to dispatchers as decision-makers (Antunes & Scott, 1981), despite the far-reaching impacts their choices may have on

community perceptions of the police (Flippin et al., 2019) and the distribution of police resources (Maxfield, 1982; Parnas, 1971; Varano et al., 2009). This lack of research on how these decisions are made leads to an incomplete understanding of how calls are processed from start to finish. This is particularly problematic given the responsibility dispatchers possess to interpret and classify calls and facilitate officer responses – including expediting them. Moreover, a few recent studies have highlighted how dispatchers can make things worse, not better. Taylor (2020) employed a dispatcher priming lens to explore the degree to which officers in the field rely on dispatcher information and how that information influences their decision to use force. Gillooly (2021) concluded that some dispatchers are considered alarmist and tend to assign a higher priority level to calls for service than those considered more reserved (Gillooly, 2021). More research is needed to better understand the critical role of dispatchers, specifically the strategies and techniques used while interacting with citizens and officers.

THE FAILURE TO PROPERLY TRAIN AND PREPARE DISPATCHERS

The tendency to ignore and undervalue dispatchers is also evident in the police profession, and it can lead to disastrous consequences. The actions of dispatchers have been dissected in the media in high-profile instances of misjudgment or misinterpretation (NBC News), failure to relay full call details to officers (Karma, 2020), inaccuracy (Ems1), inappropriate language (CNN), refusal to send officers (Local 12 News), inability to filter out calls with no evidence of wrongdoing, and use of language tinged with racist or discriminatory undertones (San Francisco Board of Supervisors).

Dispatchers are expected to perform efficiently, accurately, and reliably, but they are rarely given tools and resources to expand their skill set beyond the standard new hire

training that tends to vary by agency. Dispatcher training is typically centered on verbal formats, call codes, and interpreting data returns (Behr, 2000). There is little-to-no specialized training for dispatchers, and departments often neglect them when making decisions about advanced (or new) training. As a consequence, many dispatchers learn advanced skills "on the fly" at the hands of their assigned floor trainer. Much like field training officers (FTOs) on the sworn side, dispatch trainers are usually selected based on experience and expressions of interest, and most floor training is not delivered in a consistent, systematic fashion.

Moreover, communications centers are plagued by a recruitment and retention crisis which leads to reduced staffing levels (Fox 31), burnout, excessive sick time usage, and attrition (Kureczka, 1996; Meischke et al., 2018). This high rate of turnover (Ramey et al., 2016) makes it difficult for communications leadership to justify investment in quality training (Roberg et al., 1988). At the same time, dispatchers experience high levels of secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and PTSD because of the nature of the calls they receive, compounded by shift work (Barnum, 2011) and a lack of supervisor support (Meischke et al., 2018; Ramey et al., 2016; Regehr et al., 2013; Roberg et al., 1988).

The need for exceptional communication skills and adaptable call management is critical to the safe resolution of incidents for community members and officers. There is an urgent need for dispatchers to receive advanced training that provides those requisite skills. De-escalation training can do just that. De-escalation, loosely defined as using a variety of techniques to stabilize and resolve an interaction while reducing threats to safety for all involved, has shown tremendous promise for officers (White, Orosco et al.,

2021). Strategies can be verbal and non-verbal, and largely involve continuous assessment and effective communication techniques. Studies have demonstrated that de-escalation training can reduce use of force and injuries to officers (Engel et al., 2020), as well as decrease the incidence of citizen injuries (Engel et al., 2020; White, Orosco et al., 2021) and lead to favorable public perceptions (White, Orosco et al., 2021). The principles of de-escalation apply equally well to dispatchers as the first point of contact for most citizens who request police services. Dispatchers rely on effective communication strategies to calm callers, obtain information, and engage with officers in the field. To date, no studies have focused on identifying the skills used to de-escalate callers and officers in a dispatch context, or the barriers that prevent it. Understanding how dispatchers de-escalate is critical to our understanding of call resolution, and how dispatcher actions may improve the possibility for effective de-escalation of both community members and officers on scene. The current study fills this gap by enhancing our understanding of de-escalation by dispatchers. These findings have major implications for training, policy, and practice, and now serve as the foundation for a customized de-escalation curriculum being built for Tempe Police Department dispatchers.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The interactive nature of dispatch work presents numerous opportunities for resolution throughout the course of an incident, with each decision impacting the next. This transactional framework has been applied in a policing context (Binder & Scharf, 1980), and will serve as the framework used to explore dispatcher de-escalation. The limited evaluations on de-escalation training for officers show promising results in terms

of positively influencing both perceptions of de-escalation and the application of de-escalation in the field (Engel et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2020; White, Orosco et al., 2021). Dispatchers are the missing link in the resolution of potentially violent encounters, and it is crucial for research to explore their role in de-escalation.

This study fills a gap in our understanding of this important practice by identifying (1) the strategies and techniques dispatchers use to de-escalate callers and officers, and (2) the barriers to dispatcher de-escalation. The current study is grounded in several methods:

1. *Peer Nomination* – I conducted a two-level peer nomination process among Tempe Police Department Communications Center (TPDCC) staff to identify nine (trained in both call-taking and radio dispatch) Top Dispatch De-Escalators (TDDs) considered highly skilled at de-escalating citizens and officers. These peer-nominated TDDs are the focus of this research. They provide insights through semi-structured interviews and sit-alongs (sitting with a dispatcher and using a headset to listen to calls or radio traffic) and will continue to lend their expertise to future efforts.
2. *Dispatcher Perceptions Survey* – I administered a dispatcher perception survey to all TPDCC staff (N=30, excluding trainees) to capture information on the importance and frequency of tactics and strategies used to de-escalate callers and officers, tactics to avoid when attempting to calm highly unpredictable situations, and dispatcher mental health and wellness. These data were obtained to supplement the rich qualitative data gathered from the TDDs.

3. *Semi-structured Interviews* – I conducted series of in-person interviews with the nine TDDs. The interview protocol includes 24 interview questions developed using existing de-escalation interview protocols (White, Orosco et al., 2021), literature on dispatcher decision-making and call processing, as well as the researcher's own professional experience as a dispatcher. Although themes and questions were decided upon prior to the interviews (Given, 2008), the researcher was prepared for conversations and question order to shift based on the discussion. In other words, the interviews were free flowing. Interviews conducted with TDDs span numerous topics such as definitions of de-escalation, citizen and officer interactions, and barriers to effective de-escalation. Interviews were recorded, de-identified, and transcribed prior to analysis.

Given the lack of research on this topic, the current study is exploratory in nature. Discussions surrounding dispatchers and de-escalation are typically centered on behavioral health calls or crisis intervention and provide limited guidance for training and practice (see APCO, 2021). Emerging research on de-escalation training for sworn personnel offers a framework that will be adapted to the unique role of the dispatcher. The overall goal of the study is to improve our understanding of the role dispatchers can play in de-escalation during interactions with citizens and officers, and the degree to which dispatcher actions may improve officer and community safety through both pre-arrival and on-scene de-escalation. Given the recent interest in the role of dispatchers and national discussions surrounding their impact on the distribution of police resources, this study is both timely and informative for the development of more comprehensive training, sound policy, and practice. This study answers the following research questions:

RQ1 *How is de-escalation defined in a dispatch context?*
RQ2 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered most effective while de-escalating citizens?*
RQ3 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered most effective while de-escalating officers?*
RQ4 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered a hinderance to effective de-escalation with citizens?*
RQ5 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered a hinderance to effective de-escalation with officers?*
RQ6 *What are the stress management techniques used by dispatchers?*
RQ7 *How does the police department contribute to effective de-escalation?*
RQ8 *What are the biggest barriers to de-escalation?*

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

911 SYSTEMS

Dispatchers play a central role in the core function of police response through the 911 system, which transformed criminal justice entirely (Mazerolle et al., 2005). 911 was originally developed for the purpose of fire reporting and was later expanded to serve as the central response system for all emergency services, including police (Neusteter et al., 2019). Advancements in the technology of 911 and Next Generation 911 (NG911) systems have improved the capacity and efficiency exponentially, including screening and routing automation, as well as automatic location identification (911.gov; Neusteter et al., 2019). Though limited and flawed (Neusteter et al., 2019), E911 systems have continued to evolve since their inception.

The functions and operating procedures of Emergency Communications Centers (ECCs) also known as Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) vary greatly depending on the jurisdiction type and size. ECCs still operate independently in terms of their call routing, triage protocols, and prioritization guidelines. They also remain decentralized

(Neusteter et al., 2019), which creates challenges for widescale changes, or rigorous analysis of call data beyond basic totals. These differences in call processing practices mean that our understanding of call trends by type is also likely inaccurate (Simpson & Orosco, 2021). The National Emergency Number Association (NENA, 2020) and the Association of Public Safety Communications (APCO, 2021) have provided national-level guidance as a decision-making framework for classification and prioritization among agencies, yet the extent to which these guidelines have been adopted and implemented remains unknown. The nature of 911 systems, the challenges facing 911 call metrics, and response time are extremely worthy research topics, however, they are not a key focus of this study.

THE DECISION-MAKER BEHIND THE HEADSET

The dispatcher is the central node of the call for service framework, yet the position largely remains underexplored in the research. Much is known about the evolution of 911 systems, namely the impact this development has had on the ability for citizens to request police and medical services swiftly and easily (Neusteter et al., 2019). The emergence of streamlined 911 systems has resulted in an overwhelming number of calls for service, most of which are not life-threatening emergencies, but are exacerbated by citizen expectations of rapid response (Mazerolle et al., 2005). Non-emergency lines and 311 systems have been developed to lessen call load (Mazerolle et al., 2005), but they do not eliminate the need for dispatcher interpretation and decision-making (Antunes & Scott, 1981). Moreover, technological advancements have further complicated the role of the dispatcher (Simpson, 2020) by broadening their reach and requiring more knowledge of resources and incident protocols.

The hidden nature of dispatch work has led to them being all but excluded from policing research (Simpson, 2020). The first point of contact is commonly attributed to the officer responding to the scene, though that is most often not the case with citizen-generated calls for service. Scholars (the researcher included) with practical experience in this profession (see Gillooly 2020; 2021; Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Orosco, 2021) have attempted to draw attention to the dynamic and powerful impact that the dispatcher has, as well as the intricate nature of their daily duties that cannot be fully gleaned without firsthand experience. Access to communication centers and dispatchers is a challenge in itself given the sensitive nature of 911 calls, and this limitation has been amplified with the recent COVID-19 pandemic and concerns for employee and researcher safety. Access is still a possibility with strong partnerships and research agreements (Simpson, 2020), and has led to studies on dispatcher and dispatch operations (e.g., Garcia & Parmer, 1999; Gilsinan, 1989; Herbst & Walker, 2001; Lum et al., 2020; Manning, 1982; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990). Others have adapted to these constraints through the use of vignettes (Flippin et al., 2019) and computer simulation with scenarios (Taylor, 2020). Findings have consistently reiterated the gatekeeping role of the dispatcher and highlighted the immense discretion inherent in this position (Antunes & Scott, 1981; Gillooly, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Neusteter et al., 2019; Simpson & Orosco, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Existing research has highlighted the depth and breadth of influence a dispatcher has in policing and the criminal justice system more broadly (Lum et al., 2020), namely citizen perceptions (Flippin et al., 2019), call classification (Simpson & Orosco, 2021), officer behaviors (Taylor, 2020), the decision to respond (Lum et al., 2020), the priority level of said responses (Gillooly, 2020; 2021), and the extent of information sought and

provided to all involved (Garcia & Parmer, 1999). Dispatchers are tasked with receiving, deciphering, assessing, processing, classifying (Gilsinan, 1989; Manning, 1988), and prioritizing information within a short time frame, often while operating multiple radio frequencies simultaneously (Simpson, 2020). Their decision-making is often hampered by ambiguous call details and almost infinite possibilities for call classification categories that may change as more information is obtained during the call, and upon officer arrival (Simpson & Orosco, 2021). Those tasked with receiving 911 calls play an information game throughout the course of the interaction (Garcia & Parmer, 1999), operating with a sense of skepticism while trying to discern fact from perceived fiction (Garcia & Parmer, 1999; Goffman, 1959) and formulating what is believed to be an appropriate response for the situation.

On top of these substantial responsibilities and inconsistent guidelines, dispatchers bear immense legal and safety liability for any errors or miscalculations they make based on their call assessment (Clawson et al., 2018). Guidance on verbal formats and flowcharts for common incidents and crisis calls are available (APCO, 2021), but cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of calls for service. Developments such as Criteria Based Dispatch (CBD), originally used to triage medical calls for service, have been sparsely applied in a public safety setting to assist with the accurate classification of calls based on the level of need, and the urgency of the incident (Wunschel & Bodah, 2020), but full-scale evaluations of the efficacy in a public safety setting are not currently available.

Many calls for service are routine, but the dispatcher is expected to perform with the same level of accuracy, efficiency, and professionalism when faced with an escalated

citizen, or a critical incident involving an officer. They are required to determine which calls need to be routed to the fire department for medical rescue, as well as those that necessitate additional services such as crisis intervention or substance abuse treatment. Dispatchers do not receive comprehensive training related to mental health crises and negotiations, nor are they equipped with sufficient resources such as behavioral health partner agencies (Pew, 2021; Wayne State University, 2021). Many calls for service do not involve violence against persons or threats to property; calls for service related to mental health crises are among the most frequent calls received though an exact number is difficult to quantify (Neusteter et al., 2019; Pew, 2021; Wayne State University, 2021). These calls require a specific set of skills to produce an appropriate response, and many agencies have begun to explore the inclusion of crisis response teams or in-house clinicians as a result (Pew, 2021). Variations of the call-taking process have appeared in the literature; however, Figure 1 depicts the flow of a call for service more broadly, understanding that agencies may employ unique decision points or call entry policies. It illustrates the complexity of the process, and the skills needed to manage the call-taking and radio communication process effectively and safely. This complex process requires critical thinking, accuracy, efficiency, and a reliance upon training foundations and experience.

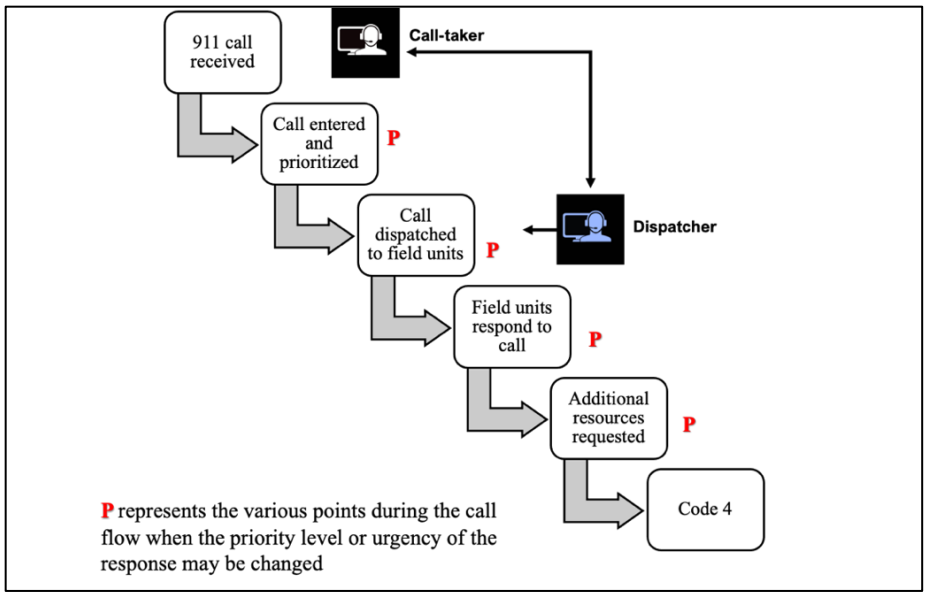

Figure 1. Call for Service Flow

Figure 2 shows the different dispatcher classifications based on responsibilities. Some are cross trained in both roles, handling citizen calls and radio traffic within the same shift, or simultaneously. For this study, the term dispatcher will refer to both call-takers and radio dispatchers, as TPDCC cross-trains its dispatchers to work in both posts.

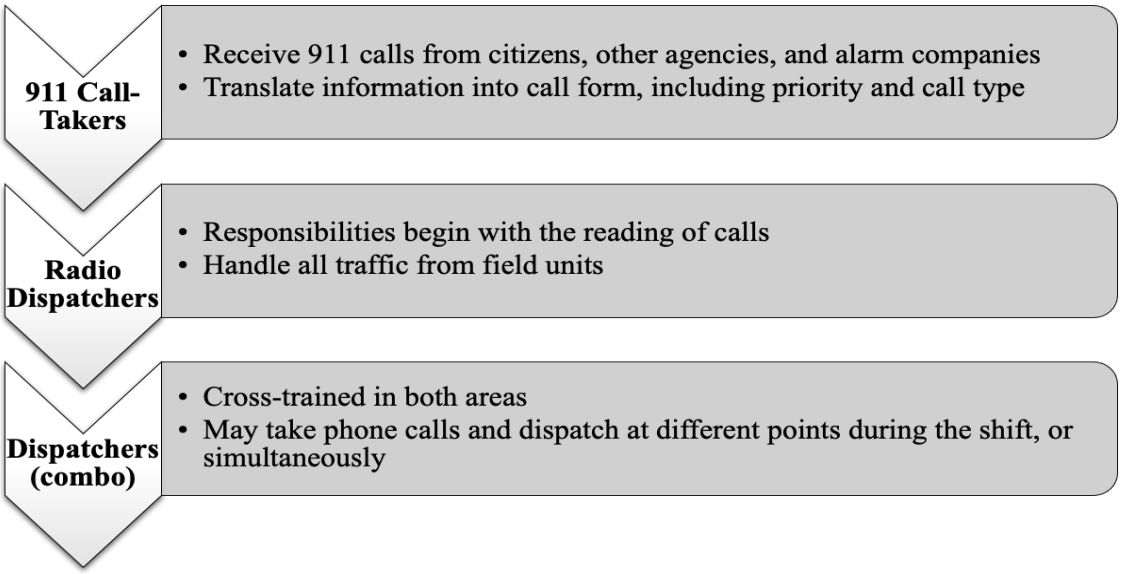

Figure 2. Dispatcher Classifications

The role of the dispatcher and the impact of their actions on the criminal justice system has gained traction in the criminological research as of late (Gillooly, 2020; 2021; Lum et al., 2020; Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Orosco, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Calls for researchers to explore this profession, specifically skill development to handle complex calls and evaluations of dispatch programs (Lum et al., 2020), have paved the way for the current study of de-escalation at the dispatcher level.

DE-ESCALATION IN POLICING

The high-profile deaths of Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, among others, have highlighted the urgent need to reevaluate policing practices, particularly in communities of color (White & Fradella, 2016). The potential consequences of use of force incidents are vast (even if justified), impacting involved parties by way of injury or death, as well as rupturing police-community relations and eroding legitimacy (Klahm et al., 2010; Fyfe, 1988). These events have resulted in a closer examination of the situations and conditions that lead to the deployment of force by law enforcement (Bennell et al., 2021). The unpredictable nature of police work can create challenges for officers, as they are required to navigate dynamic, unpredictable interactions (Bittner, 1970; Manning, 1978). Though infrequent, the very nature of use of force incidents has led to heightened interest among citizens, activists, civil liberties groups, and the government. Most calls for service that officers respond to are resolved without incident due to the presence of police (Bayley & Garofolo, 1989). Approximately 2% of police-citizen interactions result in a use of force incident (Davis et al., 2018), with even fewer, roughly .0015%, resulting in death (Police Foundation, 2016).

The recent high-profile incidents in 2014-15 led then-President Obama to create the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015). The goal of the task force was to develop recommendations and action items rooted in measurable change in police accountability and community trust. The Task Force recommended de-escalation training as an actionable request to address concerns surrounding police use of force (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) echoed these sentiments, stating that de-escalation is the preferred method of resolution for all incidents involving police (2016). In 2017, the IACP-led National Consensus Policy on Use of Force also discussed the importance of de-escalation prior to resorting to force, when possible (IACP, 2017). De-escalation has continued to gain momentum in research and practitioner spheres since these efforts (Brumback & Rico, 2020). George Floyd's death in May 2020 again led to public demands for police reform focused on use of force and led to renewed interest in de-escalation.

The term "de-escalation" is a foundational concept cemented in the lexicon of police training. Definitions of de-escalation vary (Engel et al., 2020) and concepts are not delivered in a consistent, systematic fashion. The lack of clarity surrounding what the term de-escalation means has also muddied the waters in terms of which tactics and behaviors are considered successful when interacting with potentially violent citizens. De-escalation has been studied extensively in other disciplines but remains relatively understudied in criminal justice. In plain terms, there is little consensus regarding what it is (and isn't).

De-Escalation Training. Studies have consistently shown that specialized training is essential for law enforcement (Clayfield et al., 2004; Coleman & Cotton, 2010;

Watson et al., 2014). Scenario-based training (Krameddine & Silverstone, 2015), incident review (Tahamont, 2018), and virtual reality training (Bosse et al., 2016; Hughes & Ingraham, 2016) have also been used to teach officers the foundations of crisis negotiation and responding to mental health crises, though outcomes have been mixed when long-term effects are considered. Though not labeled as de-escalation training, Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) has been mentioned in the de-escalation conversation. CIT is delivered to officers through a 40-hour curriculum rooted in crisis intervention strategies and providing access to mental health as an alternative to criminal justice involvement (CIT International, 2022; NAMI, 2022). Evaluations of CIT demonstrate an increase in referrals to mental health providers, as well as a decrease in arrests (Compton et al., 2014). Though CIT is designed to assist officers with persons experiencing a mental health crisis (Oliva, Morgan & Compton, 2010; Watson & Fulambarker, 2013), but it may not be ideal for all incident types (Augustin & Fagan, 2011; Davidson, 2014; Hanafi et al., 2008).

Despite the widespread diffusion of CIT training in law enforcement, de-escalation-specific training has not been adopted at the same rate. Engel and colleagues conducted a systematic review of the literature across disciplines from 1970-2016 and found no evaluations of de-escalation training in criminal justice or policing. The dearth of research presents challenges for an area that is often criticized, as some may feel that the term de-escalation translates to restricting an officer's ability to use force, and jeopardizing officer safety (Blake, 2017; Landers, 2017). Resistance stemming from these concerns, coupled with unclear definitions and objectives, may explain the absence of a knowledge base in this area.

Research on de-escalation in policing has expanded since this review, including assessments of officer perceptions, strategies and tactics, and the impacts of training on behavior. Willingness to use de-escalation in the field may be linked to officer attitudes (White, Orosco et al., 2021), underscoring the need to first acknowledge where officers stand on the topic. The Tempe (AZ) Police Department De-Escalation Project included the development, delivery, and evaluation of a customized de-escalation curriculum using a randomized control design. The curriculum content emerged after researchers spent a considerable amount of time with sworn peer-nominated expert de-escalators considered highly effective at defusing citizens in the field. This included ride-alongs, interviews, and focus groups in which the peer-nominated de-escalators discussed body-worn camera footage of citizen encounters. The curriculum was also influenced by external perspectives, as several members of the project committee attended other training courses and visited law enforcement agencies in different states to learn about their de-escalation policies and practices. Prior to the delivery of the training, White and colleagues (2019) conducted surveys with all field operations personnel, with results indicating that officers were receptive to de-escalation training, but doubtful about its ability to improve interactions with citizens. Post-training attitudes of de-escalation remained favorable, and in fact, trained officers self-reported increased use of compromise, knowing when to walk away, and maintaining officer safety. This last finding directly contradicts the notion that de-escalation is a threat to officer safety (White, Hedberg et al., 2021).

Evaluations of the impact of training on behavior have also emerged recently, with considerable variation in the results. Giacomantonio and colleagues (2020) examined the impact of Verbal Judo, a de-escalation program centered on resolving

interpersonal conflict, on the behavior of officers in the Canadian Police Service. Results indicated that behaviors considered natural or easier to adopt did change, including avoiding unnecessary repetition and verbal commands. Other behaviors considered more complex did not change among trained officers, with more experienced officers less likely to adopt recommended behaviors overall, and within groups. The authors discuss the importance of examining training with a critical lens and using a tailored approach when delivering training.

McLean and colleagues (2020) evaluated the impact of T3 training (Tact, Tactics, Trust), a social-interaction curriculum offered by Polis Solutions that incorporates classroom training and exercises using body-worn camera footage and group evaluation of decision points. The researchers reported no statistically significant differences in behavior, namely use of force, for both study sites (Fayetteville, NC and Tucson, AZ). However, attitudes did improve among officers, and those who received the training placed a higher priority on communication that is procedurally just. Overall, the findings do show promise, and the researchers highlighted a number of limitations such as possible differences in delivery and contamination effects, that may explain the mixed findings (McLean et al., 2020). Engel et al. (2022) evaluated the Police Executive Research Forum's Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) training with officers in Louisville, KY, and the researchers reported reductions in use of force, citizen injuries, and officer injuries (reductions of 28%, 26%, and 36%, respectively). The findings showcase the benefits de-escalation training, while also highlighting the need to identify the "key ingredients" to developing effective training (Engel et al., 2020, p. 24).

Evaluation findings from the customized de-escalation training in Tempe illustrate the benefit of identifying the key strategies and techniques prior to developing and delivering a de-escalation curriculum (White, Orosco et al., 2021). The evaluation spanned several data sources and used innovative approaches, such as post-interaction interviews with citizens, and a review of body-worn camera footage. Phone surveys with citizens who had recent interactions with officers demonstrate a positive training impact, with 16 statistically significant differences noted among treatment and control officers. Trained officers were more likely to treat citizens fairly, have a calm tone, and listen actively, among others (White, Orosco et al., 2021). Because Tempe is a low use of force department to begin with, administrative data did not reveal statistically significant differences among specialty and patrol units in use of force rates. Researchers also reviewed a random selection of body-worn camera footage from treatment and control officers. Results indicate that patrol officers were significantly less likely to use a condescending tone, fail to transfer to control to another officer, and use charging/imposing body language. Treatment officers were also significantly more likely to make the effort to build rapport and use informal measures to resolve an encounter. White and colleagues (2021) also examined BWC footage of all use of force encounters both before and after the training. Though there were few differences among treatment and control officers in the use of de-escalation, one very important difference did emerge: trained officers who used force were 58% less likely to injure a citizen (compared to officers who did not receive the de-escalation training).

The Missing Link: De-Escalation in Dispatch. The discussion surrounding de-escalation and dispatchers is effectively nonexistent beyond their role in crisis

intervention and behavioral health triage (APCO, 2021). Considering recent interest in de-escalation, the lack of research on the nexus between de-escalation and dispatch is alarming. This knowledge gap is particularly troubling, as the amount of responsibility placed on the dispatcher continues to mount. Though the number of calls for service handled by dispatchers may decrease with the addition of alternative responses and diversion for crisis calls (Pew, 2021), de-escalation is still essential for initial call assessment and information gathering. Dispatchers are noticeably absent from the de-escalation literature, despite being the conduit between callers and officers before arrival on scene. It is vital that dispatchers are given a seat at the table when de-escalation is discussed and are provided with the tools and resources needed to ensure effective call and radio traffic resolution, regardless of call or incident type.

Dispatchers and Transactional Decision-Making. Police-citizen interactions have been described as transactional in nature, with officers and citizens both playing an active role in the potential for violence during a contact (Binder & Scharf, 1980). Officers have the ability, when appropriate, to call for back-up or transfer the incident to another officer. Officers make a number of tactical and operational decisions throughout the course of their dealings with citizens (Bayley, 1986), with any shifts in decision-making potentially altering the outcome altogether (e.g., similar to a chess match). Dispatcher interactions can be thought of in the same way, as their decisions and interactions have the potential to shape the imprint left on the criminal justice system (Lum et al., 2020). Figure 3 shows there are several interactions or transactions that take place in both the call-taking and radio traffic processes, all of which present opportunities to gain information, clarify details, and de-escalate the potential for violence. Previous studies

have presented the call for service process (see Gillooly, 2020; 2021 and Simpson, 2020), but the full extent of these interactions at the dispatcher-officer level has not been explored in detail. The researcher's experience as a dispatcher in Los Angeles County has contributed to the expansion of this framework to include other transaction points that may impact the outcome, and present opportunities to resolve the situation until a Code 4 (the situation no longer presents risk) is reached. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on dispatcher-citizen and dispatcher-officer transactions or interactions.

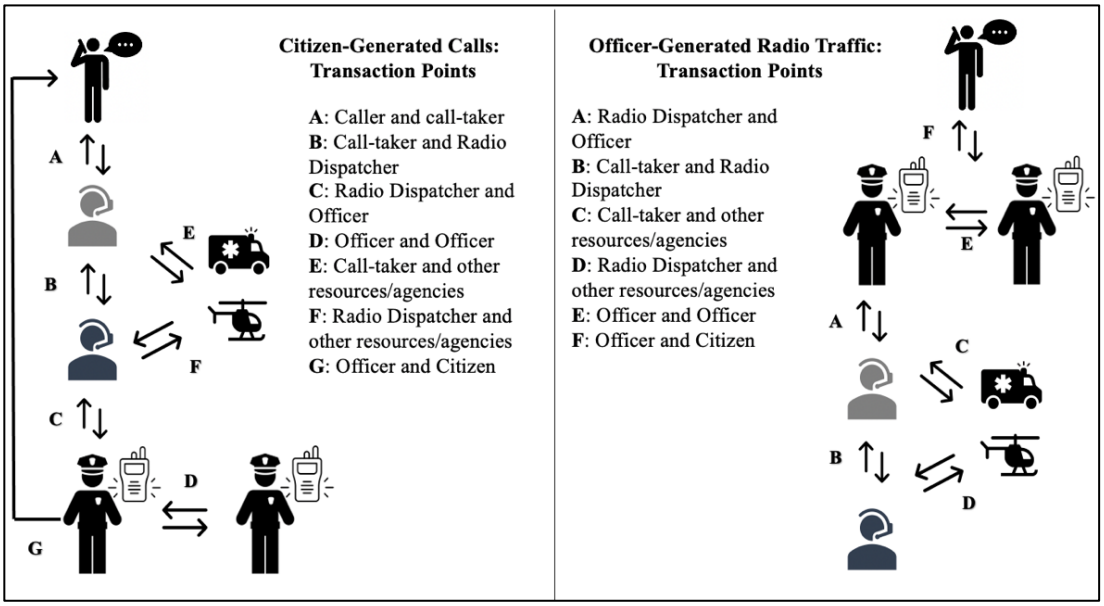

Figure 3. Dispatcher Transaction Points

Interactions that a dispatcher engages in at both the call-taking and radio dispatch stages present numerous possibilities for pre-arrival de-escalation. Following the words "911, what's your emergency?" a dynamic cycle of questions and responses will occur until the situation is resolved in some capacity. The dispatcher will use specific language, strategies, and problem-solving tactics, all while calling upon foundational training

concepts and past knowledge gained from experience in the position and ancillary roles. Dispatchers serve as the missing link in the de-escalation process. The have the potential to calm volatile citizens and officers who may be responding to calls in a heightened state of emotion. The dispatcher plays a significant role in the detection of concerning behavior and emotional management at the officer level. Disregarding the influence of dispatchers with citizens and officers leads to an incomplete picture of de-escalation. Until all opportunities for de-escalation from the very first point of contact with a citizen are maximized, we cannot say, with certainty, that all attempts to de-escalate have been exhausted.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Dispatchers are underexamined in the criminological research despite being the first point of contact for most citizens, and the lifeline for officers. This study is the first to examine the strategies and techniques dispatchers use to de-escalate callers on the front end, and officers in the field. Using a mixed-methods approach including surveys and interviews with peer-nominated Top Dispatch De-Escalators, findings highlight the vast set of skills dispatchers employ to defuse incidents. Results also provide insight into the barriers that inhibit effective de-escalation, and how agencies can shape policy and practice to better equip dispatch staff to de-escalate successfully.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH SETTING

Tempe, Arizona is located just east of Phoenix and is roughly 40.22 square miles in size. The resident population of Tempe is approximately 180,587 (US Census Quick

Facts), though the service population of approximately 268,000 is considerably higher due to number of commuters who travel into Tempe for professional and academic reasons (TPD Quick Facts). The poverty rate of 19.8% is higher than the national average. Tempe has a median income of $57,994, and a racial composition that is 56.7% White and 22.2% Hispanic (US Census Quick Facts). Tempe is home to the main campus of Arizona State University which serves 54,886 enrolled students (ASU Enrollment Trends, 2021), Tempe Town Lake, a bustling entertainment district known as Mill Ave., and many other notable events including the Iron Man, and Tempe Festival of the Arts. In 2020, Tempe saw their lowest UCR Part I crime rate in over twenty years, 42 per 1,000 residents (TPD Quick Facts) as well as drastic reductions in traffic collisions which may be attributed to COVID-19-related closures and protocols reducing the number of vehicles on the road (TPD Quick Facts). The unique geographic and demographic backcloth in Tempe requires a tailored approach to public safety, with a department equipped to respond to a variety of crime problems and community needs. According to an analysis of Tempe Police Department (TPD) 2020 personnel totals, there are 337 sworn members and 147 professional staff members employed in a variety of capacities across the department (TPD Quick Facts).

This research is largely centered on the TPDCC. The TPDCC consists of approximately 30 Dispatchers and Shift Supervisors and one Bureau Manager, though this position was vacant during much of the project. At the time of the most recent roster update, there were a total of eight dispatcher trainees at various stages of their training program, though all have completed the call taking portion of their process. The TPDCC is located on the second floor of the Apache (North) substation and consists of radio

consoles equipped for call-taking and radio traffic, and several consoles suited solely for call-taking. Dispatch Supervisors sit on an elevated platform with a full console, phone lines, and other tools necessary for monitoring all radio frequencies and calls and have access to their own private offices. The TPDCC can fully function without accessing other areas of the station, as it includes restrooms, a kitchen, break facilities, and its own entrance.

Dispatchers handle emergency (911) and non-emergency calls, as well as monitor and transmit over radio frequencies. Although there are several radio frequencies open for use, two main channels are staffed 24/7 (North and South), and a third channel (Information) is staffed when there are enough dispatchers available to work radio communications while also meeting 911 minimum staffing requirements. The Information channel is used solely for subject and vehicle inquiries by officers across the city. If staffing dips below minimum requirements and a dispatcher is not available to monitor this frequency, units in their respective divisions (North and South) will run their inquiries through the dispatcher monitoring the channel. During high-volume radio traffic periods, dispatchers are responsible for dispatching calls across all priority levels, monitoring the location and status of field units, running inquiries, and answering 911 and non-emergency calls if the lines are particularly busy. TPDCC dispatchers are cross-trained in both call-taking and radio communications, alternating between the two positions as staffing needs require, often during the same shift. For this study, the term dispatcher is used to describe both call-takers and radio dispatchers.

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

The researcher is currently a TPD Supervisor in the Strategic Planning, Analysis, and Research Center (SPARC) housed within the Data & Technology Bureau. The success of the TPD De-Escalation project (White et al., 2021) for sworn personnel shaped the discussion surrounding the unexamined role of dispatchers in de-escalation, namely the importance of understanding the strategies and techniques used by dispatchers to de-escalate callers and officers in the field across all call and incident types. The original project, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance under the Smart Policing Initiative, included the development, delivery, and evaluation (via a randomized control trial) of a de-escalation training for officers in Field Operations (see White et al., 2019 for a detailed description). TPD Command Staff, including the former and current Chief and current Director of Support Services overseeing the TPDCC, expressed their support for the completion of this project and subsequent efforts stemming from the findings. The project was approved by all levels of TPD Command Staff, and each component of the project, including the survey, peer nomination forms, and interview topics were reviewed and approved by the Acting TPDCC Bureau Manager. Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) also reviewed and approved all aspects of the research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 *How is de-escalation defined in a dispatch context?*
RQ2 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered most effective while de-escalating citizens?*
RQ3 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered most effective while de-escalating officers?*
RQ4 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered a hinderance to effective de-escalation with citizens?*

RQ5 *What are the dispatcher tactics and behaviors considered a hinderance to effective de-escalation with officers?*
RQ6 *What are the stress management techniques used by dispatchers?*
RQ7 *How does the police department contribute to effective de-escalation?*
RQ8 *What are the biggest barriers to de-escalation?*

RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT

The development of a sound recruitment strategy is essential to the success of any project. The former TPDCC Bureau Manager expressed a desire for all staff members, dispatchers, and supervisors, to participate in the research. The researcher created a recruitment infographic (Appendix A) and recorded a video introduction (Appendix B) that included a discussion of the project overview, proposed timeline, peer nomination process, plans for a training curriculum, as well as the benefits that the project will provide to the TPDCC and field more broadly. The video was accompanied by an electronic consent form created in Qualtrics to ensure that dispatchers could access the form and IRB[1] approval language at their convenience. After the video was released, the researcher attended shift briefings with all dispatch staff to discuss the project, provide a printed copy of the infographic, and answer any questions. Spending time in the TPDCC before the data collection period was incredibly important for building legitimacy and increasing comfort among dispatch staff, as were discussions surrounding the researcher's own personal experiences as a dispatcher in Los Angeles. These steps, coupled with support from several internal champions throughout TPD and within the communications center itself, eliminated any hesitance or concern that may have existed beforehand.

[1] IRB approval granted on 5/3/201 approval #STUDY00013774

PROJECT COMPONENTS AND DATA SOURCES

Peer Nomination. Peer nomination has been used by policing researchers to identify individuals considered experts by their peers in a given field or sub-area. This process has been utilized to identify officers adept at recognizing proper violence-reduction strategies (Fyfe, 1989), and more recently, to identify officers considered particularly skilled in the ability to de-escalate volatile incidents or citizens (Todak & White, 2019; White et al., 2019). In the TPD De-Escalation project for sworn staff, officers assigned to Field Operations were asked to nominate the top three officers (from any division) that they felt were especially skilled at de-escalating potentially violent encounters. Once the list of peer-nominated officers was compiled, White and colleagues (2019) provided the list to field supervisors to ensure that officers were selected based on their skills, and not popularity. The final 14 top de-escalators served as consultants of sorts, providing insight and expertise that shaped the resulting curriculum. The current study adopted this practice of peer nomination by asking non-supervisory dispatch personnel to nominate the top three dispatchers considered highly skilled at de-escalating citizen callers in distress, as well as the top three dispatchers with advanced proficiency in calming officers on the radio during high-stress incidents.

Electronic peer nomination forms were made available to TPDCC staff and sent to their email list via Outlook (as were all electronic communications). Initially the researcher planned to provide a paper form option and lock box in the TPDCC and in her personal office but opted for Qualtrics to protect the anonymity of responses and ensure that dispatchers would be able to easily submit their nomination forms at their convenience. Peer nomination forms provided two separate columns with spaces for three

nominations each: those considered highly skilled at de-escalation with callers, and those considered highly skilled at calming officers on the radio. There were no parameters placed aside from requiring that selections be from TPDCC, therefore dispatchers had the option to nominate the same peer for both categories, if warranted. The researcher and acting TPDCC Bureau Manager sent reminders before the formal deadline to ensure that dispatchers who may have been out of the office had an opportunity to nominate. Once received, the researcher compiled results into a master list without the number of nominations or a specific order, then sent the list and an entry form to TPDCC Supervisors for second-level vetting. The final list of nine Top Dispatch De-Escalators was provided to the TPDCC Bureau Manager and former Assistant Chief of Support Services for reference, and for ease of scheduling interviews and future meetings pertaining to post-study efforts. These experts are the focus of the study and will serve as subject matter experts and consultants during future efforts that stem from these findings.

Internal Expertise: Top Dispatcher De-Escalators. The group of nine peer-nominated dispatch de-escalators are considered specialists and subject matter experts. They were asked to provide insight by way of semi-structured interviews and sit-alongs with the researcher, which included listening to live calls and radio traffic using a headset. Concerns stemming from ongoing COVID-19 surges prevented the researcher from conducting extensive observations in the TPDCC, however, the nine sit-alongs that did occur were important for building legitimacy and observing de-escalation strategies and techniques in the field. Although the researcher did take notes during the sit-along periods, many more observations would be required for truly robust themes to emerge.

The researcher conducted TDD interviews in the TPDCC conference room which is located on the outer portion of the dispatch floor and has a door to prevent any disruptions. Interviews were scheduled in advance via email and were planned to coincide with dispatcher schedules to prevent coming to the station on their scheduled days off. TDDs were given a second consent form (Appendix C) outlining their additional participation in the project (i.e., sit-alongs and semi-structured interviews), and were also given a study identifier to keep their identities confidential in any research products. The list of study identifiers and the TDD they correspond to is only accessible to the researcher and has not been shared with any department personnel. Interviews consisted of 24 pre-determined questions covering several topic areas (Appendix D), however, the order was flexible and organic depending on the trajectory of the conversation. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour and were recorded with the TDD's permission for later transcription and reference. All recordings were coded with the study identifier and did not have names or other details included in the file names. These files were exported, saved in a secure drive, and deleted from the recording device.

Dispatcher Perceptions of De-Escalation. Researchers are only beginning to scratch the surface of de-escalation with regard to officer perceptions and the effects of de-escalation training on behavioral and attitudinal outcomes (Engel et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2020; Todak & White, 2019; White, Orosco et al., 2021). The limited available research has underscored the importance of understanding officer perceptions, as they may affect training receptivity, resistance to curriculum, as well as behaviors in the field (Engel et al., 2021; White, Hedberg et al., 2021). Parallels exist between sworn and

dispatch staff in terms of perceptions of de-escalation, but a survey tailored to the unique role of dispatchers was needed to truly understand the unique, dynamic nature of de-escalation in this capacity. To understand these perceptions and behaviors, the researcher surveyed all TPDCC dispatchers.

The researcher participated in a series of socially distant sit-alongs with dispatch personnel in the TPDCC over the course of one week. These dispatchers were selected based on scheduling availability of the researcher and included TDDs and others. The purpose of this exercise was to refine possible survey questions and response options. The researcher did not collect call and transmission-specific data, as these were informal, conversational, and not part of the data collected for analysis. The final survey instrument is loosely based on the officer perception survey used in the larger TPD de-escalation study (White et al., 2019), but primarily rooted in personal dispatch experience, observations, and informal conversations with TPDCC personnel. Survey topics include external and internal factors affecting de-escalation, tactics and strategies, definitions of de-escalation, as well as the types of incidents and interactions that present challenges for dispatchers. All dissertation committee members and the TPDCC acting Bureau Manager reviewed the instrument prior to dissemination, and the researcher made minor revisions before final approval. The researcher pilot tested the instrument with dispatchers from the Maricopa County Sheriff's Department as well as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to identify necessary changes from the perspective of current dispatchers and ensure that questions were clear and logical. The final approved survey (Appendix E) was then entered into Qualtrics and tested with the dissertation committee chair and the acting TPDCC Bureau Manager before going live. The survey instrument includes a consent

statement for the respondent before proceeding to the first set of questions. All participants are at least 18 years of age, and no identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity of responses.

Among the practical concerns inherent with agency research are those surrounding sampling and the degree of rigor in the research design. The original TPD project was ideal for randomization given the number of squads and sworn personnel assigned to field operations, and the rigorous evaluation plan. TPD leadership expressed preference for current and future project components to include all TPDCC staff, therefore randomization was not considered. Non-randomized designs are at times the only feasible alternative due to practical agency concerns. While not the gold standard, non-experimental designs can provide a valuable contribution (Farrington et al., 2019). The current study placed the highest importance on qualitative responses from TDDs and open-ended survey responses from survey participants, while aiming to achieve a survey response rate as close to 100% as possible. The researcher did not experience any major resistance to the project due to the support of internal champions, and her internal role as a TPD employee. Fully blank survey entries were omitted from the study, but partial data points proved beneficial for supporting qualitative themes and providing context.

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD

The timeline for this project depended largely on the availability of TPDCC staff, TPD priorities and staffing needs, COVID-19 protocols, and related staffing issues, as well as major shifts in leadership that occurred after the project was first proposed. The project, which was previously approved by the former Chief, was presented to the entire TPD Command Staff in October of 2020, after which a Scope of Work was requested by

the Assistant Chief over TPDCC at the time. This study runs parallel to additional efforts aimed at designing a de-escalation curriculum for dispatchers, so efforts had to be paused for several months due to turnover at the TPDCC Bureau Manager level, and the appointment of a new Chief of Police. Delays were used to focus on project design, establish relationships with TPDCC staff, and secure IRB approval from ASU. The following timeline reflects delays due to COVID-19 surges and mitigation measures, staffing shortages, researcher availability, and the transition from paper documents to electronic tools (e.g., survey):

Figure 4. Timeline

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Understanding Expert Perspectives., Understanding TDD views on de-escalation became the primary focus of the research. TDDs consented to the Top De-Escalator portion of the project, including having their interview recorded, de-identified, transcribed, and analyzed using reflexive thematic coding techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TDDs also consented to having notes taken during researcher sit-alongs, which were used during the coding process to support the creation of themes. Interviews were recorded, labeled with a study identifier, and then exported to a password-protected drive before deletion from the device. De-identified files were transcribed using otter.ai web-

based transcription software and subjected to a two-level transcription review: an automated transcription by the software, and a review of the audio and transcript by the researcher. The researcher manually reviewed the transcripts, corrected any spacing or spelling issues, and assigned identifiers for each TDD in the transcripts.

The researcher selected reflexive thematic analysis as the qualitative approach to assist with the inductive identification of broad semantic and latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This technique allows ideas and concepts to emerge organically, while accounting for interpretation that is influenced by one's experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Campbell et al., 2021). In this case, the researcher interpreted the qualitative data through the lens of a former dispatch practitioner and a Research Assistant on the larger sworn de-escalation project. Themes were derived from a multi-level, line-by-line coding procedure conducted in ATLAS.ti version 9.1.3 which included in vivo coding, quotations with notes, and the manual creation of quick codes and code groups (Henson, 2020). After all items were coded, the researcher printed the full list of codes, cut them into individual strips of paper, and arranged code groupings on posterboard to reflect level two code groups comprised of level one codes that fall together. The researcher applied this coding process to the interview responses, as well as the open-ended survey questions relating to behaviors to avoid and stress management practices. Once finalized, the level one codes were grouped in their respective level two code group in ATLAS.ti, a process that allows you to see larger code headers and the codes that fall within it. These broader codes were then grouped based on similar or repetitive themes, resulting in a final list of 34 code groups.

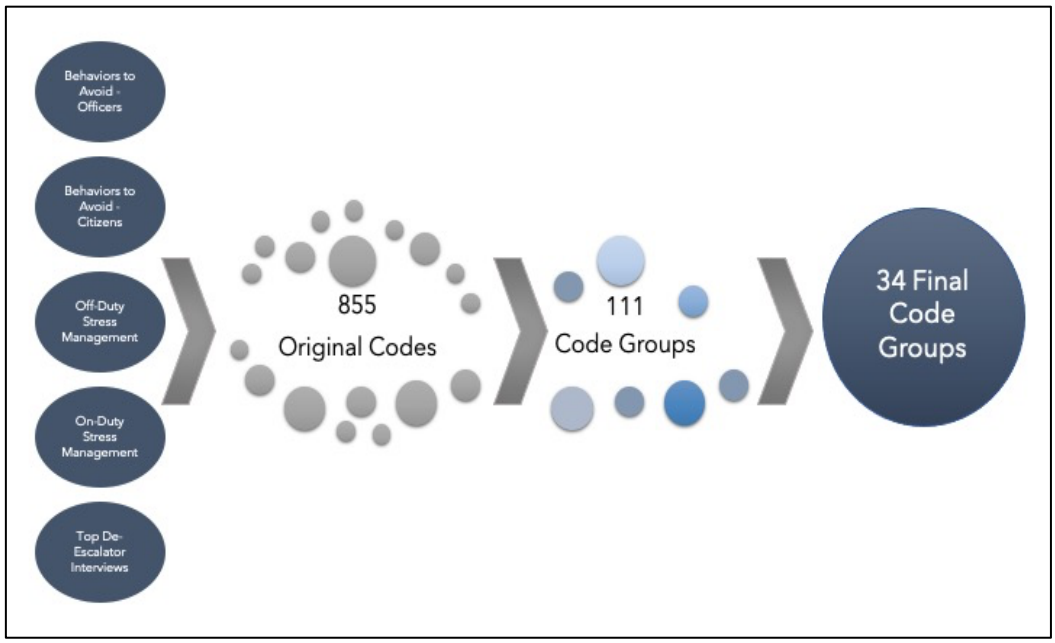

Figure 5. Coding Process

The researcher sent four de-identified transcript excerpts and a list of code groupings to two separate coders (two excerpts each) for inter-rater reliability testing (Henson, 2020). The researcher coded each of the four excerpts separately, compared results, and determined that coding was above the acceptable 80% threshold (McAllister et al., 2017).

Final themes speak to the definitions of de-escalation, techniques used during citizen calls and radio transmissions, barriers to de-escalation, disconnects (a lack of understanding between dispatchers and other individuals or groups), dispatcher mental health, and how the department can better support de-escalation efforts. These themes will inform future training efforts and will shape discussions surrounding perspectives on de-escalation from those who are often the first point of contact for community members. Moving forward, TDDs will be referenced by their research identifier derived from a

random number generator between 1-100 (e.g., TD32) to protect their confidentiality during the entirety of the process.

Perceptions of De-Escalation. To understand perceptions of de-escalation, specifically importance and frequency of specific techniques, the researcher conducted descriptive analysis of survey responses after accounting for the removal of incomplete entries (i.e., consented, but did not enter a response for any questions). A lack of variation among respondents and a small sample size precluded examinations of variance or related sophisticated techniques. Because of the rich qualitative data available, descriptive results from the survey occupy a less prominent position in the study.

Qualitative findings from open-ended survey responses regarding behaviors to avoid and stress management techniques were coded to generate themes on tactics and behaviors that have proven ineffective during attempts to de-escalate, as well as coping mechanisms used in a stressful role. These themes are incredibly important for lending support for, or deviating from, themes derived from interviews with TDDs, in addition to shedding light on the ways dispatchers manage the stress from their position both on and off duty.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

The nine TDDs who are the focus of the study, were selected through a two-level peer nomination process to ensure that they were chosen based on skill level and not popularity. They are comprised of seven Police Communications Dispatchers II, and two Police Communications Supervisors, one of whom became a supervisor only weeks before the data collection period commenced. The tenure of TDDs ranged from 3 to 16.5 years of service (average of 9.1 years), and one is a lateral dispatch transfer from a

neighboring agency. All TDDs are current or former Dispatch Trainers, and one serves on the Peer Support Team (provides support and resources to peers experiencing challenges) for TPD. Seven of the nine TDDs identify as female, which aligns with other studies on dispatchers (see Gillooly, 2021).

Dispatcher perception surveys, sent to all TPDCC staff (N=30, excluding trainees) had an overall response rate of 93.0%, though question-specific response rates ranged from 80.0% to 93.0%. This response rate is based on the most recent Communications roster dated July 2021, although some staffing fluctuations have occurred since its publication. Finally, since the survey was sent to all Communications staff and did not require an identifier, it is possible that Trainees also completed the survey. All trainees at the time of survey distribution were fully trained, at minimum, in the call-taker function. If trainees are included, the overall survey response rate sits at approximately 74.0%. Respondents on average are 36 years old, though the age range included dispatchers as young as 22. In terms of experience, years of service ranges from one to 24, with only one respondent indicating that they have been a dispatcher for less than one year. TPDCC survey respondents overwhelmingly identify as female, White/European American, and heterosexual (88.5%, 88.0%, and 92.0%, respectively). Respondents have largely only dispatched for Tempe, with 15.4% indicating that they lateraled from another agency. Respondents represented all shifts (days, PMs, and graveyards), though 38.5% report working a combination of shifts, which may be attributed to mandatory overtime requirements that fall outside of their assigned hours. Finally, 80.8% of survey respondents are dispatchers (as compared to supervisors), and 100% have had at least some college, 46.2% of which have a four-year degree (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Breakdown of Survey Respondents

	(n=24-30)	
	n	%
Identify as Female	23	88.5
Identify as Male	3	11.5
Hispanic or Latino	6	23.10
White	22	88.00
Other	3	12.00
Identify as Heterosexual	23	92.00
Identify as Gay or Lesbian	1	4.00
Prefer not to say	1	4.00
Completed an advanced degree	1	3.80
Completed a 4-year degree	12	46.20
Completed a 2-year degree	3	11.50
Completed some college	10	38.50
Day Shift	5	19.20
PM Shift (Afternoons)	5	19.20
Graveyards	6	23.10
Combination of Shifts	10	38.50

Note. Sample sizes vary by question. % reflects valid % among respondents. Some categories have been omitted.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS FROM THE GENERAL SURVEY

The following chapter provides the descriptive results from the general survey administered to all dispatch staff. The sample is necessarily small, and the response rates vary by question, but the findings are still of importance for understanding an area that has not been explored in a dispatch context. Data in Tables 2 and 3 are organized by highest to lowest mean score.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE AND LEGITIMACY

Respondents were asked a series of questions related to procedural justice and perceived legitimacy among citizen callers (Table 2). These questions were based on the instrument given to officers in the sworn de-escalation project (see White et al., 2019), though slightly modified to reflect the dispatcher role. Overall, respondents strongly feel that they uphold Tempe Police Department values, act professionally when interacting with citizens, care about citizens, and treat them with respect (*M*=3.50, 3.41, 3.37, and 3.34, respectively). There is slightly lower agreement when dispatchers were asked if they remained neutral during calls with citizens, which may speak to the need to use a more commanding tone or control their emotions better while obtaining details. When asked about citizen perceptions of interactions with dispatch, responses reflect slightly lower agreement. Dispatchers feel that citizens are generally satisfied with how their situations are resolved (*M*=2.97), though they do not feel as strongly that citizens trust them (*M*=2.90).

Table 2

Descriptive Results of the Dispatcher Perception Survey	(n=24-30)
Procedural Justice	
Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Agree (3) Strongly Agree (4)	Mean
I try to uphold Tempe Police Department values.	3.50
I always act professionally when I interact with citizens.	3.41
I care about every citizen.	3.37
I always treat citizen callers with respect.	3.34
I always remain neutral during phone calls with citizens.	3.10
Citizens I interact with are generally satisfied with how their situations are resolved.	2.97
Most citizens that I interact with on the phone trust me.	2.90
The Tempe Police Department has a positive relationship with the community.	2.90
Most citizens in Tempe have respect for the Tempe Police Department.	2.83
Most citizens that I interact with on the phone respect me as a dispatcher.	2.57
I always give citizens an opportunity to fully explain the situation, even if it takes more time than normal.	2.47
Importance of Use	
Not Important at All (1) Somewhat Important (2) Important (3) Very Important (4)	Mean
Communication	3.83
Staying Calm	3.79
Patience	3.76
Active Listening	3.72
Tone of Voice (even, controlled)	3.62
Speaking in a Calm Manner	3.62
Professionalism	3.59
Restraint (when frustrated)	3.52
Using Appropriate Wording and Language	3.48
Empathy	3.28
Knowing when to Call a Supervisor	3.14
Knowing when to Disconnect	3.10
Compromise	2.55

Respondents were largely in agreement that the department has a positive relationship with the community (*M*=2.90), though perceptions of citizen respect for the department garnered slightly less agreement (*M*=2.83). Finally, respondents did not feel as strongly that they were respected by citizens (*M*=2.57), which may be attributed to the often volatile, emotional calls that they are required to navigate. The lowest ranking item (*M*=2.47), which refers to dispatchers giving citizens an opportunity to fully explain the situation even if more time is taken, aligns with performance standards that dispatchers are often held to. Dispatchers are expected to handle calls expeditiously and will attempt to get as many details as possible in a short time frame. Respondents may want to give the citizen more time, but recognize that time is of the essence, and it is simply not feasible.

IMPORTANCE OF DE-ESCALATION TACTICS

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance for a list of de-escalation tactics used to resolve calm volatile citizen interactions, ranging not important at all (1), to very important (4). With the exception of one tactic (compromise, *M*=2.55), responses on average indicate that each of these tactics are highly important for call resolution. Unsurprisingly, communication was the most important (*M*=3.83), followed by staying calm (*M*=3.79) and patience (*M*=3.76). Dispatching requires one to remain even keeled and patient when speaking with elevated citizens, particularly when important details need to be obtained. Active listening (*M*=3.72), tone of voice (*M*=3.62), speaking in a calm manner (*M*=3.62), and professionalism (*M*=3.59) are integral to successful call resolution, as being able to extract details from what callers provide is often dependent on your ability to listen effectively and intently. Tone may reflect

nervousness or frustration yet dispatching requires you to sound calm and controlled even in the most heightened situations. This also speaks to the next tactics ranked by mean importance, exercising restraint when frustrated, using appropriate wording and language, and empathy (*M*=3.52, 3.48, and 3.28). Dispatchers deal with many urgent, critical incidents during their day, and it is easy to lose sight of the fact that although an incident may not seem particularly serious to you, it is important to the caller. Approaching calls with empathy may elicit a kinder response, and lead to a more positive citizen interaction. Importance slightly declines with the tactics of knowing when to call a supervisor, knowing when to disconnect, and finally, compromise (*M*=3.14, 3.10, and 2.55, respectively), though still quite favorable overall for all except compromise. This is not surprising in the context of the TPDCC, as supervisors are considered a last resource for call resolution and are only consulted when dispatchers are faced with complex situations. Dispatchers are also trained to stay on the line until the situation is resolved; it is possible that some calls may require the dispatcher to proactively disconnect, but the majority only conclude when there is a resolution (e.g., all details obtained, caller is provided with the information they requested). The lowest ranked tactic of compromise is also not surprising. Dispatchers have limited control over the speed in which officers respond, and other processes dictated by the call for service process. It is difficult for a dispatcher to truly compromise with a caller in the same way an officer may be able to compromise with a citizen in the field.

FREQUENCY OF DE-ESCALATION TACTICS

It is also important to understand how often dispatchers are using de-escalation tactics during their shift. Respondents were provided the same list of tactics and asked to

select the frequency of use using the following scale: (1), rarely (2), once per week (3), once per shift (4), and multiple times per shift (5; see Table 3).

Table 3

Descriptive Results of the Dispatcher Perception Survey	(n=24-30)
Frequency of Use	
Not at all (1) Rarely (2) Once per Week (3) Once per Shift (4) Multiple Times per Shift (5)	Mean
Patience	5.00
Communication	5.00
Professionalism	5.00
Tone of Voice (even, controlled)	5.00
Using Appropriate Wording and Language	5.00
Active Listening	4.97
Speaking in a Calm Manner	4.97
Staying Calm	4.97
Restraint (when frustrated)	4.90
Empathy	4.79
Knowing when to Disconnect	4.55
Knowing when to Call a Supervisor	4.17
Compromise	3.97
Others' Frequency of Use	
Not at all (1) Rarely (2) Once per Week (3) Once per Shift (4) Multiple Times per Shift (5)	Mean
Communication	4.89
Patience	4.82
Active Listening	4.82
Using Appropriate Wording and Language	4.82
Professionalism	4.79
Tone of Voice (even, controlled)	4.71
Speaking in a Calm Manner	4.71
Restraint (when frustrated)	4.68
Knowing when to Disconnect	4.54
Staying Calm	4.68
Empathy	4.39
Knowing when to Call a Supervisor	4.29
Compromise	3.89

Most of these tactics are used multiple times per shift, with very little variation among responses. The only tactic with an average response indicating that it is not used multiple times per shift is compromise (*M*=3.97), which is consistent with where it falls in terms

of importance. Dispatchers have little latitude in terms of post-call decisions framed by policy or procedure, so the infrequent use of this tactic is expected.

Respondents were also asked to provide insight on how often other dispatchers use these tactics. Interestingly, frequency of use was lower for others across all tactics, though only slightly. Consistent with self-report frequency of use, compromise was the only tactic that fell below the threshold for use multiple times per shift (*M*=3.89).

PERCEPTIONS OF DE-ESCALATION TRAINING

Prior research has shown receptivity to de-escalation training may have implications for the use of tactics in the field (White, Orosco et al., 2021). To understand this in a dispatch context, respondents were asked a series of questions pertaining to de-escalation training with options ranging from strongly disagree to disagree (Table 4). Overall, dispatchers are overwhelmingly in favor of taking part in de-escalation training and feel it will provide additional tools for call resolution (*M*=3.46 and 3.41), though they are in slightly lower agreement about its potential impacts on citizens. It does appear that respondents believe it will improve communication with citizens (*M*=3.28) and officers (*M*=3.21), and result in the use of more effective techniques (*M*=3.28). However, dispatching is a two-way street, and the outcome also depends on the citizen's behavior during the call. This may explain lower average agreement on questions pertaining to reductions in disputes with citizens (*M*=3.10), as respondents may feel that some of these situations are unavoidable despite the best training efforts. It is also evident that dispatchers recognize strained relations that exist outside of a dispatch context, as they do not feel as strongly that de-escalation training will influence police-community relations or foster more trust in the community (*M*=3.07 and 3.00, respectively).

Table 4

Descriptive Results of the Dispatcher Perception Survey	(n=24-30)
Sentiments toward De-Escalation	
Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Agree (3) Strongly Agree (4)	Mean
I am willing to take part in de-escalation training.	3.46
I believe that de-escalation training will provide me with additional tools to better resolve encounters with citizens.	3.41
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training are better able to communicate with citizens.	3.28
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training use more effective techniques.	3.28
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training are better able to communicate with officers.	3.21
I am enthusiastic about de-escalation training.	3.17
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training will get into fewer disputes with citizens.	3.10
I believe if dispatchers take de-escalation training, police-community relations will improve.	3.07
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training garner more trust from citizens.	3.00
Since the announcement of the project I have been more aware of my behavior during interactions with citizens.	2.62
Since the announcement of the project I have been more aware of how I speak with citizens after talking to my peers about the project.	2.59

The lowest agreement was observed with questions that touched on the launch of the project, and current behavior. Dispatchers do not feel strongly that they have been more aware of their behavior or how they speak to citizens since the announcement of the project (*M*=2.62 and 2.59, respectively). This may be explained by the fact that curriculum development based on these findings is in its infancy. It is anticipated that

future iterations of this survey may reflect stronger agreement as initiatives stemming from this research take shape.

DISPATCHER BURNOUT

The literature on emergency communications professionals (e.g., police and fire dispatchers) and stress demonstrates the high incidence of burnout that can result from the job and organizational dynamics (Adams & Mastracci, 2020). The survey includes questions from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005) that capture respondents' experience with burnout symptoms because of their job duties (Table 5). Overall, respondents often or sometimes feel tired (M=3.89), emotionally, and physically exhausted (M=3.71 and 3.43), worn out (overall (M=3.64), and after each working day (M=3.79)), and burnt out (M=3.54). The job is often frustrating, and respondents also feel that it affects the amount of energy they have for family and friends during leisure periods (M=3.36). These results are concerning and indicate that dispatchers are operating in an extremely exhausted and stressed state much of the time. Respondents are less likely to agree that every working hour is tiring (M=2.71), which may reflect fluctuating busy periods throughout their shift. Finally, the lowest overall agreement was observed with questions pertaining to susceptibility to illness, and not being able to take it anymore (M=2.54 and 2.43, respectively).

Table 5

Descriptive Results of the Dispatcher Perception Survey	(n=24-30)
Burnout and Mental Health	
Never, Almost Never, or to a Very Low Degree (1) Seldom, or to a Low Degree (2) Sometimes/Somewhat (3) Often, or to a High Degree (4) Always, or to a Very High Degree (5)	Mean
How often do you feel tired?	3.89
How often do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?	3.79
Is your work emotionally exhausting?	3.71
How often are you emotionally exhausted?	3.68
How often do you feel worn out?	3.64
Do you feel burnt out because of your work?	3.54
Are you exhausted in the morning/start of your day at the thought of another day at work?	3.46
How often are you physically exhausted?	3.43
Do you have energy for family and friends during leisure time?	3.36
Does your work frustrate you?	3.36
Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?	2.71
How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?	2.54
How often do you think "I can't take it anymore"?	2.43
Burnout and Mental Health - Department Role and Coping Strategies	
Strongly disagree (1) Somewhat Disagree (2) No Opinion (3) Somewhat Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
People outside of my industry cannot relate to my job demands	4.36
It is hard for me to spend time with my family because of work demands (e.g., overtime shifts)	3.82
There is a lot of variety in my assigned tasks	3.11
My experience and opinion are valued by my coworkers	2.93
There is always someone looking over my shoulder or listening to see if I do everything correctly	2.75
The citizens I speak to are very appreciative of what I do for them	2.68
I plan on seeking advancement and/or promotion during my career with this agency	2.50
Dispatchers are valued in the department	2.43
If I have a bad day at work, I find myself taking it out on my family when I get home	2.39
The department cares about my well being	2.36
I am so busy at work that I often have to work through my breaks	2.25
This agency is very efficient at handling problems	2.11
Drinking alcohol after a rough day at work helps me to unwind	1.89

Feelings of burnout and related mental health impacts may be perpetuated by the monotony of the position and lack of relatability among non-dispatchers. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on questions surrounding this topic, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Overall, respondents agreed most strongly that people outside of their profession cannot relate to their job demands (M=4.36), and it is difficult for them to spend time with family and friends because of work demands (M=3.82). This is an anticipated finding, as TPDCC have been on a mandatory overtime rotation for an extended period. Though slightly lower in agreement, dispatchers agree to some extent that there is variety their assigned tasks (M=3.11). This is surprising given the routine nature of many calls for service but may speak to the unpredictability that arises with officer radio transmissions and critical incidents.

Lower agreement is observed with questions pertaining to feeling valued by colleagues (M=2.93), appreciated by citizens (M=.68), and feeling valued (M=2.43) and cared for by the department (M=2.36). Considering how integral they are to police operations, this is especially disconcerting. Results also demonstrate that overall, respondents do not strongly feel they are constantly being watched and assessed (M=2.75). Those who do feel that this occurs may be referring to the close quarters in which dispatchers work, as well as the monitoring of frequencies that occurs among all staff members during a shift. Respondents do not appear to feel strong interest in seeking advancement with the department (M=2.50), which may stem from the limited trajectory for a dispatch professional. In terms of the lowest overall agreement, respondents do not feel strongly that the department is efficient at handling problems, and they also do not engage in alcohol use as a coping mechanism after a rough day (M=2.11 and 1.89,

respectively). Open-ended narrative responses pertaining to stress management both at and outside of work will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Descriptive results from the general survey highlight the importance of using de-escalation techniques to defuse interactions with citizens. Not only are these techniques important, but they are also called upon multiple times in a dispatcher's shift. Further, dispatchers see de-escalation training in a favorable light, indicating that it will equip dispatchers with additional skills, and improve communication with both citizens and officers. Finally, results pertaining to burnout and department support indicate that dispatchers are exhausted, experiencing burnout, and find it difficult to carve out time for family and friends because of work demands. Dispatchers do not feel that they are strongly supported and cared for by the department, which is troubling considering how vital their role is to policing operations. These results have implications for policy and practice, which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS: BEHAVIORS TO AVOID

Understanding the behaviors considered hinderances to effective de-escalation is integral to the development of training content and performance standards for dispatchers. Open-ended responses were gathered from the survey administered to all dispatch personnel, specifically the following two questions:

> What types of behaviors should a dispatcher/call-taker **avoid** using when **talking to citizens**?
> What types of behaviors should a dispatcher/call-taker **avoid** using when **talking to an officer**?

These qualitative responses resulted in the emergence of key themes surrounding actions that escalate callers and officers.

Citizens. Speaking with citizens during 911 and non-emergency calls can present numerous challenges, ranging from obtaining necessary details or clarifying ambiguous details (Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Orosco, 2021), to de-escalating individuals experiencing or witnessing a crisis (APCO, 2021). As discussed previously, those considered highly effective at de-escalation employ strategies and techniques proven to be helpful throughout the course of their duties. However, it is equally as important to identify actions that may escalate callers or create barriers to effective call resolution. Shedding light on these behaviors from the perspective of dispatch practitioners not only informs our understanding of call dynamics but may lead to more comprehensive classroom and on-air training that is rooted in reducing said behaviors.

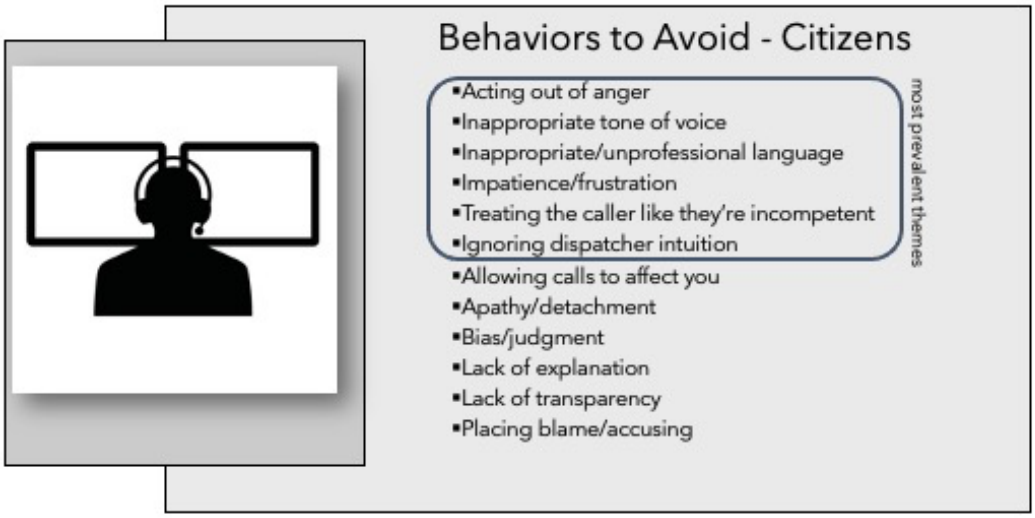

Figure 6. Behaviors to Avoid with Citizens - Themes

Among the most common themes are acting out of anger and exhibiting impatience or frustration, both of which are directly related to the inability to hold in frustration with the caller, or the situation itself. Often, callers are not in the most

cooperative or rational state due to the urgency or magnitude of the situation, and they may need to be calmed down before they can provide details. Further, a dispatcher may be speaking to a caller who has never interacted with police before, and in turn is not aware of the process, or what is expected of them as a complainant. This frustration may show itself in the form of treating callers like they are incompetent or stupid, rather than providing an explanation for call protocols (e.g., asking a variety of questions so that officers have the necessary details). One survey response perfectly encapsulates the issues inherent in approaching callers this way:

> The worst issue here is responding to citizens condescendingly or abruptly for not knowing things that are intuitive to us as police employees, or for calling us for issues that we don't handle. I cringe when I hear my peers regularly treat our citizens like they're stupid, rather than someone we serve. What I hear is, "That's a civil matter, sir, we don't handle that" more often than, "I'm sorry to hear that happened to you. Because this is a civil matter -- a private agreement between you both that was violated -- we actually don't have any authority to handle this. Instead you can choose to take action through the courts where a Judge has authority to decide what happens next. Would you like me to transfer you there?" (Survey Respondent 15*)*

This also touches on the themes of not providing an explanation (e.g., this is why I can't help you), detachment, and a lack of transparency (i.e., we can't do anything to help you on this end, but perhaps this agency can), "not explaining what is going on, for example; transferring to another agency or service without explaining to caller what to expect or what is happening" (Respondent 2).

Moreover, there appears to be a delicate balance between not taking things personally, and becoming completely detached or apathetic, "being overly dismissive and making them feel like you don't care about them or their problem" (Respondent 8). According to one respondent, the feelings of detachment and apathy stems from taking things personally, specifically the way callers communicate with dispatchers:

> Letting people get under the dispatchers' skin, it's easy to get frustrated or even detached. [I] came into the job with a high level of empathy and it's turning to apathy because of the horrible way people speak to us daily. (Respondent 16)

Detachment from the call and caller violates the dispatcher rule of being proactive and engaged, and in a heightened state of awareness. If the dispatcher is not present, or is dismissive, it is possible that they will not detect the subtle clues and details essential to proper information gathering.

The cumulative effects of being spoken to harshly may also result in approaching calls in a biased manner, specifically, entering a new call with the frustrations of the previous calls, "the caller of a previous caller or set of calls…assuming you know the outcome or cause of the current caller's incident or concern" (Respondent 14). Although many calls share similarities and may be related to the same incident in some cases, dispatchers must approach each call with a clean slate to ensure that all details are captured, and key questions are posed. Not making assumptions about the call also holds relevance for another behavior identified by respondents: placing blame on or accusing the caller of putting themselves in a situation. According to Respondent 7, "Call takers should not be accusatory or talk down to citizens, even when their choices have put them in the situation they are in". This speaks to the need to focus on the service being provided, and the necessary details, versus focusing on contextual factors that are not of relevance for initial call classification.

Finally, using inappropriate or unprofessional language was among the most common themes that emerged from the responses. Inappropriate language may include "using crass or inappropriate language" (Respondent 6), "using confusing terminology or codes, not using plain language" (Respondent 2), or "language that promises an action"

(Respondent 11). Finally, language that sounds as though you are interrogating or questioning the caller is also considered unprofessional, and aligns with the previously discussed behavior of treating the caller as if they're incompetent:

> Using language that makes it seem that you are questioning the actuality of the circumstances. Although as a dispatcher you need to verify the information, dispatchers need to avoid using certain phrases "are you sure you're seeing this?" "are you having mental health issues?" (Respondent 21)

These behaviors emphasize the importance of proper tone, language, emotion regulation, and being in tune with your intuition.

Officers. Interactions with officers span the entire shift, and include frequent, rapid transactions such as voicing calls for service, assigning responding units, processing requests for subject and vehicle information, as well as requests for back-up or assistance that may result from other high-risk incidents in the field. The sheer volume of communication between dispatcher and officer equates to more opportunities for misunderstanding or escalation.

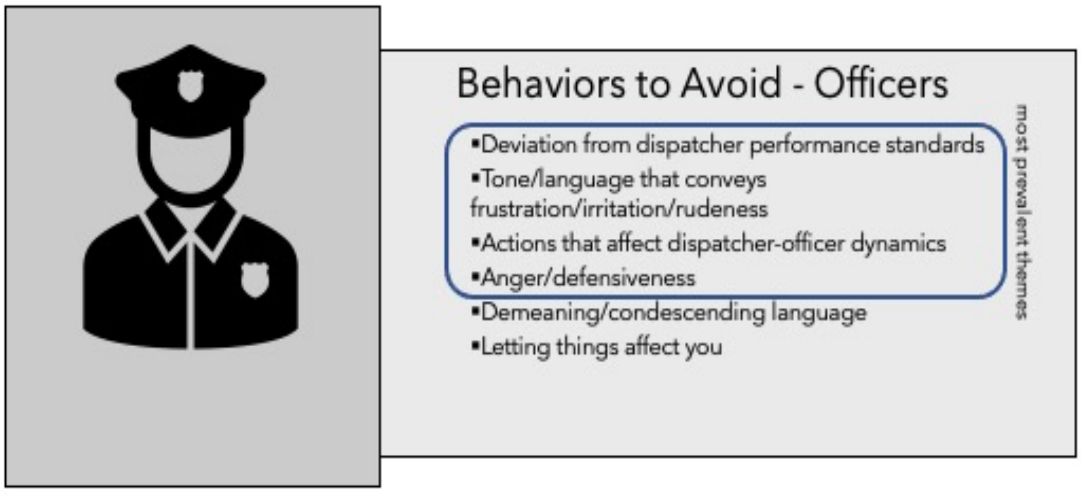

Figure 7. Behaviors to Avoid with Officers - Themes

These open-ended survey responses are in direct contrast to the qualities and behaviors considered necessary for effective de-escalation with officers (see Chapter 5). Most notable are the expectations of following dispatcher intuition, increased awareness, and being proactive. Several respondents listed behaviors that are in direct opposition to these standards, which should be avoided while working the radio: “not paying attention to the board or updates on calls for service” (Respondent 23), “leaving out important, clarifying information” (Respondent 8), and the following, which captures several behaviors deemed problematic, “withholding information that is needed for calls for services, doing the bare minimum requirements for calls, not paying attention to your channel, not keeping up on status monitor locations” (Respondent 20). By not being fully aware of the status of your units, or able to recognize slight changes in their behavior, a dispatcher may indirectly be placing their officers at risk for harm:

> Lack of initiative in going to extra steps; inattentiveness… failure to recognize idiosyncrasies that may indicate officer's potential change in stress level or possible hazard encountered; failure or unwillingness to use available resources; lack of knowledge (not staying current with intel, hazards, etc.). (Respondent 25)

Those who do not meet the minimum performance standards are seen as placing officer and community safety at risk. The expectation that dispatchers will regulate their emotions when on the air, another performance expectation, also appeared in responses:

> We also need to have a clear, calm and confident tone when working high-adrenaline, emergency calls. I have heard from the sworn side that when the dispatcher sounds nervous or amped up, it frazzles them going into a call. Whereas if we are calm, confident, and collected - they are in a better headspace for whatever they roll up on. (Respondent 14)

Those unable to remain even keeled on the radio may place officers in an elevated state prior to arrival, and potentially increase the risk to officers and community members.

Similarly, using tone or language that is rude and conveys frustration or irritation conflicts with the de-escalation technique of emotion regulation seen as supremely important for both citizen and officer transmissions. Dispatchers "should not use any irritated or frustrated tone on the radio when officers are not communicating well or with clarity" (Respondent 6), use an "irritated tone" (Respondent 23), and ultimately, "if you allow yourself to become frustrated, it will only cause a downward spiral on how the rest of the day will play out" (Respondent 24). One respondent spoke to the validity of the frustration, specifically as it relates to questions:

> It can be very frustrating to dispatch an officer to a call for service, and they immediately ask us 5 questions about the call that we might not have the answers to yet. I guess I would suggest not showing your frustration in your voice over the radio. (Respondent 21)

Although the dispatcher may understandably be frustrated, an irritated tone is not appropriate. This ties directly to not letting things affect you, specifically when you consider the context of the situation:

> Getting frustrated. They are out in the field dealing with issues in person versus us handling it over the phone. Stress level is definitely higher and we need to prioritize officer safety but also have patience and speak in an understanding manner. (Respondent 18)

There is recognition that officers are experiencing different stressors in the field, and dispatchers should be mindful of that when communicating. One respondent spoke to the impact of being rude on the air, specifically the way it can elevate officers:

> Having an attitude on the air. Letting the severity of the call change your tone. It is ok to be shaken, flustered or concerned, but you cannot let that out over the air as it will only amp up your officers who are responding to an already elevated or chaotic call for service. (Respondent 13*)*

Many responses also included responding defensively, or out of anger when communicating with officers. This included behaviors such as "yelling" (Respondent 1),

"talking in an angry or defensive tone" (Respondent 2), "aggression" (Respondent 22), "anger, yelling" (Respondent 5), and other similar sentiments. In line with these responses, speaking to officers in a condescending or demeaning manner will undoubtedly impact the interaction negatively, and potentially lead to strained dispatcher-officer dynamics beyond the resolution of the call. Responses also highlight the importance of remaining professional and maintaining boundaries while on the air. Behaviors such as making jokes on the air, laughing, or flirting with officers is considered unprofessional, and may affect the dispatcher-officer dynamic, and overall perceptions about dispatch.

These findings provide valuable insight into the behaviors known to hinder effective de-escalation. Though some are specific to callers and officers, four key themes overlapped across both categories.

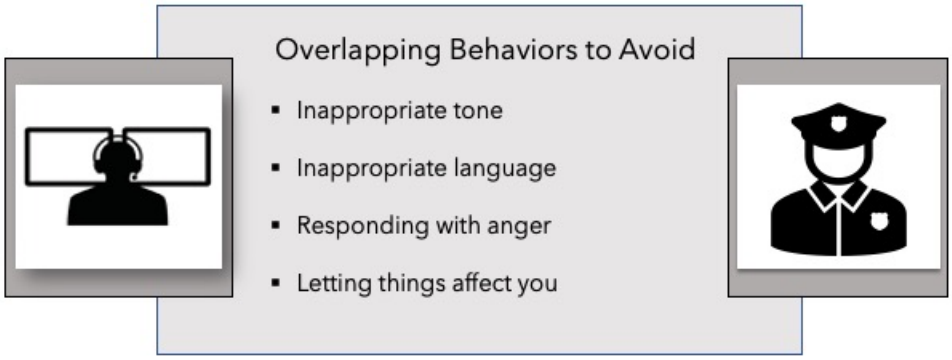

Figure 8. Overlapping Behaviors

Using an inappropriate tone, specifically one that escalates the caller or officer, is a theme that appears in both transaction types. Language should also be professional, and not convey frustration, or as though someone is being interrogated. Often callers and officers are dealing with a highly stressful situation, and in turn, they may speak to dispatch in a

curt manner. It is important to respond calmly, and not from a place of anger. Finally, among the most important themes is that of not taking things personally. The stressful nature of dispatching means that callers and officers rely on dispatch to obtain resources quickly, and with little information. Dispatchers are often on the receiving end of terrified, frustrated, and panicked transmissions, and need to remember that citizen and officer behavior is typically related to the circumstances. The ability to not take things personally is crucial to effective de-escalation of the self, and others.

Additional qualitative responses from the survey regarding on and off-duty stress management techniques are presented in Chapter 6, as they relate to the broader discussion of the dispatcher mental health-de-escalation nexus.

CHAPTER 5

TDD VIEWS ON DE-ESCALATION WITH CITIZENS AND OFFICERS

This chapter presents findings from interviews with the nine peer-nominated Top Dispatch De-Escalators considered highly skilled at de-escalation by their peers and supervisors (TDDs). Questions cover defining de-escalation in a dispatch context, as well as behaviors considered effective while de-escalating citizens and officers.

DEFINING DE-ESCALATION

A widely adopted definition for de-escalation does not exist (Engel et al., 2020; White et al., 2019), though variations of this definition have appeared in policing more broadly. During the initial stages of the larger TPD SPI project, the department created the following de-escalation definition which has been incorporated into policy:

> Techniques used to gain compliance with the goal of reducing violence or aggression. This can be accomplished through application of the PATROL model, communication, the use of appropriate force, and/or other reasonable techniques.

Note: Officers should not compromise their safety or increase the risk of physical harm to the public when applying de-escalation techniques.

Dispatching is a different world, absent of in-person interactions and constrained by rapid and accurate call processing. Since a de-escalation definition for dispatchers does not exist, TDDs were asked in their interview to define de-escalation overall (for both citizens and officers) from their point of view. TDDs noted the importance of bringing the situation down, *"*I think I would just define as…bringing the caller down. They're up here. they're at a 10. We need to get them down to like, one or two." (TD72). There was also an emphasis on having call control through effective communication techniques to extract information while simultaneously stabilizing the situation. One TDD spoke to the importance of neutralizing the situation to prevent the occurrence of injury to the caller or others:

> It's also…getting that person to come out without hurting him or someone else. It's getting them to put the weapon down, you know, and not hurt themselves or shoot at the officers. It's getting them to walk away from the person that they're beating up…it's just basically neutralizing the situation (TD49)

De-escalation as a dispatcher requires the ability to quickly adapt to a dynamic situation calmly while finding the appropriate words to encourage cooperation and prevent any further escalation:

> De-escalation is just bringing a high stressed person or officer to a level, to kind of say, take a step back here a second, let me try to help you the best that I can…de-escalation is…finding the right words to say, take a step back. Take a deep breath without making them upset (TD16)

Properly classifying an incident is of vital importance for accurate prioritization and the deployment of appropriate resources (Simpson & Orosco, 2021), which underscores the need to obtain as much information as possible within the time constraints of a 911 call. This TDD's definition of de-escalation speaks to not only the need to adjust your

approach to redirect the call in a more productive manner, but to do so while remaining respectful and empathetic to the caller. This passage also highlights the need for call control and reining the call back in if it derails:

> I would say it's quickly and efficiently finding a means to get the information you need. And like I said, I try to do it as respectfully as possible. Sometimes you have to be a little harder with…whoever you're talking to. And I mean, I would say most of us here haven't been on the receiving end, when you're in the midst of a shooting, stabbing, or something like that. So…it can be very tough to get the information you need. But you have to remember that too. So…by whatever means you do it, it just needs to be quick, efficient, and find a means to get it. Like, if you're asking the same question…if you're asking them what color is a shirt? What color's a shirt? What color's a shirt? 15 times, change it up. Okay, he was wearing blue jeans? Like, what about the top he was wearing? Like, just change your verbiage. Yeah, bring them back in somehow. (TD32)

The theme of bringing the caller down to a calmer state as the definition of de-escalation was common among all nine TDDs, and for many, doing so is integral to officer and community safety. Dispatchers see themselves as being at least partly responsible for the state of the caller upon officer arrival, and in turn, they recognize the implications of a caller being escalated once the officer arrives. This highlights the awareness among dispatchers that their behavior directly affects the call outcome:

> So I guess if I'm talking to a caller, I'm thinking about my officers getting there. So if the caller is up here, I need to bring them down here before the officers get there… because if I don't, then they're going to be heightened and the officers are going to be heightened. And we don't know what's going to happen. So I try and always have my callers even keeled. And I tell them…you need to calm down a little bit. And I don't say…calm down, but, you cannot be like this when my officers get there. [They're] like, okay, okay, I understand. Yeah, you're right. (TD57)

Taken together, de-escalation from a dispatcher lens aligns with definitions in a sworn context insofar that it involves techniques deployed to reduce the potential for violence, and it is highly dependent on the dispatcher's ability to effectively communicate and

adapt to the caller, as well as the dynamics of the incident. Further, by focusing on stabilizing the incident and obtaining details, there is an emphasis on decreasing the risk of harm, whether it be against other involved parties, the caller themselves, or officers. These dispatcher-specific definitions showcase the continuity in the de-escalation process from the initial call to officer arrival. Interestingly, when asked if de-escalation as defined in a dispatch context occurs naturally, or is purposeful, the majority of TDDs felt that de-escalation is a process that happens organically:

> I think it's more of just a natural thing … if I'm trying to pull information out of somebody, and they're all over the place…that's just a natural response to be like, I need you to take a deep breath and focus on what I'm asking you… it's never been my first thought that I need to de-escalate this, it's just been like, this is my job, this is what I need to do. And this is the most efficient way to do it. (TD32)

The need to obtain as much information as possible leads to the natural occurrence of de-escalation, as a caller often needs to be defused to answer questions and to provide the level of detail needed to classify a call and inform officers of what to expect upon arrival. De-escalation is seen as a core function of dispatching, though the nature of the call itself may require a more purposeful effort to de-escalate:

> It truly depends on the caller…sometimes it's just natural. There's more of a nurturing element that comes out when you're talking to someone, maybe elderly or a child or something, there's more of that…motherly instinct or that nurturing instinct to try to kind of calm them down…just naturally. Other times when you have the angry caller…you're like, I need to extract information cognizant [of de-escalation] now, the only way I'm going to do that is if I come down, when they go up, I have to come down. So then I'd have to make a conscious effort with that type of caller. (TD35)

This speaks to the natural nurturing quality of de-escalation that emerges when speaking to certain individuals, and the focused approach to de-escalation when a caller is angry, or less cooperative. Dispatchers need to be aware of their tone when speaking to

escalated callers, ensuring that they remain calm and level-headed to acquire key details. While the approach may differ depending on the attributes of the call, de-escalation in a call setting requires rapid assessment and adaptation in order to complete the call entry process.

EFFECTIVE DE-ESCALATION: CITIZEN TRANSACTIONS

TDDs were asked to first consider de-escalation of citizens. The characteristics of an exceptional de-escalator, such as remaining calm and being adaptable, were central themes in most responses. To identify the qualities and behaviors of a top de-escalator more concretely, TDDs were asked the following three questions:

> Why do you think your peers voted you as a top de-escalator?
>
> Do you remember filling out the nomination sheet yourself? What types of traits did you think about when you voted for others?
>
> Can you describe exactly how a dispatcher de-escalates a situation?

Results (Figure 9) point to a wide variety of skills that are needed to be effective at de-escalation. These extend beyond communication and listening skills and speak to the human element of dispatching and the need to regulate your own emotions before you can assist others. Overall, effective de-escalation with a citizen involves a toolkit of techniques that a dispatcher can pull from if needed. Groups of related themes will be discussed in detail below.

Emotion Regulation. Effective de-escalation with citizens requires an unparalleled ability to regulate your own emotions, de-escalate yourself (TD52, TD72), and remain calm independent of what may be occurring on the phone or the radio

frequency. More specifically, effective de-escalation involves consistency in tone of voice:

> Definitely tone, tone was never raised. Volume was kept to a low tone…their volume was low, their tone was calm. And just listening to them negotiate in essence with suicidal callers or children or officers on the radio, the same thing, they're just calm, they don't change their tone much there's not a ton of influx in that. (TD35)

> So, whether it's a routine call, or the craziest call for the day…it should all sound the same on my end. (TD32)

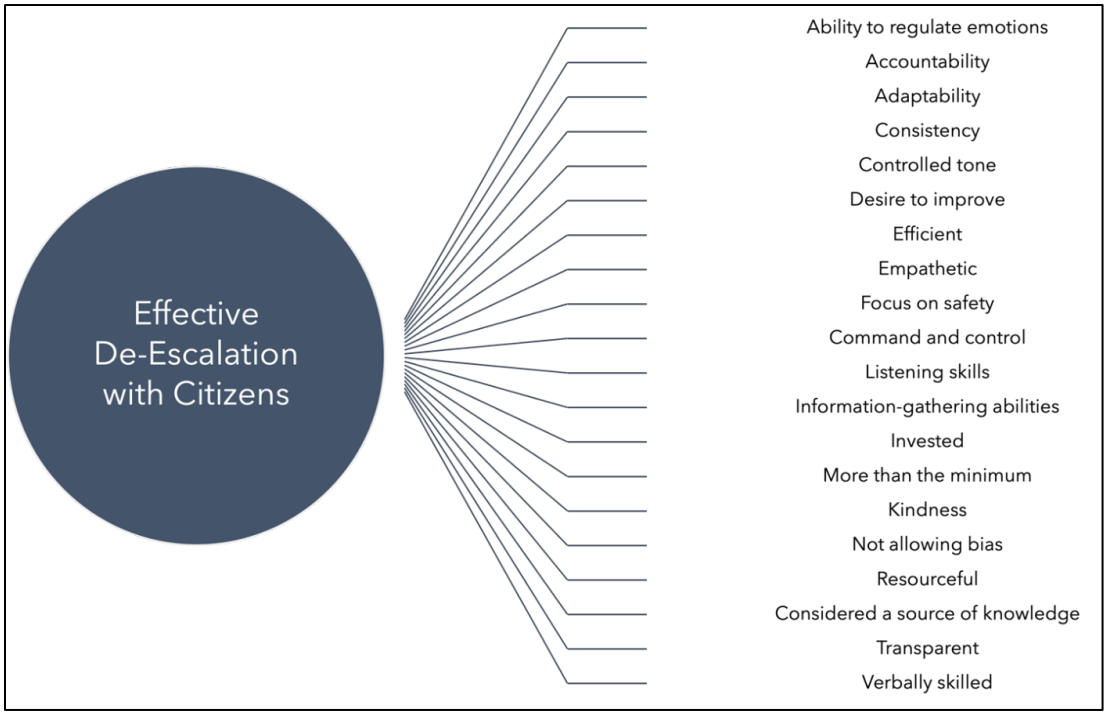

Figure 9. Effective De-Escalation with Citizens Themes

This was perfectly captured by TD72 who stated, "I know, it seems like such a stupid little thing, but a calm voice when hell is breaking loose, really does help." Although the tactic itself seems simple, it can be challenging when faced with a situation that is chaotic and would otherwise hinder one's ability to remain calm. Those highly skilled at de-

escalation are also able to brush things off and gather the information needed without taking things personally:

> The people that came to mind, to me, were people that…you couldn't easily get a rise out of them. They were in control of themselves. And didn't take things personally…you can hear that pretty easily on the floor. This person just kind of always operates at this consistent level, they get frustrated, but they don't very often. (TD90)

Finally, effective de-escalation requires the ability to separate past experiences with callers from incoming calls for service, treating each call with a clean slate free from assumptions. Although one caller or a specific incident type may have been challenging the day before, each caller deserves to be treated with kindness, and without the added weight of negative experiences unrelated to their own call for service.

Being Empathetic and Showing Kindness. As displayed in Figure 9, effective de-escalation with citizens involves treating callers with empathy and kindness, despite how frustrating the circumstances may be:

> You can always be respectful, it's a choice to bite on what they're giving you. And it's a choice to use whatever words come out of your mouth…I'm not saying I've never had a situation where I got frustrated, because we all have, but in that moment, that was my choice, and it wasn't a correct one. (TD32)

It is expected that frustration will occur, particularly considering the expectation that calls will be processed quickly and comprehensively, with many requiring an urgent response and additional resources. However, the ability to recognize that citizens are still deserving of respect and ensuring that it is maintained throughout the call is a skill that is crucial to effective de-escalation, and integral to procedurally just policing (Flippin et al., 2019). Kindness and empathy also manifest in the form of validating the caller's concerns, however minuscule, in turn making the caller feel heard, and as though their request is a priority:

> A lot of people call and they say…I know you're too busy for me, and I know this isn't a big deal. And I just always try to make them feel like, no, you're the reason I'm here…you're the reason I have a job and… whatever you're calling about is very important to you. So, I just have that mindset of every caller, you know, even though it's maybe their neighbors parking in front of their house, it's a huge deal to them…it ruins their day. (TD49)

This empathetic, caring approach also helps the dispatcher to reorient themselves and recognize that a caller treating them poorly does not make them a victim. Validating caller concerns may provide a solution that will lead to more positive interactions in the future:

> It's really easy to get wrapped up in feeling like, man those people mistreated me, people are so rude, my job's awful. I can't believe that…people talk to me in that way. Then I sort of just had this lightbulb go off. I'm not…necessarily a victim to them, I have some control over these conversations, and maybe I can do something that will help limit the amount of times people are treating me that way. Because I can dignify them, even when I don't feel like I want to, even if I want to think it's something that's silly and dumb…all I have to do is say, "Oh, wow, that sounds frustrating, but let me help you by referring you..." instead of saying, "…you called the wrong place, we don't care about that. This isn't an emergency." (TD90)

The importance of treating callers with kindness and empathy also requires a level of personalization and seeing callers as people rather than a reporting party in a call for service. Although the vicarious trauma associated with dispatching is well known in the literature (Steinkopf et al., 2018), TDDs often approach calls from the vantage point of humanizing the caller to provide better service. Although this can present challenges in terms of separating emotions from the task at hand, TDDs enhanced ability to regulate their emotions may explain the use of this tactic:

> They're all personal to me, I treat everybody as if that was my grandma, or that… was my mom…you know, they're frustrating, but I would want someone to treat me with respect and dignity. (TD35)

Giving More than the Minimum and a Desire to Improve. Remarks from TDDs also emphasized the importance of post-call reflection to stay sharp and skilled at de-escalation: “every call you're like, did I, could I have done something more?” (TD16). Another TDD spoke to the importance of keeping yourself in a heightened state of awareness, recognizing when mistakes are made, and quickly reminding oneself that mistakes, whether unintentional or due to frustration or burnout, are unacceptable:

> Because for me…one thing in this job is I never try to get comfortable. And I never try to get complacent. I always kind of…just psychologically keep myself a little bit on edge. Because I mean, yes, there have been times where…maybe I've been a little, not the friendliest to somebody…that's the 10th call that I've had like that and I'm rolling my eyes…but then I think too, whenever like, I make a mistake…naturally, I just kind of start to sweat…and I'm like…not acceptable. (TD72)

The continuous reflection on performance and desire to improve also manifests itself in the form of going above and beyond during a call, as TDDs spoke frequently to the importance of exceeding basic call requirements (e.g., entering a call, answering questions) to ensure that all bases are covered:

> …saying, you know, well, let me see what I can do for you…I'm going to research this, and I'm going to…get back to you with an answer. Or, you know, I'm sorry you're having a bad day, let me see what I can do for you to help you. (TD49)

TDDs prioritize exploring all possible avenues for information and close the loop with callers to ensure that they feel their situation is resolved in some capacity.

A Knowledge Hub: Resourcefulness and Information-Gathering. The frequent practice of extensive information-gathering to provide exceptional service to the caller has direct implications for the dispatch floor, as TDDs are also viewed as a knowledge resource among others who may not possess the same insight, “everyone

comes to me for advice" (TD57). In addition to serving as trainers, supervisors, and in other ancillary roles, TDDs are called upon to provide guidance in unique situations that require advanced knowledge in a variety of topic areas (e.g., laws, resources, contacts), and value the same qualities in others:

> …they have a vast knowledge of different things that can help them. So yes, it may not be our wheelhouse that it's not criminal, but they have civil questions and… information that can be helpful to them. So by [telling them] you can get more protection, or you can get an injunction against harassment, or hey, the constable can help you out with eviction…it helps to de-escalate the situation from being, "oh, you guys don't know what you're doing" (TD52)

However, it is also important to acknowledge when you do not possess the necessary knowledge, but you are willing to locate it, or ask a colleague for assistance. In this case, the priority becomes obtaining the necessary information and providing the caller with resources:

> …and also knowing…where your limit is…like, hey, I don't know, let me ask my supervisor, or hey, I don't know, let me ask, you know, my peer who's been here for 14 years…and knowing that you don't know everything. So, I think that helps. (TD52)

Transparency, Exceptional Communication, and Listening Skills. TDDs elaborated on the specific techniques used when communicating with callers, most notably the importance of being transparent and providing sufficient explanation for their actions throughout the interaction:

> It's like, I can't do anything for you on this end, but you still try to explain as much as possible…explaining something always helps, in detail as much as possible...instead of just brushing them off. Yeah…helps a lot.". (TD16)

TDDs recognize that although providing only brief details will expedite the call process, it makes the caller feel as though they are being disregarded, and not receiving the care they deserve. Often callers who feel as though they were merely processed through the

911 system will place additional calls, which may lead to delays in the queue and increased frustration for all involved parties. Ultimately, even if the dispatcher is not able to provide a service (e.g., the call is non-emergency and is handled by another agency or department), transparency and a detailed explanation can lead to effective call resolution and a de-escalated citizen.

Providing an explanation for one's actions may also have a calming effect on a caller who is in an elevated state because of the nature of the incident they are reporting. It is imperative that dispatchers recognize that citizens calling 911 are often experiencing a crisis, and unable to articulate details clearly or calmly:

> I don't even try and say, obviously calm down…you hear people all the time say, "I can't understand you when you're yelling". Okay, well, I don't think that's going to de-escalate them at all. I think you just need to explain to them what your problem is, so they can fix it. "I can't understand what you're saying", you know, "Can you speak a little slower, take a couple of deep breaths and talk slower for me, so I can understand you, so I can send you the help that you need". If you explain to people, this is a problem I'm having, and this is why I need you to fix it. Instead of just saying, you know, stop yelling, I can't understand you, then I think it's more successful. (TD49)

As previously discussed, having empathy for the caller leads to more successful de-escalation, and is a precursor to providing an explanation for all actions. Simply telling a citizen to calm down does not provide reasoning, but instead may invalidate or frustrate the caller. By conveying to the caller why you need them to slow down and take deep breaths (i.e., so that you can obtain the information you need and provide resources), the caller may better understand how their behavior influences the outcome of the interaction, including a swift response and informed officers.

Being a good listener is integral to the resolution of calls, even if de-escalation is no longer a possibility:

> No matter how well you're trained, you're just gonna get a caller that's not gonna cooperate. So sometimes the best thing you can do is just type what you hear, you know… I try to teach that to some people in the beginning because like, really, the officers are responding to whatever information that they get (TD72)

A skilled de-escalator possesses the ability to adapt to a caller who may not be responding to call resolution efforts, instead focusing on the acquisition of important call details, and preparing responding officers as much as possible. Call ambiguity can present challenges for officer and community safety alike (Simpson, 2020); therefore, it is imperative that dispatchers continue to gauge the situation and switch to listening mode when appropriate.

A Focus on Safety: Command and Control. A central theme woven throughout each of the interviews with TDDs was the importance of command and control, both of which are directly related to ensuring community and officer safety: "and de-escalation…is call control, you're helping control and guide the conversation" (TD90). One TDD commented on the emphasis placed on call control from the very first training phase as a new hire, underscoring the importance of information gathering and timeliness, especially when the incident is considered critical:

> We go through our training phase, I would say, what gets put in place of that [de-escalation] is the phrase call control. And…it gets beaten into you early on, because like, obviously, when you're first coming to this, you're slow…and you can't be typing slow, and letting people ramble when someone just got shot. So as necessary as it is, I think it gets more beat into you up front. Like, shut them down and get what you need. So, yeah, I think [it] gets presented as cut them off and get what you need to, cut them off and get what you need. (TD32)

Call control is central to the dispatcher skill set, "because you have to control your call. And I mean, people have walked all over me…and then you kind of have to reel them back in." (TD57). As discussed, this is done to ensure that all pertinent information is obtained so that responding officers and other resources (e.g., fire department) are sent to

the scene as quickly as possible. From a TDD perspective, call control is key, but this can still be accomplished while providing good service:

> And then also with it obviously being about de-escalation, people [good de-escalators] that I feel…have a strong knack for controlling their callers without being disrespectful (TD32)

Taken together, the need to obtain details and piece together an incident is vital to the proper response and distribution of resources and will continue to be a key component of all calls from citizens. By utilizing the various skills identified by TDDs as being key to effective de-escalation, the call for service becomes a more seamless, mutually beneficial experience between caller and dispatcher.

EFFECTIVE DE-ESCALATION: OFFICER TRANSACTIONS

The current study provides insight on a neglected portion of the de-escalation landscape – the dispatcher role in the de-escalation of officers in the field. Dispatchers are typically the first point of contact for citizens, while also remaining in constant contact with officers in the field as they process inquiries, voice calls, and facilitate urgent requests for assistance should an officer be in distress. This constant communication between officers and dispatchers highlights the need to consider the way dispatchers de-escalate, or prevent escalation, among officers on the radio. TDDs were asked the following question during their interview:

Do you ever need to de-escalate units in the field? Can you provide an example? Results indicate that to effectively de-escalate officers in the field, dispatchers must regulate their emotions, remain aware and proactive, respect officers, and maintain command and control. Findings also highlight the importance of following your intuition and paying attention to cues that may indicate that an officer is in distress.

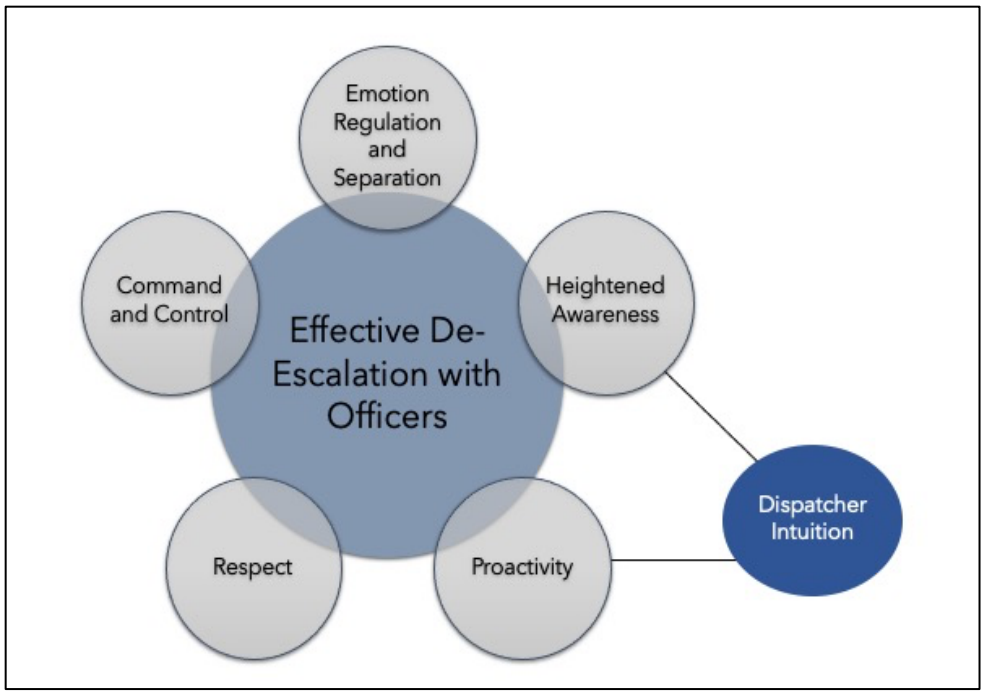

Figure 10. Effective De-Escalation with Officers - Themes

Emotion Regulation and Separation. Like the emotion regulation used during interactions with citizens, TDDs emphasized the importance of keeping themselves calm, steady, and without much fluctuation, despite the circumstances surrounding the radio traffic they are voicing and receiving. The dispatcher should be aware of the manner of delivery, and the potential impact on responding officers, even if there is a high potential for violence:

> I worked one couple months back where this guy…he legitimately…barricaded his wife and kids in the room and was just going off threatening to kill them and …had them trapped in the room, the call taker is on the line the whole time, the guy is screaming. So, any update I gave, I gave very slow and deliberately, not slow in getting it out, but just the way I delivered it. (TD32)

The speed at which the information was conveyed was not delayed by the decision to transmit slowly and deliberately, yet it may have prevented officer-level escalation by taking a "just the facts" approach free from the expression of emotion. It is important to

recognize that dispatchers feel the effects of these incidents and regulating their emotions over the air does not mean they are free from a stress response. Further, they are often on the receiving end of the officers' emotional response which may compound call-related effects, and require an additional level of stabilization:

> With just the way the way you talk to officers, again, when they're going up, you have to be calm … I may be shaking, I may be trembling, I may be eyes welling up with whatever emotion, but you have to come down, you know. When officers are snippy, I'm not gonna be snippy back with them. There's a lot going on, you have to kind of take in that perspective as well. It's not personal sometimes. (TD32)

Discussions surrounding dispatcher priming and the relationship to officer use of force (Taylor, 2020) as well as alarmist prioritization (Gillooly, 2021) have emerged in the literature. These issues are particularly relevant to dispatcher views on voice and emotion control, and the "amping up" of officers in the field:

> And then on the radio… my biggest concern at all times is…I don't want to rile them up, if they're going to something crazy, you know, they're going to a shooting or the potential of a shooting happening or whatever, I don't need to be on the air, like, "you gotta get there and it's really getting out of hand" (TD32)

TDDs are aware of the risks inherent in sounding elevated or excited during transmissions, making it a point to remain emotionless and without inflection each time they transmit:

> You know, you have to calm down. You can't sound like that, because it amps them up. Sure, when you have units that sound like they're getting amped up…you just really, I at least make an extra effort to just sound calm and to keep my voice for lack of a better term, be monotone. No emotion in it. Because that does tend to help them calm down, and you know, stay even keeled. (TD49)

Dispatchers are particularly adept at recognizing when officers are frustrated, which presents challenges for the acquisition of additional information such as the status of an incident, or the location of the officer, for example:

> Because if they're already escalated, you're just gonna amp them up more. And I always keep that in mind. Whenever I'm working…a hot call. Whenever I'm dealing with a disgruntled officer, if I've had to ask them to repeat something, they get snooty about it. I just always stay the same. (TD72)

Ultimately, TDDs emphasize the importance of remaining calm, level-headed, and without much voice variation, all while not taking it personally if officers respond with a frustrated or escalated tone:

> But for the most part, I just let it bounce right off you. Because most of the time, you know that when they're escalated it's not towards you. It's towards what they're dealing with, or you may not [know]. And a lot of times…I don't know what they're dealing with. (TD72)

There is common understanding that because officers are in the field, they may be experiencing other stressors that are not known to the dispatcher handling the radio traffic. Finally, the ability to regulate your emotions also benefits dispatcher performance, as it helps one to remain calm and confident, and in turn, less susceptible to errors. "I think a lot of people when they get so hyped up, they feel like they're not doing their job correctly, so then they become scared, and then they do make more mistakes" (TD52). The position is inherently stressful but making mistakes due to the fear of what can go wrong can have detrimental effects on officer and community safety.

Heightened Awareness and Proactivity. Dispatching on the radio presents a level of unpredictability that requires increased awareness and proactive behaviors by the dispatcher on the radio channel. TDDs spoke to the importance of being aware of the needs of the officers, and being one step ahead so the officers can focus on their task at hand:

> I've never been in the field, but I can only imagine if you're in the field, and you have a dispatcher saying, "Where are you? What did you say? What's going on?" can only feel like your lifeline has been cut off. And so I think that probably is the biggest de-escalation for most officers because I've heard it from when you have

> someone on channel to someone else who they feel comfortable with…they almost like sigh like, okay, yeah, I can handle the rest of the way. Or…you'll get a message… thanks for taking over the channel…I can focus on what I need to do right because they have my back. Like, you have my back …you can handle it. (TD52)

If a dispatcher is highly tuned in, the officer can focus on the incident at hand without having to respond to requests on the radio because they are confident in the fact that the dispatcher is a trustworthy lifeline who can anticipate their needs. Further, it appears that limiting the number of transactions between the dispatcher and officer leads to less escalated radio transmissions, as it essentially reduces officer workload. This level of awareness is lauded by other dispatchers, and seen as an expectation of a top de-escalator:

> Those who just know like, hey, this is my dashboard. I know where my units are. I've checked on them. I know what calls are happening. I could reach you right now without looking at it. You know, like, knowing your shit. (TD52)

Increased awareness and proactivity on the dispatch side removes the reliance on others, particularly officers who are tasked with additional call-handling responsibilities. The discussion surrounding the unknowns of the incident that only the field units are aware of also speaks to the limited control that dispatchers have after officer arrival, and in turn, the controllable elements such as monitoring the radio frequency and knowing officer status, become the priority. Dispatchers place importance on preparedness, considering the "what ifs" of each call or request, and holding in a "ready" state should the worst-case scenario become a reality:

> And I like to have those things. I figure that if they're hearing that they're like, oh, I don't have to wait around there. They…have so much to do out there. And not even that, just an officer who's asking for a second unit. Make sure that you're prepared. (TD16)

Dispatcher Intuition. Anecdotally, the idea of "dispatcher intuition" is well known in the dispatcher community, and something the researcher experienced during her 9 years of service as a dispatcher in Los Angeles:

> You work with the units long enough that you get their tone inflection, and you can tell when something just isn't right. You always know. (TD52)

This intuition directly relates to the heightened awareness, proactivity, and preparedness communicated by each TDD, and speaks to the gut feeling you have when something feels out of the ordinary. Interestingly, this may be in the form of not responding to a request in the radio, suspicious clicks of the radio without any transmissions, or a long period of time without officer interactions. During a sit-along with TD35, we discussed the act of independently making decisions on behalf of the officers when dispatcher intuition puts you on alert: "if my gut says to do something, I will – the unit can cancel it if needed". The belief is that being safe and having to cancel responding back-up units or resources is much better than the alternative – ignoring your intuition and leaving the officer in a high-risk situation without assistance.

Respect. Several TDDs spoke to the importance of treating the officer with respect, a behavior that is vital to the effective de-escalation, or prevention of escalation, during an interaction. This respect may present itself in the form of recognizing mistakes, but not acting disrespectfully by pointing them out on the radio: "But I've definitely never been purposely, like, taking the moment to call someone out on the radio…I absolutely don't talk disrespectfully on the radio" (TD32), or tell an officer what to do.

Command and Control. Overall, the theme of having command and control over the radio, and what happens on your respective frequency, was a common theme among

TDDs. This involves not only a constant state of awareness, but also having the ability to make decisions that will benefit all involved, and decrease the possibility of injury:

> …if the unit on scene during…hot traffic says they can slow it down [stop responding with lights and sirens]…the adrenaline's already up for everyone, whether it's in here or out on the road…I'll reiterate that for sure. "Units can slow it down, person's detained" whatever the case is, whatever the reason, they're saying they can slow it down. Because I feel like…again, that can get missed in radio traffic, but the biggest thing is…just to remind you the person we're rushing to is good (TD32)

Having a command presence on the radio means "slowing down" the units (i.e., turning off lights and sirens and driving at a slower speed) when the situation is deemed safe. As the central point of contact for all units in the field, dispatchers can impact the way units respond to requests and calls.

Taken together, these results showcase the unique strategies and techniques dispatchers use to de-escalate citizens and officers, as well as those that overlap. Citizens do not possess the internal knowledge that officers have, and require transparency, exceptional listening and communication skills, and resourcefulness to locate information and route calls appropriately when police services are not needed. Officer interactions require the dispatcher to be aware of behaviors that seem out of the ordinary (intuition), respect for officers, and heightened awareness as it relates to officer and call status. As seen in Figure 11, three overlapping themes emerged with both citizens and officers: emotion regulation, command and control, and proactivity/doing more than the minimum. Dispatchers are required to remain calm, controlled, and not take things personally when citizens and officers are frustrated or use aggressive language. Dispatchers must de-escalate themselves before they can effectively de-escalate others. This regulation of emotions allows the dispatcher to have a command presence and

control over the call and radio, a skill that is essential for information gathering and resource deployment. Highly skilled de-escalators are able to do this professionally, and without an aggressive or disrespectful tone. Finally, in both instances, dispatchers must operate one step ahead, remain proactive, and give more than the minimum to ensure that citizens and officers have what they need. To be most effective at de-escalation, dispatchers should anticipate needs, and always have a plan in mind rather than being reactive and unprepared.

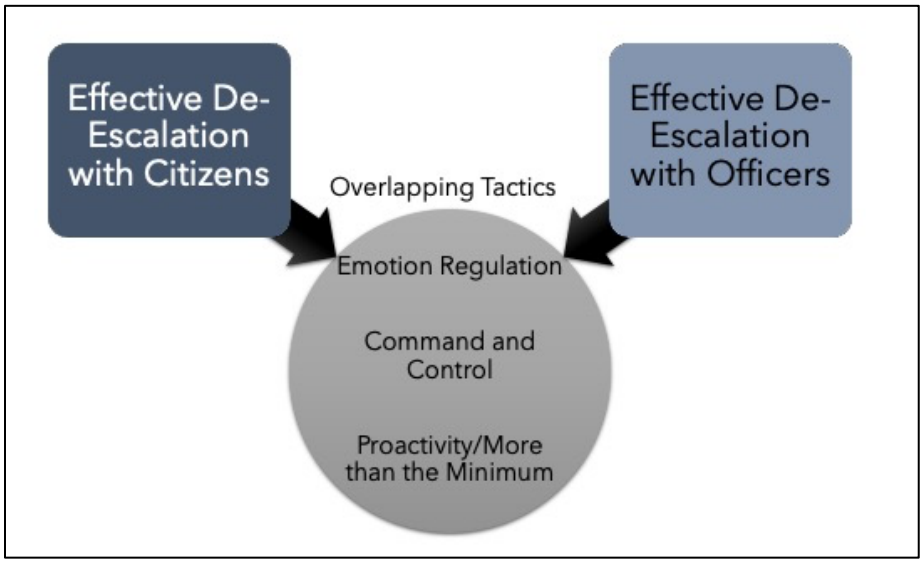

Figure 11. Overlapping Tactics – Citizens and Officers

CHAPTER 6

CHALLENGES, BARRIERS, AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

This chapter presents findings from interviews with the nine peer-nominated Top Dispatch De-Escalators as they relate to challenges faced while de-escalating, and how they can be resolved. To better understand situations considered difficult to de-escalate, TDDs were asked the following questions:

> Are there specific situations in which de-escalation is more difficult, or impossible?
>
> What elements of a situation make de-escalation more difficult or impossible, or undesirable?

Responses were analyzed, after which key themes surrounding the types of calls, individuals, and circumstances that make effective de-escalation more challenging emerged.

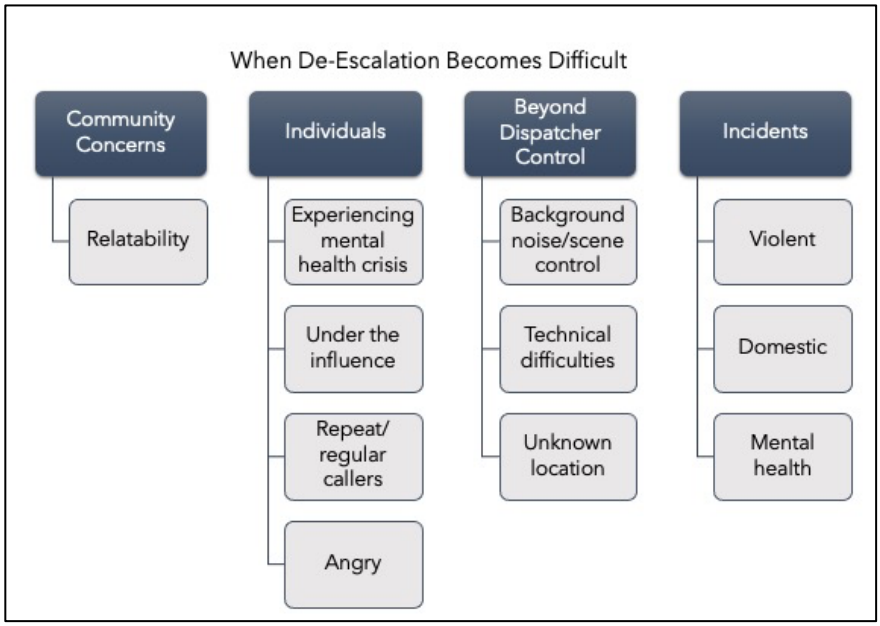

Figure 12. When De-Escalation Becomes Difficult - Themes

COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Dispatchers handle a wide range of calls for service, and with that, speak to a vast community with diverse experiences and unique needs. TDDs recognize that there may be a community experience they are unable to relate to, and conventional de-escalation methods may not be as effective or appropriate:

> So there's the racial aspect, I think, that can be difficult or awkward. We do … occasionally get people requesting a certain gender or requesting a certain race respond out. And…they're asking that for reasons that are very personal to them. (TD90)

This TDD recognizes that a community member has very personal reasons for specific requests based on their own experiences, but in turn, it can create challenges when the dispatcher is unable to honor the request. TD90 went on to elaborate on the dynamics surrounding community concerns and race:

> …I've had some callers that have expressed apprehension or fear over being a person of color and having a police officer come out to contact them. And… absolutely terrified on the phone with me. And…I had one call that, he wasn't out of control, but he was suicidal. And I kind of just felt at a loss as far as how can I be assuring to you about this concern that you have…I learned later I can say "I hear you"...and that's what I learned after the call as I talked to an officer about like, can you help me with if this happens again, what can I say?

The TDD could not personally relate to or speak to these concerns, so they focused on making the caller feel heard and validated, rather than being dismissive or minimizing their concerns. Recently, the discussion surrounding diversity in 911 Communications Centers has come to the forefront of the movement to transform emergency call operations (ABC 4, 2019; NENA, 2020), highlighting the importance of diverse dispatcher perspectives in the landscape of diverse communities. This finding underscores the importance of recruitment and retention practices (to be discussed in Chapter 8) to ensure that the community is well represented among dispatch staff.

INDIVIDUALS

TDDs consistently mentioned four categories of callers who are often challenging even for the most skilled de-escalator: those experiencing a mental health crisis, those under the influence of drugs or alcohol, repeat/regular callers, and individuals who are extremely angry, which may overlap with the aforementioned categories. It is estimated that approximately 20% of police calls for service involve individuals experiencing a mental health crisis, though this is likely an underestimation when one accounts for the

calls triaged at the dispatcher level and routed to other agencies (Abramson, 2021; Pew, 2021). The discussion surrounding the redistribution of police resources and diversion of mental health calls for service away from the police and to mental health practitioners is an important one with significant implications for what the policing role looks like in the future. However, it is important to remember that calls cannot be diverted until they are evaluated by the dispatcher to determine if police services are needed, or if it can be sent to a partner organization with unarmed responders. TDDs spoke to the challenges inherent in speaking to callers experiencing a mental health crisis, highlighting how difficult it is to obtain information, interpret details, and classify appropriately:

> So it's really the mental health side that can be a challenge because … you don't always know how to de-escalate them. And sometimes you just might not be able to especially if they're in something serious, or there's something going on that they can't…elaborate, they're super elevated, that can always be a challenge (TD72)

These calls present challenges in terms of determining if a police response is required, as well as acquiring important details necessary for assigning call types and providing as much detail as possible for responding units. As will be discussed in a later section, training on these dynamic incidents is scarce, and therefore the dispatcher is most often relying on their past experience to navigate such calls. Further, when a caller is experiencing a mental health crisis, it may not be immediately apparent. Adding even more complexity is the responsibility placed on the dispatcher to try to determine if the call details are legitimate, as some information provided by the caller may include urgent threats to safety that warrant an expedited police response:

> But when it's something new, and you're really not sure, sometimes they start off and you're like, oh, this is legit. And then all of a sudden, they say something and it takes a hard left, like, oh, maybe this isn't… but those are definitely sometimes challenging. (TD35)

Finally, callers who are experiencing a mental health crisis may be in a highly elevated state, which can lead to frustration for the dispatcher who is attempting to control the call and obtain information. This can be compounded by a caller who hangs up abruptly and can't be reached again:

> …there are times where we get mental health issues with people, and you're trying to de-escalate them, because…you know what the issue is…but sometimes they're just so hyped up that you yourself get frustrated, and then they just hang up, and then you can't get them back. And so that's something that…I wish I would have been more understanding. I wish I would have waited 30 more seconds to let them say what they needed to say. (TD52)

The following passage from TD90 perfectly encapsulates the challenges that occur when speaking to a caller experiencing a mental health crisis, most notably the fact that although the prevalence of these calls can be reduced using diversion and triage processes, the dispatcher is still expected to de-escalate them to determine if police services are needed:

> When you've got somebody on the phone who's clearly mentally ill, or…there's something not reasonable, rational, maybe that's just how they respond to whatever's happening in the moment, that's their trauma response or something. But usually, I feel like we interact a lot with people that are mentally ill calling in. And that kind of makes it hard to gauge how to communicate, because…it might not make any sense, and that may not be reasonable. And they may just be escalated, no matter what you say….so those can be difficult to deal with. And obviously, there's the mental health aspect that they're kind of changing up here with, with not having as much of that on our plate [referencing diversion]. But if it's someone that needs contact from an officer, for whatever reason…we're still going to be dealing with them.

Dispatchers also find callers who are under the influence of alcohol or "high on drugs calling in" (TD90) challenging to de-escalate due to their altered state: "if they're drunk, I mean, you can say and do anything, and they'll just scream" (TD82). Despite their efforts, dispatchers may encounter resistance when trying to obtain even the most basic details. One TDD commented on the difficult circumstances surrounding party

calls, as there are usually multiple barriers at play including intoxication, which make de-escalation all but impossible:

> I would say the hardest ones are large fight or party [calls] where there's…a weapon involved because…you have intoxication, you have a lot of background noise…a lot of chaos on scene for the caller. (TD35)

Even if the caller themselves is cooperative, intoxication can add a level of difficulty that would perhaps not be present otherwise.

Regulars – frequent callers – can evade de-escalation techniques, particularly if they are also angry and uncooperative. Regular callers often call on a daily or weekly basis and are well known to dispatch staff. These callers may not have an actual emergency but use dispatch resources with repeat calls for service. These calls can be complicated when the citizen is experiencing a mental health crisis. Dispatchers take each call seriously and make no assumptions about the validity of the call, but often the incidents are unfounded, or already being handled.

These examples demonstrate the difficulty faced by even the most skilled de-escalators, and the resulting acceptance that at times, it is close to impossible to de-escalate despite your best efforts.

BEYOND DISPATCHER CONTROL

At times there are circumstances completely outside of a dispatcher's control that can render their efforts useless. If the caller is placing their call in an environment that is noisy, frenzied, and involves many parties, it can be difficult to keep the caller focused enough to answer questions, assuming they can hear the dispatcher at all. As mentioned previously, fight or party calls are difficult because of "a lot of background noise, a lot of

a lot of chaos on scene" (TD35), as well as the possibility of the complainant being involved themselves:

> I mean, there's times where the phone drops and people are fighting, like, you may have had that caller, stepping away, are trying to separate themselves and the other party wasn't gonna let that happen. I mean, that's the nature of the business…that can and will happen. (TD32)

Other technological issues such as a disconnected call or poor connection place the dispatcher in a challenging position, which requires them to make attempts to get the caller back on the line, while simultaneously entering a call with limited details. Because safety is the utmost priority, dropped calls with a traceable location are still dispatched to ensure that no critical incidents are missed.

It is a common understanding among those in the dispatch community that if nothing else is obtained from the caller, you must always get the location. A location is the foundation of the call, as the dispatcher will start to send units as additional information is being obtained (once at least partial details concerning the call type are gathered). TD32 describes the challenges inherent with de-escalation when there is no address information provided:

> I mean, we have to start with location. And sometimes it's hard to get someone to settle down when the realization hits…I don't know where you're at, and you don't know where you're at. So you better start looking for some signs, or businesses or something you can call out to me…

This TDD approaches the barrier by asking the caller for landmark information or other details that would indicate where the caller could be which would then assist with narrowing down a possible location.

INCIDENTS

TDDs provided other examples of incidents in which de-escalation is difficult to achieve. Calls that are particularly violent, gruesome, or with a loss of life are among the most arduous for a dispatcher:

> Any major incident…where their loved one, or even if they don't know them, but they see it, like, they see someone get shot or they see a car accident where the person was just run over and is clearly dead. You're not going to calm that person down. (TD49)

Witnessing serious or fatal injury is understandably distressing for most callers, and in turn, many are inconsolable despite the dispatcher's best efforts. Given the importance of obtaining the location, a dispatcher may transition to obtaining the most significant details such as the address or intersection and immediacy of any threats (e.g., is the armed subject still there?), followed by additional de-escalation efforts and supplementary particulars.

The complexity of calls resulting in violence or injury can be magnified during a domestic dispute. Domestic incidents are emotion-filled, dynamic, and can quickly turn dangerous if weapons are involved. As discussed by TD52:

> They're really hard to just de-escalate, especially if it's like, baby mama drama…because they're so invested in, it's my child. He can't do this to me…you know, it's a personal attack on them…they just see red, and you telling them to calm down or step away, they're like, no. If I step away, he's gonna take my child, if I step away, something bad is going to happen, when, in reality, is it? No, 90% of the time. Sometimes it could. But…they're so far in the red in the rage that you're just this annoying little gnat.

The dispatcher can be seen as a nuisance because of the number of questions being asked, even though the information being sought is integral to proper call handling and an appropriate officer response. In other instances, observing a loved one behaving in a concerning manner can also escalate a caller:

> Family members whose loved one is doing something crazy can sometimes be very unhinged. They have no sense of calm and that's…a really hard one to de-escalate because they are just like, that's my baby…it's really hard to get them to calm down. (TD90)

The shock of witnessing a loved one engaging in concerning behavior is often too powerful for the dispatcher to combat, and therefore call details may be vague, or take an extensive amount of time to gather.

The complexity of mental health-related calls for service and what is required of dispatchers attempting to de-escalate them, is most apparent when an incident involves suicide or attempted suicide. Speaking to the difficulty of suicide calls:

> I think, honestly, suicide calls are probably the hardest to de-escalate. Especially if they're already committed to wanting to do it. Because…they know the lingo, you know… they can feel it, they're like, nope, I'm good. I'm ready to do this. I have nothing to live for. I've…cleaned up my home life, everything's in order here. So…they're really committed to doing it and not calling for help, more like, "Hey, you're gonna find my body here". Those are hard to de-escalate because they've already had their mind set and when someone's mind is [set] it's really hard to change it right? (TD52)

Calls of this nature require the coordination of officers, negotiators, partner agencies (e.g., human services), family members, and any others who may have the ability to change the course of the incident. Often the dispatcher remains on the line with the caller throughout the entire event, or, in the worst possible situation, will be on the line while the caller commits suicide. These incidents are extremely challenging to navigate not only because of the nature of the call, but the delicate balance that must be struck between communication with the caller, and facilitation of other services behind the scenes.

PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DISCONNECTS

After being asked to identify certain incidents or elements of transactions that may present challenges for de-escalation (Figure 12), TDDs were asked a series of questions to understand their perspective on any professional or organizational challenges that they encounter, and how they may affect the ability to de-escalate. These themes also emerged organically in other parts of the interview and are presented separately to illustrate the barriers dispatchers face in their respective department and profession more broadly. Understanding the barriers to one's ability to perform their job effectively, of which de-escalation is a major part, is essential for improvements at the department level, and in policing more broadly. A central theme emerged from these conversations regarding the barriers to de-escalation that exist in the form of disconnects between dispatchers, sworn personnel, and the department, limited training and resources, the community, and the nature of professional overall.

Dispatchers and Sworn. The divide between professional staff and sworn staff in law enforcement has been discussed in the literature (Maguire, 1997; Reiss, 1992), and centers on the "us versus them" mentality that exists due to the perceived lack of relatability and resulting feelings of isolation that stem from police work. Dispatcher sentiments are overwhelmingly in favor of removing this divide between professional and sworn staff and fostering understanding between both groups.

Typically, calls for service only remain on the dispatcher's screen until the officer on scene provides a status of Code 4 over the radio (Code 4 = incident is resolved), and no other information is provided on that incident. The voicing of a Code 4 on the radio does not mean the incident is fully complete and officers have left the scene, but rather,

that there is no longer a threat to community or officer safety, and sufficient units and resources are on scene. Rarely are dispatchers provided updates on calls after they receive a Code 4, as discussed by TD16 (regarding a medical emergency):

> Just by reading it into it afterward. Just seeing that they got transported. I don't know. And actually, I don't know to this day…I know they were going to a trauma room, is the last thing I remember. (TD16)

The lack of closure provided to the handling dispatcher after particularly difficult calls or radio transmissions (e.g., an officer involved in a fight) means that the dispatcher is not given any post-incident details to close the loop on what is surely an emotional and often traumatic incident. When asked, TDDs remarked that they were rarely included in debriefs after critical incidents, "No, but it would help. We have to…dig for it." (TD57). One TDD spoke to their experience with a post-incident debrief after an officer-involved shooting:

> I've been to several debriefings…especially the first one with (omitted), they made me go…and I was like, okay. I didn't feel like I needed to be there. I didn't feel like I needed it. Number one, I didn't feel like I belong there. Number two, but after going through it, and after, you know, the residual dealing with it, I'm really glad they made me go because even though I didn't feel like it was necessary… it really helped deal with a lot of stuff that I think would have affected me had I not gone to the debriefing (TD49)

Dispatchers are conditioned to handle extremely stressful calls and radio traffic at a rapid pace (Antunes & Scott, 1981), and in turn, may not feel that this type of measure is necessary. Further, this TDD did not feel that they belonged or should be included in the critical incident debrief but spoke to the long-term benefit of having some semblance of closure after handling incredibly traumatic radio traffic. This dispatcher was embraced by most, but spoke to the dispatcher-sworn divide that exists:

> And I walked in and [the officer] looked at me, she walked in, she looked me up and down, said "who are you?" and I was like, "the dispatcher on the channel".

> Hello, why are you here? And I was like…but you know, that's what it is…it would be nice to get rid of that mentality (TD49)

The dispatcher-officer divide was also discussed as it relates to best practices for call handling, and how some level of continuity would be beneficial for implementing de-escalation practices early on, "… we're just all dealing with our portion of the same call…I started, you finish it, I'm doing my part, you're doing your part" (TD32). This divide may be perpetuated by the way training is organized and information is distributed to both groups:

> I think one of the biggest things that I've always thought is weird in this job…I might know three officers, by their face … all of our training is always separate. So…patrol goes to this training…and then it's like, dispatch gets this training… but…when it has to do with, like, how we're going to dispatch or how we're going to operate…we all get those emails to us. But it's like, not that I need to know how to, you know, breach a door or clear a room, but…if I know how they prepare or their methods, we can implement that early on with the caller. (TD32)

If dispatchers are not up to date on the protocols, strategies, and techniques used in the field, there may be difficulties faced during the information-gathering stage, and when relaying information to callers.

The Department. TDDs were asked the following question regarding departmental support and de-escalation:

How do you think the department can improve your ability to de-escalate callers? Overall, TDDs feel at least somewhat supported, but did offer ideas for the department to create and sustain an environment that is more conducive to de-escalation. A common thread across responses was the lack of understanding as to what the dispatcher role truly entails. Department leaders have interacted with dispatchers over the radio, but their knowledge of the position is limited. TD49 highlighted the importance of this understanding:

> Even people in law enforcement, if you haven't done the job, you think you understand it, but you don't… the command staff…you know, they appreciate us, we feel really appreciated…so that is good. That's a huge step in the right direction. We feel appreciated. But they don't understand. They appreciate it, but they think they know, but they don't know…so they think, oh, this is how it works. And…they have no clue. So, getting them to understand the job, I think would be a huge step in the right direction. Like… coming up here and sitting for a ride along. (TD49)

Appreciation for dispatch staff is important and necessary, but it is also vital that even the highest level of leadership in the department (i.e., command staff) spend time learning the intricacies of dispatching. They elaborated further on an experience with city leadership when they toured the dispatch center:

> I remember once we had I don't remember who they were, city council or something we brought, went for a tour once. And we actually sat them in the training room and did a couple of fake foot pursuits. And…we had them sitting at a console typing, and we're like…all we want you to do is just type everything you hear, type everything you hear. And they were just like, whoa…so if we could do something like that with command staff, you know, just play some radio traffic for them…(TD49)

Having staff participate in an exercise may increase understanding and appreciation for dispatcher staff. It is possible that firsthand knowledge of the duties associated with dispatching will also illuminate the downstream effects of dispatcher decision-making, and their impact on policy. COVID-19 has shifted priorities and the way police resources are distributed (White et al., 2022), and in this case, a decision was made to classify calls based on a tiered system to reduce in-person responses as determined by call severity and risk to public safety. TD49 also spoke to the exclusion of dispatchers from policy decisions:

> People forget, they don't include dispatch, you know, because they forget about that piece of the puzzle that we're very integral… And I think once the department is better at including us and all of that…like with [the] tier two thing [referencing a call reponse tier system], when they decided which calls we're

> gonna respond [to]…they didn't even talk to us about that, 100% out of the loop, 100% out on that. And we got this matrix, and we were like, are you sure? (TD49)

Dispatchers were not at the table when the call matrix was created, despite having intimate knowledge of prioritization and call volume. Most departmental decisions will have some impact on communications, and as such, their voice is critical.

Finally, several TDDs discussed areas of opportunity in the realm of dispatcher appreciation that extends beyond verbalizing appreciation and includes some type of action or benefit. Staffing shortages mean that most dispatchers cannot be considered for department-sponsored activities or benefits, even if they are offered:

> But, you know, like how they have the officer wellness day…one, maybe two of us can go. And it's like a lottery…so maybe some more of those. I don't know how that would work because we can't have people off the floor. But things like that…show that you care about us. (TD57)

A lottery system, while fair, does not ensure that dispatchers will have the opportunity to participate in activities, and in turn, affects morale when there is a sense of acceptance among dispatch staff that these benefits are out of their reach. Further, one TDD spoke to the fact that training content does not reach the full dispatch population:

> I don't think given the opportunity, many trainings would get like declined. I don't think a lot of people would turn it away…if we could actually go. And…when people do get pulled and go to certain trainings, a lot of time it's done in like, a bid…. everyone who's interested put in and we'll send one or two…but how does that training ever get back to us? (TD32)

At a minimum, dispatch leadership can collaborate to design a form, organize a train the trainer session, or develop another sharing mechanism to ensure that training materials are made available to all staff.

Police employees are also recognized annually during an awards ceremony for heroic or lifesaving efforts, exceptional performance, and notable accomplishments, yet dispatchers often feel excluded from these achievements as well:

> …things have been bad up here for a long time. They're getting better. We're still very short, though. They know, and burnout is real in any agency, it's out in patrol now too. So just department wide, I think to have a department that would stand by supporting us in any way, that this could be a healthy place where we also have dignity and respect. I mean, I've walked in every morning downstairs in the lobby, and I see the employees of the year, there's never once been a dispatcher employee of the year…there's never once been a dispatcher, dispatchers are hardly in the award ceremonies. (TD90)

Feeling overlooked from recognition signifies that their contributions to the resolution of critical incidents are not valued. Recognizing dispatcher contributions tangibly, and not just verbally, may increase the sense of value felt by dispatch staff. It is possible that increased recognition will also affect performance (Luthens, 2000) and the desire to exceed expectations, which includes effective de-escalation.

Training Content and Resources. Shortcomings in training and resource availability may also hinder a dispatcher's ability to de-escalate. TDDs were asked a series of questions about training availability, and the content of the training they are provided with (Appendix D). None of the TDDs have received de-escalation training, and the overall sentiment was that training is not comprehensive, or accessible.

One of the issues presented by TDDs was the lack of training for dispatch staff on issues related to legal matters and criminal justice processes more broadly. This directly impacts one's ability to speak to citizens confidently about their options, what to expect after the crime report process, and other resources that may be relevant:

> But we are given no training as far as…the law…I think dispatchers should be sent to some of the…academy training that the officers get, because people call us

> all the time, and they say, “well, you know, I want to report this”, and they're like “is this illegal”? And we're like, “I don't know”, you know, and…not only does it not instill confidence in the police department by the public, but it wastes a lot of time because sometimes we put calls in when we shouldn't, and then other times, we don't call them when we should. So, we're not giving training on how to do the job functionally. (TD49)

By including dispatchers in training classes typically reserved for sworn officers, they can more confidently speak to legal processes, more accurately triage and classify calls for service, and potentially reduce the number of repeat calls received by citizens seeking assistance. While not in the field or performing the same duties as sworn officers, continuity from the first point of contact is essential for community satisfaction, and in turn, may prevent escalation from occurring.

Citizen callers with legal questions are generally very routine, and do not require the dispatcher to navigate life or death situations. However, dispatchers are often faced with extremely critical calls that require them to perform as “untrained negotiators” (TD35), often with little guidance. One TDD spoke to the delicate balance between receiving training on suicidal callers, and wanting it to sound natural and organic for the caller:

> I actually had talked about that with coworkers…because suicides were high…I mean, we just got a string… and all we were told from supervisors’ stance is we don't want to give you anything because we don't want to sound rehearsed or scripted. But then for me, especially after I've had like a couple…you kind of go blank with… we don’t want to now say the wrong thing to tick them off or like trigger them … mental health, especially now, is something that, I don't know, sometimes you can't just do it on the fly, right? You're like, I need some something to work with just to even keep conversation going (TD82)

Dispatching does require adaptation and excellent communication skills to extract important details, but at times training on general strategies and techniques, particularly for crisis incidents (APCO, 2021) and special populations, are a helpful resource for de-

escalation efforts. Otherwise, as stated in this excerpt, dispatchers may feel reluctant to communicate for fear of triggering an adverse response or action. To quote TD72, “for dispatchers, it's almost like you're constantly carrying around a lot of bricks with very little resources to help support you”, which underscores the immense responsibility that dispatchers bear while not sufficiently equipped to handle them. This may also speak to resources more broadly, and a more concerted effort to examine recruitment and retention practices. Though this has become a national crisis, TDDs spoke to the cumulative effect of insufficient resources and staffing shortages on one’s ability to perform the job and de-escalate effectively:

> Resources will be nice. I mean… we're just getting hammered up here. So, trying to keep the frame of mind where you can be effective and de- escalating can be difficult when you're getting bombarded. I mean, and you just don't have time to think about [it]. (TD49)

TDDs also discussed improvements that can be made to the dispatcher training program, citing the variation in on-the-floor training that takes place after new hires complete several weeks of classroom instruction. All nine of the TDDs agree that de-escalation training is important and necessary and feel that the existing training practices can be improved upon to better reflect de-escalation strategies and techniques. Among the most notable barriers are the differences that exist between trainers, and the challenges that can present for a new dispatcher who will most likely be assigned to several trainers before being “signed off” to work independently:

> Because some trainers only trained the way they think it should be…and then other trainers are like, well, you know, per policy, this is how it should be done. But this is how I do it. Which in my opinion, is how it should be done… everybody's style is different, as long as they're getting from point A to point B, and it's within policy. I don't care how you get there, you know, but then you have these newer trainers who come in, and they're like, no, you can't do it this way.

> This is better. Well, it might be better for you, but it may not be better for them. (TD49)

> You're working with different trainers, you might be learning how to do this the 2006 way this week, and then 2018 this week, and they're like, oh, I didn't even know we had this system over here, or this venue to look into information or what have you. (TD32)

While it is important that dispatch trainers be given the autonomy to train using creative methods and their own experiences as a foundation, the approach should be rooted in providing several options to achieve the same goal. Much like de-escalation, the emphasis should shift to adaptability and an evolving toolkit of skills, as opposed to only one acceptable method.

Finally, when asked if they have received de-escalation training during their tenure, all nine TDDs said they had not, but feel it is critically important for their position. Any strategies and techniques related to de-escalation have been acquired from colleagues or their on-the-floor trainers over the course of their employment:

> But as far as dispatch, we have not been trained well in de-escalation. It's not part of our training program…it's something that people pick up along the way. I think with certain trainers, they like what they hear and they start using that. But there's not been anything really for dispatchers. (TD35)

This illustrates not only the importance of providing de-escalation training for dispatchers, but the fact that local expertise serves as a source of guidance for other dispatchers wishing to perfect their craft. The consensus was that de-escalation is not currently emphasized, but should be a foundational component of dispatch training:

> There are some laws we need to know, like, 1381 3511…there are certain things we need to know to as a dispatcher to make our job effective. So why can't we have that base level training? Like every agency, you have to pass this course at an 80%. Why can't that just be included into it? Like, de-escalation be included into that POST training. (TD52)

TDDs recognize that staffing limitations and related challenges impact the availability of training, but they unanimously agree that current, widely available training courses are essential to the execution of their job duties, including effective de-escalation.

The Community. A common barrier to de-escalation discussed by TDDs is the disconnect between the perceptions of dispatching, and the reality of the position. When these misconceptions are coupled with assumptions made by dispatchers, the potential for de-escalation and effective call resolution decreases significantly. When asked about public perceptions of de-escalation:

> I think that the public's just, I think they just don't really know how things work...and I think that that is one thing, the fact that they don't understand or know what we do, is one thing that causes escalation in calls with callers, because…we assume they know, we assume they get it and we treat them like they should know…"Don't you know, we don't do that"… (TD90)

On one hand, a lack of understanding on the part of the public may lead to unrealistic expectations or frustrations with dispatchers during the information-gathering process.

> I feel like the public has no idea why we do what we do. They think that they call us and we can get help there like that, right? (TD57)

Callers are understandably most concerned with receiving assistance as quickly as possible, unaware of the fact that there are many moving parts to a call for service, including call classification (Simpson & Orosco, 2021), prioritization (Gillooly, 2021), additional resources, and inquiries on subjects, vehicles, and locations, among others. This information is critical for the dispatcher to obtain, yet it can lead to escalation when the caller perceives that the questions are unnecessary. Some callers also believe there should be a specific outcome after a call is placed, unaware of the internal guidelines and protocols in place for calls for service based on immediacy of threats to public or officer

safety, time of occurrence, and numerous other variables. When asked what the public believes de-escalation is:

> I think fixing it. Like, it doesn't matter if this happened, this is the end result that I was expecting. So that's what should happen. (TD82)

Another TDD discussed the multitude of factors contributing to this public misperception, and how it may fuel the disconnect between dispatchers and citizens regarding what de-escalation is:

> I definitely think there's a lot of things to play into it… Obviously, TV, movies, that kind of thing that might set you up for certain scenarios, or you think like, I'm gonna drop my headset, come run out and save you. I don't know what is perceived there. But…I think it's being ignorant to what we actually do…I don't mean that as an insult, just…not having a knowledge base of what we actually do up here. I think the public expects just about anything, they call in the second they call, or run into it, whether it's, you know, a code violation or whatever…I honestly don't know what they're expecting when they call in. (TD32)

Overall, the disconnect that exists between the community and dispatchers is not intentional, rather, it stems from a lack of understanding surrounding the information that needs to be obtained from the caller, and why. Many of the de-escalation strategies discussed previously highlight the importance of transparency and explanation when speaking to callers, a technique used to make the caller feel comfortable with the array of questions and foster understanding, and in turn, make the call handling process much easier for the dispatcher and citizen.

Nature of the Profession. The nature of police dispatching also presents challenges for effective de-escalation. Burnout, trauma (Roberg et al., 1988), and recruitment and retention challenges (McAleavy et al., 2021) can make dispatchers feel overwhelmed and without room to breathe. Dispatch performance metrics that emphasize quick turnover, “you just move on one after another” (TD16), and rapid processing over

more thorough, front-end resolution go against what is needed to properly de-escalate. TDDs emphasized the fact that they are “always short staffed” and “get overworked a lot” (TD72), and understand some days will be an uphill battle:

> I definitely have my days just like anyone else, where you just feel like you're trying to run through mud all day, like, you just aren't gaining ground…(TD32)

These staffing challenges are not new to the profession, yet recruitment and training passage rates continue to be roadblocks to resolving this issue. Resulting scheduling mandates are problematic for dispatcher satisfaction, and the ability to have balance:

> I mean, honestly…we're so stressed out because of our mandates for overtime. And it just takes a toll. So, I know they're not gonna go away. [I’ve] been here seven, eight years, they've never gone away. (TD57)

Dispatch positions have typically only required a high school diploma (BLS, 2021), customer service experience, and a minimum typing score for initial consideration, followed by screening tools such as CritiCall (CritiCall, 2022) or other call simulators used to expose applicants to possible dispatch conditions. After the background investigation is completed (e.g., polygraph), a trainee’s first taste of actual dispatching occurs when they are assigned to a floor trainer:

> It's not until you get here. I mean, you know, you can read about [it] all the time and see what it's about. But then you interview, and you get there, and you're like, woah (TD16)

It is difficult to simulate real-world dispatch conditions in a testing process without compromising public or officer safety, and as a result, even the most qualified and high achieving trainees may not pass the training process if they are considered a liability, or unable to perform their job duties during critical incidents. As the applicant pool becomes narrower, agencies are forced to compete for the same group of applicants who are 1) interested in the position, 2) can pass the screening criteria and background process, and

3) can handle stressful and life-threatening emergencies with skill and finesse. Even so, it takes considerably more time, “you probably won't even feel comfortable until you're about two years in” (TD32) to feel as though you can dispatch confidently. It is no surprise that dispatch centers are among the most challenging to fully staff. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that new dispatchers, many of whom have families and other commitments, will typically be assigned to a weekend or night shift, “they’re not going to day shift right away” (TD57), may be required to work on holidays, and will inevitably be required to work overtime if mandates remain in place.

The very essence of dispatching revolves around providing a service to the public, which means frequently receiving calls from individuals who are distraught, angry, terrified, and every emotion in between. It is “easy in this job to take personal, when people are coming at you” (TD72), and in turn, it can be difficult to mitigate without proper self-care and emotion regulation. From the very first day of training, dispatchers are conditioned to prepare for the worst possible scenario, and to remain in a heightened state of awareness throughout the course of the call. Anecdotally, the researcher commented on being terrified for a full year after being released from training, a sentiment that was shared by the remaining TDDs during their interviews, and as TD32 commented, “I'd come to work like, oh, I hope nothing bad happens.” This increased anxiety can reduce dispatcher confidence and lead to errors, “I think a lot of people when they get so hyped up, they feel like they're not doing their job correctly, so, then they become scared. And then they do make more mistakes” (TD52). The stress of the profession, trauma resulting from critical incidents and engaging with emotional callers,

and the omnipresent feelings of an impending crisis or massive event, put dispatchers at a disadvantage when it comes to their mental health and wellness.

THE DISPATCHER MENTAL HEALTH-DE-ESCALATION NEXUS

The stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma associated with dispatching is well documented in the literature (Roberg et al., 1988), as are the physical and mental health diagnoses resulting from this type of work (Klimley et al., 2018). The lack of research examining de-escalation in this population means that the relationship between dispatcher mental health and effective de-escalation with citizens and officers is unknown. During the course of this research, the intersection of mental health and self-de-escalation, and the ability to de-escalate others, emerged as a central theme influencing all facets of dispatch work. One TDD spoke to the importance of being able to calm yourself down when you start to feel the effects of the job:

> I do think it's [de-escalation] very important because this job in itself is stressful. So you need to de-escalate yourself just to get through the job…that's why sometimes we do have all this turnover rate because people don't know how to de-escalate themselves…(TD52).

This comment illustrates the importance of being able to bring yourself down to a calm state to better serve callers and officers. Further, it brings to light the turnover that exists among dispatch staff who choose to leave the profession because of their inability to self-de-escalate, and in turn, are more likely to feel the negative impacts of a fundamentally stressful position. This TDD elaborated further on the separation required to perform this job effectively:

> If you let your anxiety get to you, you're gonna shut down. And the only way to not let it get to you is to get ahead of it. And to realize that, how you get better at your job is by being calmer…especially in this type of job. (TD52)

Self-de-escalation requires you to step back, recognize that it is not personal, and disconnect knowing there is only so much you can do to ensure that the community and officers are safe. It is imperative that dispatchers anticipate that calls will be stressful, some callers will be particularly aggressive, and some incidents will not be resolved peacefully. For those who are unable to process emotions in a healthy way, dispatching may be too much to bear.

The unpredictability of the position may lead to extreme highs and lows throughout the course of a single work shift, and with that, stress levels may fluctuate a great deal. According to TDDs, dispatchers also need to be in tune with their stress levels, and assess them periodically to determine if they are in a healthy space:

> [You] have to be able to gauge yourself throughout the day… you either got to turn it around, or you need to just call it for the day and go because…it sucks to be short staffed, but you can't have people here in the wrong mental space (TD32)

Continuing your shift while in the wrong headspace has implications for community and officer safety, as well as the long-term mental health of the dispatcher themselves. As discussed previously, the ability to regulate emotions and not take things personally are essential for successful de-escalation with citizens and officers, but also appear to directly impact self-de-escalation and the execution of job duties:

> And you can only help people if you yourself are okay. And so I learned quickly after that…shooting I was involved with that I needed to make sure my mental health was okay. And I think a lot of that helps with de-escalation. Because if you are okay, and you're in a good mindset, then you can help others become in that mindset, too. (TD52)

According to many of the TDDs, de-escalation of the self and being in a good space mentally are directly tied to the effective de-escalation of others. Although not every call results in the need for de-escalation, mood and mental health is important in a customer

service sense: “I think that if people are happier to be here... then they're more likely to show some grace to people that they otherwise wouldn't show grace to on the phone” (TD90).

On-Duty Stress Management. Minimum staffing requirements, long shifts, and mandatory overtime mean that dispatchers are spending more time at work. To make matters more challenging, dispatchers are required to stay near their console unless on a scheduled break, as they need to answer calls and radio traffic quickly, run subject and vehicle inquiries, and simultaneously update call remarks. Often dispatchers will need to request that a colleague pick up their respective radio channel so they can do something as simple as fill up their water bottle. Given these constraints, all TPDCC staff were asked an open-ended question regarding stress management techniques used while on duty, which resulted in nine key themes (Figure 13).

Figure 13. On-Duty Stress Management – Themes

Three themes were most prevalent among respondents: stress reduction techniques, mindset, and talking to colleagues. Stress reduction techniques include such exercises as breathing or relaxation techniques, lowering heart rate, meditation, and grounding exercises. As displayed in Figure 14, each dispatch console is outfitted with a 1-minute grounding exercise that can be completed between calls or transmissions. When asked about its origin during a sit-along, a TDD remarked that copies were printed out and taped to screens by a newly promoted supervisor (also a TDD). It is possible that these techniques are among the most popular due to the visibility of the graphic, and the speed at which exercises can be completed.

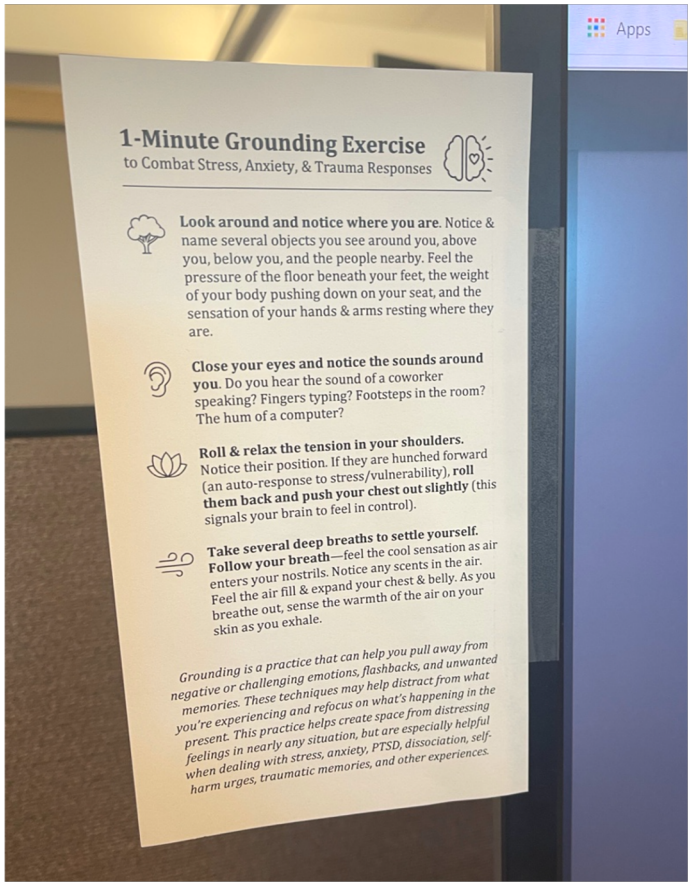

Figure 14. Grounding Exercise

Mindset includes techniques centered on changing your perspective to cope with the stressors of the job, including having a positive attitude, controlling what you can and relinquishing control of what you can't, redirecting focus, and seeing things as opportunities. Much of the discussion with TDDs on de-escalation techniques centered on the ability to not take things personally and remain calm during otherwise chaotic situations. It is understood that callers may be experiencing trauma and high levels of stress, and in turn may be angry, use profanity, or place their frustration on the shoulders of the dispatcher. Having a positive, strong mindset is critical to managing and reducing stress levels as a dispatcher.

The third most prevalent theme, talking to colleagues, includes venting to other dispatchers (which may be a response to a negative event), laughing with each other, and even talking to officers during the shift. Two open-ended responses mentioned talking specifically to peers they have a strong bond with, as opposed to more general responses pertaining to talking with colleagues. Considering the lengthy shifts dispatchers are required to work, the tandem design of most dispatch consoles, and the sense of relatability and solidarity that dispatchers feel, it is not surprising that venting or laughing with peers is a way to reduce stress and process events of the day.

The remaining six stress reduction themes largely involve some type of activity or distraction to create separation from the rigors of the job. Dispatchers receive a break schedule at the beginning of their shift and must strictly adhere to it to maintain minimum staffing levels on the phones and radio. Numerous respondents commented on the importance of taking breaks, ideally in a separate location such as the quiet room, outside, or driving somewhere during their designated lunch break. This separation from

the dispatch floor may provide a sense of reprieve and a much-needed change of scenery, particularly during a busy shift. Physical activity is also considered an important stress reduction technique, with several responses mentioning the importance of walking outside, walking laps in the parking lot, or even walking around their desk if unable to unplug from the console. Relatedly, distractions or disconnecting appears to be integral to stress reduction, including drowning out noise, keeping to yourself, and doing things that will keep your mind distracted from the stress. This can also be achieved through music and other audio files, drinking water, and staying nourished with meals and snacks. Although these techniques may not address root causes, nor will they reduce the stress of the position, dispatchers engage in these activities to cope with the demands of the position, and keep their minds and bodies occupied in a healthy way.

Off-Duty Stress Management. TPDCC survey respondents were also asked to provide examples of strategies used off duty to manage their stress. Understandably, responses to this question were plentiful and resulted in a total of ten themes which capture the wide range of practices used. Themes were not entirely dissimilar from those used on duty, with the most prevalent being Disconnecting/decompressing, support system, and physical activity.

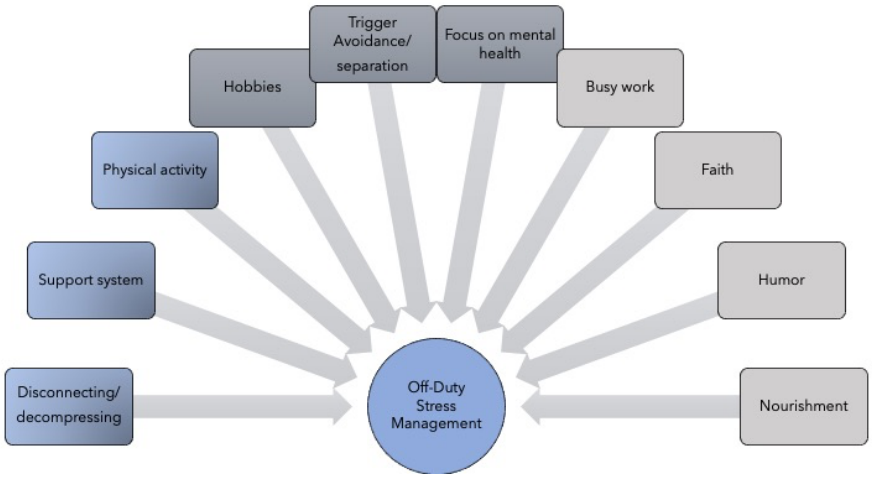

Figure 15. Off-Duty Stress Management - Themes

Dispatchers most often engage in activities that allow them to mentally disconnect or decompress and relax. These include quiet time, mindless activities (not specified), disconnecting from social media, meditation, and laying in a quiet room, among others. Activities of this type do not require much mental bandwidth, and instead allow the dispatcher to "just be" and focus on relaxation.

Much like on-duty stress management, the presence of a strong support system is vital to effective stress management. Responses captured within this theme included talking or spending time with a significant other, venting to friends, having fun with loved ones, family, friends, and pets. The support group characterized by these responses did not include coworkers, and instead included external parties. It is possible that dispatchers desire true separation from their work environment, and perhaps spending time with those outside of the department ensures that this can happen.

Physical activity rounded out the three most prevalent themes that emerged from responses, and include frequent exercise, hiking, swimming, yoga, and several other movement-related interests. The relationship between physical activity and the

management of stress is among the most well known in the literature (Taylor et al., 1985), so it is of no surprise that this is a priority for dispatchers off duty. Hobbies such as baking, art, games, reading, and other creative activities were also quite common among respondents. Although working in a dispatch capacity does not preclude one from engaging in creative activities during down time (i.e., when there is little to no radio activity and few phone calls, such as graveyard shift), staffing issues may reduce the number of dispatchers available during what would otherwise be a very slow period. In turn, there is little-to-no availability to read or engage in creative activities at your console.

Trigger avoidance and separation are worthy of discussion in the context of the dispatcher de-escalation and the mental health nexus. Avoiding triggers that spur feelings of work-related stress or trauma and separating oneself from anything considered work-related may be coping mechanisms used to prevent the occurrence of negative emotions off duty. Such avoidance may be attributed to stigma and have long term impacts for those experiencing such stress (Holahan et al., 2005). This includes avoiding "shop talk", spending time with people outside of public safety, leaving work at work, and not picking up overtime shifts. This aligns with the previous discussion surrounding a support system that does not include coworkers, as that may contribute to the activation of triggers or work seeping into home life. These activities appear to be avoidance-centered, whereas those categorized as being focused on mental health involve facing and actively working through mental health challenges. Activities such as journaling, mindfulness, therapy, mentally preparing for the next shift, and working through stress were among those mentioned by respondents. This is not to say that those who use avoidance techniques are

uninterested in exploring the mental health impacts of their work but may do so privately or through another means.

Finally, activities such as busy work (errands, cleaning), faith (praying, worship), humor (laughing, watching things that make me laugh), and nourishment (eating healthy, cooking healthy meals, eating well) were less common, but noteworthy. It should also be noted that several respondents did not provide stress management techniques, and instead discussed the fact that it is difficult to manage stress, even while off duty. Specifically, these responses discussed not having enough off-duty time to actually decompress, and that feeling jaded and burnt out were simply too strong. Although most respondents do have proactive, positive strategies in place, there are several who find the separation between work and home to be quite difficult.

Findings from this chapter underscore the importance of considering mental health when discussing de-escalation. Dispatching is stressful under any circumstances, but is exacerbated by inadequate staffing, and a lack of departmental support. Dispatchers must be able to self-de-escalate before they can assist others and recognize when they are not in the correct headspace to handle the phones or the radio. Dispatchers have several on and off-duty stress management techniques they use to deal with their stress, though on-duty stress management is constrained by a strict break schedule and minimum staffing requirements. Both involve relying on a strong support system, physical activity, and separation from the environment when possible. Dispatchers appear to be quite adept at finding ways to cope with their stress, but some respondents did speak to difficulty truly being able to decompress.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

Dispatchers are the first point of contact for many citizens seeking assistance from police, but are often overlooked within law enforcement, and in criminological scholarship (Lum et al., 2020; Simpson, 2020). Much of the limited research centering on dispatch discusses their decision-making power (Gillooly, 2021; Neusteter et al., 2019), prioritization and call classification practices (Gillooly, 2021; Simpson & Orosco, 2021), handling of mental health and crisis calls for service (Pew, 2021), as well as the negative impact their behavior can have on officer behavior and call outcomes (Gillooly, 2021; Taylor, 2020). The importance of understanding the dispatch function in these contexts cannot be overstated and has contributed greatly to our knowledge of an otherwise neglected yet critical role in law enforcement. Despite the recent interest, the relationship between dispatchers and de-escalation outside of crisis management, has remained unexplored. The impacts of dispatcher behavior are integral to future assessments of proper triaging, handling, and training protocols. However, it is vital that the toolkit utilized by dispatchers to defuse incidents with citizens and officers is explored extensively and given equal importance. Each transaction that takes place from the initial 911 call to the conclusion, or "Code 4" provides an opportunity for de-escalation, whether in a preventative sense, or during an elevated interaction. While proper triage and classification processes are essential to the effective resolution of calls for service (Simpson & Orosco, 2021), de-escalation is often in motion before any of these steps can be completed. To ensure cooperation with citizens and maintain a calm radio environment with officers (and in effect reduce the possibility for alarmist responses and

priming, see Gillooly 2021; Taylor, 2020), effective de-escalation techniques must be identified, explored, refined, and serve as the backbone for future training efforts. In plain terms, effective dispatcher de-escalation will save lives. This research set out to accomplish these goals and expand existing efforts to account for the de-escalation that begins prior to officer arrival and continues until the incident is considered resolved. These findings confirm the fact that every exchange between dispatchers, callers, and officers is an opportunity to de-escalate. Every transaction counts.

Following the framework used in the Tempe sworn de-escalation project (White et al., 2019), this research centered on the expertise provided by nine peer-nominated top dispatch de-escalators considered exceptional at defusing volatile calls for service, calming elevated officers, and proactively preventing escalation. The TDD research was supplemented with a larger dispatcher survey, which provided an opportunity to identify the most important and frequently used de-escalation tactics, as well as behaviors to avoid, and burnout among dispatch staff. Survey respondents feel that they uphold TPD values, and act professionally and respectfully when interacting with citizens. They do their best to remain neutral but are tasked with steering the conversation at times if it means obtaining pertinent details. Dispatchers also feel that citizens are generally satisfied after speaking with TPDCC staff, but not as confident in terms of citizen trust in dispatch, and the department. Overall, dispatchers feel that communication, staying calm, and patience were the most important de-escalation tactics, with compromise being the least important. This is not entirely surprising, as dispatchers have little latitude when it comes to officer responses and other protocols. This aligns with results on frequency of use, as compromise was the only tactic that fell below the threshold for use multiple

times per shift. Perceptions of de-escalation training were also favorable, with respondents largely in favor of participating in de-escalation training and feel that it would provide additional skills and enhance communication. Because the training being developed from these findings is in its infancy, dispatcher behavior has not necessarily changed since the announcement of the project. Finally, dispatchers are keenly aware of the behaviors that hinder effective de-escalation with both citizens and officers. Many behaviors are unique to citizens (e.g., treating the caller like they are incompetent, apathy and detachment) and officers (e.g., deviation from dispatcher performance standards), but overlap exists. Using inappropriate tone or language and responding with anger are considered prohibited behaviors when speaking to both callers and officers. Above all else, results indicate that letting things affect you or taking them personally will prevent a dispatcher from being able to de-escalate themselves and de-escalate others.

The goal of the interviews with TDDs was to flesh out the nuances of de-escalation strategies and techniques used during transactions with citizens on the phone, and officers in the field. Interviews with these experts spanned topics ranging from defining de-escalation, the intentionality of de-escalation, and effective de-escalation practices with both citizens and officers, to barriers hindering de-escalation. Although de-escalation tends to occur naturally and organically, TDDs acknowledge that at times it is done with intention and is an objective of the call or radio transmission. From a dispatcher lens, the definition of de-escalation is variable, but ultimately is premised on bringing the caller (or officer) to a calm state so that information can be obtained and conveyed accurately and reliably. Dispatchers feel a sense of responsibility to responding officers; they recognize that the state of the caller will inevitably affect how the incident

unfolds upon officer arrival, and in turn, every effort should be made to calm the situation as much as possible from the moment the dispatcher answers the line. Sharply delineated classifications, verbal formats, and definitions are merely guidelines, whereas de-escalation is a dynamic collection of strategies and techniques in a toolkit that can be consulted and used interchangeably depending on the nature of the incident.

ESSENTIAL DISPATCHER DE-ESCALATION QUALITIES

Adaptability and call control are the marks of a well-trained dispatcher, whether in a de-escalation context or otherwise. However, the ability to change course mid-call and control the caller or officer are not particularly effective unless coupled with sound emotion regulation and self-de-escalation. When a dispatcher possesses a strong capacity for staying calm and centered, it is reflected in their tone, and their ability to refrain from internalizing what occurs during the call. This does not mean performing one's abilities in a robotic or emotionless fashion, and in fact, it is quite the opposite; de-escalation requires empathy, kindness, and respect for all involved. Approaching de-escalation from a place of empathy ensures that the dispatcher, while not personally connected to the incident, can put themselves in the position of the caller. This allows the dispatcher to focus on dignifying and validating concerns, obtaining the necessary details, and not internalizing any misdirected emotion. The ability to regulate emotions is also integral to effective de-escalation with officers, particularly when it comes to relaying information in a calm, steady, deliberate manner. Officers responding to a critical incident are almost always receiving updates from a dispatcher on the radio, and TDDs feel that it is their duty to limit the inflection in their voice to prevent the "amping up" of officers in the field. This is incredibly relevant to discussions surrounding priming by dispatchers

(Taylor, 2020) and alarmist dispatchers who tend to prioritize calls differently than their lesser elevated colleagues (Gillooly, 2021). This finding goes beyond the initial call for service priority and classification and highlights the importance of the radio communication between dispatcher and officer as call updates are received, and additional details are provided. Every word spoken has the potential to impact the resolution of these transactions.

TDDs also underscored the importance of continuous evaluation of performance, and accountability for errors. The possibility of human error is always a concern while dispatching, yet TDDs do their best to reduce the likelihood of mistakes by seeking as many details as possible and serving as a repository of knowledge for callers and peers. The equivalent to this, remaining in a heightened state of awareness and being proactive, is also true for radio traffic with officers. The dispatcher cannot control all variables from their console, but TDDs reiterated their responsibility as a lifeline, and their duty to reduce the workload for officers by anticipating their needs. Asking repeated questions or requiring officers to divert from their fieldwork may cause frustration for the officer, and potentially compromise their safety and community safety if escalation occurs. Relatedly, dispatchers are revered if they are in tune with their intuition, or able to recognize behaviors that deviate from the norm. Entry-level dispatch training does not explore this notion of dispatcher intuition, rather, it is developed after performing the job and becoming familiar with the typical behaviors of officers in the field. While not necessarily documented or able to be quantified, it is well known to those who work in dispatch, the author included, as a guiding force behind decision-making.

TDDs have extensive prior experience in service professions, occupy ancillary roles, and relate their own dispatching philosophy to past personal events that shaped their approach. These experts range in tenure from 3 to 16.5 years, and only one has prior dispatch experience; this variation provides an additional line of inquiry that may inform recruitment practices as they relate to prior work experience, and the characteristics that extend beyond the standard dispatch testing process of typing speed and multitasking ability.

Unsurprisingly, those highly skilled in de-escalation are exceptional listeners and communicators who value transparency. Being a good communicator extends beyond providing instructions, triaging calls, and answering questions related to the specifics of an incident in an expeditious manner; it is highly dependent on one's ability to explain why steps are being taken, and being transparent about what will happen after the call has concluded. If a caller disconnects and feels they know exactly what is happening, why it is happening, and when it will happen, it is likely that they will feel satisfied and more at ease with the situation and may not feel the need to place repeat calls for service. Although a caller may not be in an escalated state initially, proactively taking the time to explain the reasoning behind your actions (e.g., the questions being posed) may prevent it from occurring in the first place.

DISPATCHER DE-ESCALATION DON'TS

As expected, survey respondents identified the converse of these techniques as being behaviors that should be avoided when communicating with officers and citizens. Using unprofessional or inappropriate tone or language, responding with anger, showing signs of frustration and impatience, and treating callers as if they are incompetent were

among the most prevalent themes that emerged, followed by ignoring dispatcher intuition while handling calls for service. Allowing calls to affect you, or taking them personally, presents challenges for de-escalation, yet the complete opposite – detachment or apathy – is also frowned upon. Dispatchers must strike a delicate balance between being invested enough to show that they care, yet not so invested that they are unable to regulate their emotions. The inability to self-de-escalate may result in placing blame, acting in a biased manner, or responding aggressively. Being transparent and providing an explanation to callers is of utmost importance, as the opposite may increase frustration and lead to repeat calls for service that may have been avoided otherwise. Parallels exist between behaviors deemed unacceptable for citizens, and for officers, namely tone or language that is rude, or conveys frustration and irritation. Further, dispatchers are expected to perform at the highest level, always remaining proactive and in a heightened state of awareness, which includes acting on your intuition if something is out of the norm. Ignoring this intuition or doing the bare minimum is indicative of not meeting performance standards, which is unacceptable in the eyes of dispatch staff.

Dispatchers also feel that undermining an officer or questioning their decisions is seen as a threat to dispatcher-officer dynamics and should be avoided if the airwaves are to remain harmonious. Much like calls with citizens, dispatchers should avoid taking things personally, as there is a common understanding that the officers are dealing with factors unknown to the dispatcher and may express frustration through their tone or behavior that is not directed at the dispatcher. Even so, de-escalation is a collaborative effort; one TDD spoke to the importance of field supervisors acknowledging when an officer is unprofessional over the radio and addressing it with the officer in question to

ensure they do not continue the behavior. Dispatchers are in fact colleagues to officers, and therefore it is important that respect and good behavior are reciprocated.

BARRIERS

De-escalation can be incredibly difficult for even the most skilled dispatchers. While empathy and kindness are standards for TDDs, there are some community concerns that the dispatcher cannot speak to out of respect for the lived experiences of the caller. Other individuals, specifically those who are experiencing a mental health crisis, under the influence of substances, or in an inconsolable or angry state, may present challenges for dispatchers who are doing their best to properly triage and classify calls, and need as much detail as possible. Many of these individuals involved in some of the most challenging incidents to handle, including extreme violence, domestic disputes, and mental health calls. While dispatching as a profession has recently begun to reevaluate the way mental health calls are triaged and diverted (Pew, 2021), the need to effectively de-escalate, even if briefly, does not go away, as it is the dispatcher who still needs to obtain as much information as possible to ensure that is diverted to the appropriate party. These findings illustrate the importance of every question asked, the tone used, and the correct level of involvement; ultimately, these findings underscore the fact that every transaction is an opportunity to prevent escalation or de-escalate someone who is already in an elevated state. Prioritizing de-escalation as an objective of all calls and radio transmissions is essential to the effective resolution of incidents.

Among the most prevalent themes to emerge in the study are the organizational challenges dispatchers face daily. The divide between sworn personnel and dispatchers is perpetuated by feelings of isolation and exclusion, particularly as it relates to call closure.

Dispatchers are rarely included in post-incident debriefs, despite the benefits their attendance would provide for all involved. Dispatchers and officers are handling different parts of the same incident; if a break in communication or understanding exists, the continuity of de-escalation efforts may also be disrupted. This lack of inclusion extends to department leadership, as dispatchers are rarely included in policy decisions even if they are specific to the dispatch function. These issues, coupled with a lack of training opportunities and not feeling valued by the department, make it very difficult to operate in a positive frame of mind and de-escalate effectively.

The impact of dispatching on mental health has been well documented, a relationship that is magnified by a lack of organizational support and inadequate resources. Dispatchers recognize the importance of being able to self-de-escalate, as one cannot perform their duties effectively if they are not in a good mental space. Many rely on stress management techniques while at work and off-duty to cope with the stressors of the position. On-duty stress management techniques are somewhat limited because of scheduling constraints, but typically involve a support system, a positive mindset, physical activity, and separating from the environment, among others. Dispatchers are given designated breaks throughout their shift, which means they can plan accordingly and break up their day with activities not related to their work duties. Off duty, dispatchers tend to disconnect from work entirely, and rely on a support system that is comprised of individuals outside of the dispatch center. Physical activity, and a focus on mental health are also among the most popular stress management techniques used while off duty. Despite the use of these techniques, survey responses indicate that dispatchers

are emotionally and physically exhausted and experiencing high levels of burnout. There is more work to be done to ensure that mental health is prioritized among dispatch staff.

These exploratory findings provide a foundation from which to further our understanding of the techniques and strategies used by dispatchers to prevent escalation, or de-escalate, calls for service and radio traffic with officers. Results also shed light on the impediments to effective de-escalation, including complex incidents, organizational barriers, and mental health impacts. The main objective for all transactions is to resolve the incident peacefully and keep both community members and officers safe from harm. Understanding the front-end de-escalation that occurs on the dispatcher side provides continuity in the loop between call receipt and call resolution and explicates the missing link in our overall understanding of de-escalation. Including dispatch perspectives in the de-escalation discussion is essential to our understanding of pre-arrival resolution across all call types, as well as how dispatchers and officers can work collaboratively to achieve the same goal.

LIMITATIONS

The current study has a number of limitations that must be acknowledged. The impacts of COVID-19 have been examined in a sworn context (White et al., 2022), presenting challenges for an essential workforce tasked with maintaining public safety while also adhering to departmental policies related to operational changes and service delivery. Police dispatch is a 24/7/365 operation, with minimum staffing requirements in place to ensure adequate phone and radio coverage while responding to officer requests across various priority levels. Employee post-exposure quarantine protocols, staffing shortages, and distance requirements across the department created difficulties for

professional staff, the researcher included, while attempting to schedule observation periods and interviews. Additionally, dispatch trainers were still required to train dispatch trainees on call-taking and radio traffic despite limited staffing, many of whom were among the nine peer-nominated TDDs. The researcher scheduled interview times and observation periods with time constraints and limited availability, however, the reduced time spent in the dispatch environment impacted the ability to observe de-escalation tactics in practice.

One must also bear in mind the generalizability of the findings considering contextual differences between the TPDCC and other dispatch centers. This exploratory research centered on a single, medium-sized police communications center with unique attributes and challenges, that has experienced shifts in unit and department-level leadership over the past few years. Although protocols and policies may vary by agency, the potential impact of these findings remains the same. The high level of access afforded to the researcher created an ideal environment for understanding the full scale of strategies and techniques used by dispatchers to de-escalate citizens and officers, a topic that has not been explored in criminological research hitherto. All jurisdictions, regardless of size, employ someone in a dispatch capacity who interacts with citizens, and communicates with officers, highlighting the importance of understanding dispatcher de-escalation tactics more broadly. Radio codes, verbal formats, and call operation procedures may differ, but the role itself, and the need to effectively de-escalate, remains constant. Similarly, dispatch centers continue to face challenges with improving dispatcher mental health and the recruitment and retention crisis, and these firsthand accounts have illuminated the nexus between these variables, training limitations, and the

ability to effectively de-escalate. All things considered, this much-needed contribution to the dispatch literature can provide a starting point for other agencies, and avenue of exploration for researchers.

The small sample size of the TPDCC also presents challenges with the interpretation of survey results, as respondents did not vary widely in terms of demographics (88.5% female and 88.0% white), a finding that has also emerged elsewhere (see Gillooly, 2021). Although it is widely known, albeit anecdotally, that the dispatching profession tends to be compromised overwhelmingly by those who identify as women, the results do not allow for subgroup analysis designed to reveal differences, if any, among respondents. Two of the nine peer-nominated top de-escalators identify as male, two are Supervisors, and their tenure ranges between three and 16.5 years, providing an array of rich experiences which have framed their views on de-escalation. As interest in this area continues to grow, researchers should seek a geographically and demographically diverse sample of communications centers varying in size and composition to understand the extent to which de-escalation techniques and strategies may diverge from the present findings.

Because much of the research pertaining to dispatchers relates to their decision-making and discretion, the topic of de-escalation in dispatch is relatively untouched apart from dispatchers and crisis negotiation or intervention (APCO, 2021). Understanding the extent to which dispatchers de-escalate, the tactics they use to defuse situations with both citizens and officers, and the impact of such behaviors remains a mystery, posing a challenge for researchers who have no knowledge base from which to expand. Even with these limitations in mind, this study provides an in-depth examination of the strategies

and techniques used to defuse highly elevated callers and officers and prevent escalation from occurring in the first place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Studies of dispatchers are limited in the criminological research. Recent interest in this role has showcased the importance of their decisions, though none have examined dispatchers in a de-escalation context. This study contributes to our understanding of dispatchers more broadly and fills the gap that exists in the de-escalation conversation. De-escalation at the officer level is undoubtedly important, as they are the first physical responders on the scene. However, the majority of citizens officers encounter will have already interacted with a dispatcher by phone long before the first officer arrives. This missing link in de-escalation may be a transformational component, activating the process of defusion into motion from the first verbal transaction. This research confirms that dispatchers, like officers, engage in de-escalation daily when faced with volatile callers, while also de-escalating officers who are in an elevated state. Findings also reveal that dispatchers are aware of the actions that hinder de-escalation, and the role that they play as the link between caller and officer. These results, coupled with insight on the department, training, and mental health, have major implications for policy, practice, and our understanding of the de-escalation process from the lens of a commonly overlooked role in policing.

Bridging the Gap. A central theme emerged from conversations with TDDs regarding the disconnects that exist between dispatchers, sworn personnel, the department, and the community. This internal and external misalignment presents challenges for de-escalation, as well as for policies and practices within the department

that apply to dispatchers but were developed without them. Departments should not only support the inclusion of dispatchers in critical incident debriefs but encourage field supervisors to proactively reach out to dispatch staff and facilitate their inclusion in briefings. Simply suggesting their inclusion is insufficient, and instead, the department should elevate their role and communicate the importance of the dispatch in this post-incident process. The benefits of this inclusion are vast, including call closure, improved de-escalation techniques, and dispatcher wellness. It is also recommended that sworn personnel across all ranks periodically participate in sit-alongs with dispatch staff to facilitate collaboration, foster understanding, and discuss any concerns that have arisen. As TD32 stated, “we're all like, we're just all dealing with our portion of the same call. You know, I started you finish it. I'm doing my part. You're doing your part.” Therefore, de-escalation should be presented as a partnership consisting of passing of the baton from dispatch to officer to ensure that both parties do their part. Research has shown that using a punitive approach to gain compliance from officers as it relates to following dispatcher guidance may not be effective (Karunakaran, 2021), therefore agencies should consider more informal, non-confrontational approaches for dispatchers to voice their concerns about problematic interactions with officers in the field. Sworn leadership may not initially see the importance of including dispatchers in discussions related to field operations, but as expressed by TDDs, awareness of best practices in policing is essential to information gathering, transparency, and the securing of resources.

Dispatchers should also be encouraged to attend shift briefings and ride-alongs with officers to understand the field perspective and observe dispatcher-officer interactions without the pressures of handling radio traffic. Staffing, at least for the

foreseeable future, will remain a concern when it comes to scheduling ride-alongs. To alleviate this issue and ensure equitable access to this vital information, a rotating ride-along schedule can be created using smaller blocks of time, ideally during low traffic periods. While a full shift would be most desirable, field exposure in any capacity is an improvement from the existing approach.

In addition to lending their support as it relates to deeper understanding and inclusion at the field operations level, policymakers in the department should prioritize providing dispatch staff with a seat at the table when large-scale decisions are made. This is even more important when performance measures pertaining to dispatch performance are discussed, as they tend to center on the speed of call resolution as opposed to the quality of calls. TPDCC leadership are embraced and included when command staff deems their input is relevant to the discussion, but the lack of understanding preceding such decisions prevents department leadership from fully comprehending the sphere of influence dispatchers possess. While it is essential that the dispatch commander (i.e., Bureau Manager) is included and consulted on all department manners, soliciting input and ideas from floor personnel may provide more diverse perspectives while also giving those who may feel isolated a voice in the decision-making process. Dispatchers possess a wide array of experiences and philosophies, and their expertise has the potential to greatly benefit policy. Ultimately, dispatchers do not feel that their profession is acknowledged, and feel isolated and excluded as it relates to department events, benefits, and awards. By taking active steps to increase understanding surrounding their role as first responders, perhaps the magnitude and difficulty of their position will be understood,

and pave the way for their recognition not only during annual awards ceremonies, but every day.

Among the most important findings are those surrounding the gap that exists between public perceptions surrounding the dispatch profession, and de-escalation. If officers who work in the same agency lack understanding, one can imagine how much misunderstanding can occur among community members. This disconnect may lead to increased frustration during the information-gathering process, as a community member may not understand why they are being tasked with providing extensive details during a highly stressful situation. Although de-escalation techniques such as increased transparency may reduce this frustration during a call for service, broader understanding requires more intentional efforts. It is imperative that dispatchers are knowledgeable about the community they serve, including concerns among community members and overall trust and safety sentiments (ABC 4, 2019). Further, the community should have the opportunity to learn more about the dispatch function by participating in sit-alongs and being consulted during the development of training protocols and related diversity, equity, and inclusion education that may be provided to dispatch staff. Finally, efforts rooted in the recruitment of diverse dispatch personnel should include a community component to illuminate any biased testing or hiring practices that may prevent this goal from being attained. Command personnel should also consider including dispatchers in community meetings, advisory council presentations, and city council discussions open to the public, to ensure that the community members can ask questions, voice any praise or concerns, and better understand the dispatch process.

Training and Resources. The lack of training opportunities and resources appears to be connected to the gap in understanding that exists between dispatchers and sworn department leadership. Dispatchers should be provided with the training catalog and have the option to attend classes for sworn staff related to legal matters, operations, and criminal justice processes more broadly. Often calls for service are merely inquiries from community members seeking guidance or information pertaining to a non-emergency or civil issue (Neusteter et al., 2019). Unless a dispatcher is proactively seeking education on these topics, they may not have the knowledge to answer such questions, and in turn, may shift the workload elsewhere. For those calls that do require more specialized skills such as negotiations involving suicidal callers, dispatchers should be included in crisis negotiation courses and have the option of becoming certified. Current efforts to triage calls and divert crisis calls away from the police may alleviate some of the need for negotiators in dispatch (Pew, 2021), but the dynamic nature of this line of work means that even the most routine call for service may transition to a situation in need of negotiation without warning. Determining if a call should be diverted to crisis is not a cut and dry issue, therefore it is more beneficial to provide dispatchers with extensive training, even if it is not frequently called upon.

National training programs and other resources made available through APCO or NENA should also be a priority for dispatch staff and will supplement the future de-escalation training being developed based on these study findings. Training materials should be housed in a web-based repository for future access, and attendees (if selected by a lottery or rotating schedule) should be given the responsibility of educating fellow dispatch staff on the content. The new hire training program should be evaluated often,

and trainers should be required to stay well-rounded on a variety of topics and demonstrate their own de-escalation skills before given the responsibility of training others. It is important to consider incorporating specialty courses taught by those who particularly skilled in certain functions, such as TDDs and de-escalation. These individuals may not be assigned as the primary floor trainer but can be consulted for their expertise and serve as a subject matter expert on specific topics. Although it is difficult to standardize floor training since each dispatcher is unique, taking a toolkit approach informed by numerous perspectives may allow for flexibility in methods, and arm new dispatchers with a skill set from which to operate.

Humanizing the Headset. The phrase "humanizing the headset" has been used to describe the role of dispatchers as dynamic individuals who are often deeply affected by the job they perform and who may be in need of support (Humanizing the Headset, 2021). It is important for departments, and policing more broadly, to recognize the rigors of the position and the mental health impacts that a job of this sort can have, including the inability to effectively de-escalate themselves or others. Comprehensive resources related to mental health and stress management both on and off duty should be prioritized. This should extend beyond providing links to programs or reading material, and instead focus on access, implementation, and departmental practices that support dispatcher wellness. Recruitment and retention challenges have plagued dispatch centers for quite some time (APCO, 2017) yet finding solutions for these issues is tantamount to the implementation of practices aimed at improving dispatcher mental health and providing adequate time off and work/life balance. Departments should prioritize finding creative solutions to recruitment and retention, including the review of testing tools, dispatcher shadowing

programs, discussions with partner agencies who have had success with hiring, and current and former dispatch staff who may shed light on improvements. Hiring incentives and other bonus structures may not be feasible, therefore department leaders should consider creative, innovative recruitment practices spanning different modalities and targeting populations beyond those in law enforcement.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This exploratory study is the first, to the author's knowledge, to examine the strategies and techniques used by dispatchers to de-escalate callers and officers, and to identify hinderances to effective de-escalation. This study should serve as a launching point for future research to build upon these findings and increase the knowledge base surrounding this important topic.

Although the functions and duties of a dispatcher are fairly consistent, it is possible that geographic differences, agency characteristics, and protocols specific to a dispatch center may result in validation of, or deviations from, established themes. By expanding this research to include a broad sample of agencies across jurisdiction type (e.g., rural) and agency type (e.g., sheriff's departments), we can begin to refine the definitions and practices of de-escalation in dispatch, and identify the most prevalent across the field. Common themes supported by a large sample of dispatch centers have the potential to inform national training standards for dispatchers, and inform officer discussions surrounding the de-escalation loop, and the inclusion of dispatchers in related conversations.

Further, it is important to examine dispatcher de-escalation during different time frames, specifically as it relates to COVID-19. Conducting interviews and observations

during a non-surge period may reveal different de-escalation techniques, changes in dispatcher behavior, or shifts in call type and frequency of interactions. Further, there is evidence to support increases in crime and pandemic-related mental health crises during the pandemic thus far (Lucas, 2021; Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020), which may in turn affect the state of dispatcher mental health and prevalence of burnout, beyond what is considered baseline. Although the onset of the pandemic occurred before data collection began, future examinations of dispatcher de-escalation once the pandemic has reached an endemic state can provide a suitable comparison.

This study is a prime example of using research to drive practice and inform policies in a law enforcement agency. Findings have begun to inform a customized de-escalation curriculum built by a team of TDDs, the Communications Bureau Manager, and personnel from the training unit. To date, preliminary discussions surrounding module topics and the delivery of the curriculum have occurred, and an internal website with folders for materials and call/radio examples has been created. TDDs have selected modules they wish to contribute to (Appendix F for a list of modules) and have begun to identify examples of calls for service and radio traffic that will be included to illustrate de-escalation in practice. This training will operate independently from the existing sworn curriculum, though dispatchers will be provided with an overview of the content for continuity purposes. In line with the discussion surrounding a need for more understanding between sworn and dispatch, both groups will have the ability to attend the other course if interested. Prior to the deployment of the training curriculum, a second wave of the survey will be administered, and another after the training has concluded. Evaluation plans include conducting pre- and post-training systematic social observations

with calls and radio traffic to determine if the training curriculum has influenced the techniques and strategies used by dispatchers during their shift. Administrative data is not ideal for the evaluation of de-escalation efforts as it may mask the nuances of behavioral change (White et al., 2021); however, data such as complaints and calls for service will be examined to determine if any training impact can be detected.

Finally, the researcher will provide TPD leadership with a policy and training analysis to include an assessment of dispatch protocols, policies, and training (both new hire and advanced training) to determine if there are opportunities to fuse de-escalation strategies and techniques within the broader training objectives. The evaluation results will determine if the training itself becomes a requirement for all future dispatchers, as well as how the curriculum modules will be refined to better reflect de-escalation concepts and practices found to affect dispatcher behavior significantly, and positively.

Dispatchers, the voice of calm during the storm, are responsible for interpreting, classifying, and resolving calls for service through often elevated and traumatic circumstances (Simpson, 2020). They are expected to obtain as many details as possible, while simultaneously performing accurately, reliably, and within time constraints. Considering the sheer number of calls for service received by dispatchers daily, it is no surprise that they have developed a refined set of skills to assist with the resolution of calls for service from the first point of contact, until it reaches a Code 4. Though noticeably missing from the de-escalation discussion outside of what is considered crisis intervention, dispatchers utilize a set of strategies and techniques to defuse volatile calls or radio transmissions and prioritizing community and officer safety.

The ability of dispatchers to de-escalate is not limited to citizens requesting police services; sworn personnel in the field also experience extreme stress and unpredictability, which may manifest in the form of elevated radio traffic during interactions with dispatchers. Aside from research focused on the relationship between dispatcher priming and the incidence of use of force (Taylor, 2020), and the impact of alarmism on certain call types (Gillooly, 2021), the intricate dynamic between dispatchers and officers has largely been neglected in favor of the call-taking focus. Understanding the full spectrum of dispatcher duties is integral to our understanding of their scope of influence. This study delved into the strategies and techniques used every day to de-escalate callers and officers from the perspective of local experts, as well as the potential barriers to effective de-escalation. Shedding light on the disconnects between dispatchers and sworn personnel, the department, and the community, can educate organizations on the best way to approach integrating dispatchers more effectively. Insight gained from TDDs on pre-arrival de-escalation provides the missing link in the de-escalation process which is vital to the development of training and policies. Results also extend the de-escalation process beyond the call for service, illustrating the importance of managing incidents on the dispatch channel to ensure that officers remain calm and focused on the incident. Moving forward, definitions and examinations of de-escalation are incomplete without considering the dispatcher role. They have numerous transactions with the caller and officer(s), and each of those transactions is an opportunity for de-escalation. Dispatchers are the calm during the storm, and their role is critical to continuity in the de-escalation process, and ultimately, community and officer safety.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT INFOGRAPHIC

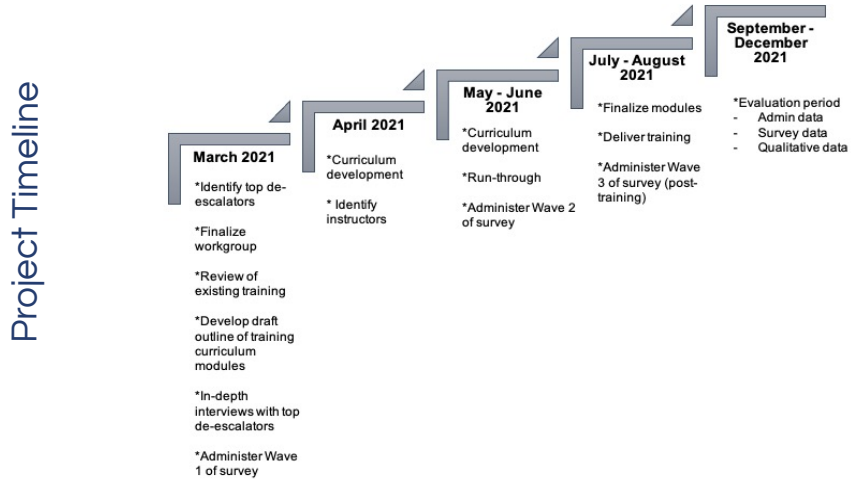
Tempe Police

Center for Violence Prevention and Community Safety
Arizona State University

The Calm During the Storm: Identifying the Principles and Techniques of De-Escalation among Police Dispatchers

I am studying de-escalation among police dispatchers. There is virtually no research on this subject in criminal justice, so you will be the first dispatchers to participate in a research project on the topic. Your participation will dictate the direction of this area of research and frame the training curriculum developed by the department. The purpose of this study is to understand your perceptions about de-escalation in dispatch, harness your expertise, and to observe your behaviors on the job. Once developed, you will be required to participate in a de-escalation training as a condition of your employment with the Tempe Police department. While there are no direct benefits to you, I believe this research has major implications for dispatching and policing, especially in light of the recent focus placed on the importance of dispatchers.

Project Timeline



Anticipated Contributions to Policy and Practice

- Adds to our limited understanding of dispatch operations, and the complexity of their role - contributes to our understanding of the missing link in de-escalation
- Customized de-escalation training with an emphasis on dispatcher wellness
- Dispatchers have the potential to defuse potentially violent situations before officer arrival, and keep officers calm once they are on scene
- Fewer incidents of force and citizen complaints, and increased citizen satisfaction with police
- May shape future dispatch training processes and the recruitment approach
- Changing the script to focus on front-end resolution

APPENDIX B

VIDEO INTRODUCTION SCRIPT

Hello,
My name is Carlena Orosco, and I am a doctoral candidate at Arizona State University in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. I am also an Analyst in the SPARC unit and have been with Tempe PD for 3.5 years. Prior to entering research and analysis, I was a dispatcher for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, where I worked the air for 9 years on graveyard shift. I have always considered myself a dispatcher first as those years shaped me as a person, and as a scholar.

Because of my work on the existing TPD de-escalation project and my experience as a dispatcher, I wanted to lead an effort that would focus on the role that call-takers and dispatchers have in de-escalation. There is virtually no research on this subject in criminal justice, so our department will be the first to participate in a research project on the topic. Your participation, while voluntary, will help to shape the direction of this research and frame a customized training curriculum developed by dispatchers, for dispatchers.

The purpose of the study is to understand your perceptions about de-escalation in dispatch, to gather your expertise on strategies and tactics, and to observe these tactics on the job as they are applied. Once developed, all communications staff will be required to participate in the de-escalation training. I believe this project and training will have major benefits for dispatching and policing, especially when we consider the importance and responsibilities placed on dispatchers.

Although the training will be mandatory, participation in other aspects of the study are voluntary, and all information gathered will remain confidential. In no way will any of your responses be attributed to your name, and all data will be presented in aggregate form. Ultimately, I want to learn from you, and use your expertise to develop something beneficial to the field of dispatch.

I have also developed an infographic that details the components of the study, and am available to answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me using the contact details provided, and you are also free to reach out to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Mike White, if you have concerns.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to working with you.

APPENDIX C

TOP DISPATCH DE-ESCALATOR CONSENT FORM

Best Practices in Dispatch De-Escalation: Top Dispatcher De-Escalator Informed Consent Script

You are receiving this form because you have been voted by your co-workers as one of the most highly skilled dispatchers at de-escalating volatile interactions with citizens, as well as officers in the field who may be operating in a heightened state. This form describes my research study and requests your participation.

Introduction: My name is Carlena Orosco, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. I'm also an Analyst in the SPARC unit, and a former dispatcher of 9 years with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Purpose: I am studying de-escalation among police dispatchers. There is virtually no research on this subject in criminal justice, so you will be the first dispatchers to participate in a research project on the topic, and your participation will dictate the direction of this area of research and frame the training curriculum developed by the department. The purpose of this study is to understand your perceptions about de-escalation in dispatch, harness your expertise, and to observe your behaviors on the job. Once developed, you will be required to participate in a de-escalation training as a condition of your employment with the Tempe Police department. While there are no direct benefits to you, I believe this research has major implications for dispatching and policing, especially in light of the recent focus placed on the importance of dispatchers.

Procedure and time limit: If you choose to participate, you will take part in two research activities. These activities will be spread out over the course of three to six months. I anticipate that approximately 5-10 dispatchers will participate in this portion of the project.

1) A formal, audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour about de-escalation in dispatching.
2) Three to five sit-alongs, each lasting approximately 2 hours each. During these sit-alongs, I will observe your work activity, ask questions, and take notes.

In addition to these three activities, I will also ask about your background, training, and prior experiences on the job. As part of that I would like to explore your prior work history at the Tempe Police Department, which will include a review of your handling of potentially volatile calls with citizens and/or officers. I will ask you to recall such incidents and describe how you handled them.

Your rights: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. You may refuse to answer any question in any phase of the study, and still move on to the next one. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your employment with the Tempe Police Department in any way, and I will not communicate to department supervisors about the nature of your participation, except to gain permission to conduct the study. My main priority is protecting the rights of the study participants. I intend only to produce findings to be used for research purposes only. You have a right to ask me any question and to have your questions

answered. You may also request a copy of this form, or any other documents associated with the research findings, including my field notes. All participants will receive copies of all final reports. Please note that your participation in the de-escalation training will be mandatory as a condition of your employment with the Tempe Police Department. All aspects of the research project are voluntary. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

Identity protection: You will be assigned a numeric study ID number. Some of the data you provide may be included in a project final report and other publications but information will be presented at an aggregate level. You will be asked to provide your Tempe PD Employee ID for tracking and administrative data purposes, but will be replaced with your study ID before analysis. Some data will be audio recorded, but this will be saved on a secure computer, not on a public network.

Risks: Your participation and responses have the potential to cause you to feel some level of discomfort, anxiety, or embarrassment. Remember, you may refuse to participate in any facet of the project, and may terminate your participation at any time.

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact me at caorosco@asu.edu, or contact my Dissertation Chair and Advisor Dr. Michael D. White at Michael.D.White.1@asu.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Arizona State University Social Behavioral IRB. You may talk to them at (480) 965-6788 or by email at research.integrity@asu.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Your signature below indicates you have read the above information, have had all of your relevant questions answered, and agree to participate in the study.

Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

TOP DISPATCH DE-ESCALATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Employment

What is your current position?

How many years have you been a dispatcher/dispatch supervisor?

Have they all been at Tempe PD?

Have you dispatched for any other departments? How was that different from Tempe PD?

Do you have any professional experience outside of dispatching that has helped you in terms of your job duties?

Self-Perceptions

Why do you think your peers voted you as a top de-escalator?

Is de-escalation or ensuring that the call or transmission doesn't escalate one of your goals when you answer a call?

Do you ever need to de-escalate units in the field? Can you provide an example?

Do you remember filling out the nomination sheet yourself? What types of traits did you think about when you voted for others?

General Perspectives on De-escalation

What is de-escalation?

Do you think your definition is different from the public's definition?

Can you describe exactly how a dispatcher de-escalates a situation?

De-Escalation Training at Tempe PD

What types of formal training have you had specifically on verbal communication or de-escalation tactics?

Can you describe the training?

Did any of your other training help with this?

Do you think the ability to communicate and de-escalate is covered effectively by these trainings?

Do you think de-escalation type training is important for dispatchers?

Do you think the training you received in the classroom and from your floor trainer prepared you to de-escalate callers and calm officers effectively?

How do you think the department can improve your ability to de-escalate callers?

Tales from the Field

Can you describe a call in which you sensed the situation might escalate and you were able to stop that from happening?

Can you describe a call in which you employed tactics to de-escalate a situation, but they didn't work? In hindsight, what else would you have done?

Are there any calls that stick with you because you weren't happy with the outcome? Specifically, calls that you wish you could do over. Can you describe what it was, and why you feel this way about it?

Barriers to De-Escalation

Are there specific situations in which de-escalation is more difficult, or impossible?

What elements of a situation make de-escalation more difficult or impossible, or undesirable?

APPENDIX E

DISPATCHER PERCEPTIONS SURVEY – QUALTRICS

I am studying de-escalation among police dispatchers, and the effectiveness of a customized de-escalation training program designed for dispatchers. There are virtually no studies on this subject in criminal justice. You will be the first dispatchers to participate in a research project on the topic, and your participation will help shape the direction of this area of research and frame the training curriculum developed by the department. The purpose of this survey is to understand your perceptions about de-escalation in dispatch and dispatch culture overall, to harness your expertise, and to understand the tactics and strategies used to de-escalate citizen calls and manage officers in the field. You will be asked to fill out the survey three (3) times during the project, over a span of 6-9 months, and each survey will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be kept strictly confidential and used for research purposes only. Your name will not be attached to any of your answers and your participation during any phase of the project is voluntary. Survey responses will be collected electronically and will only be accessible to the lead researcher via a password-protected drive. You may skip any particular question that you do not want to answer or stop taking the survey at any time. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study. Please answer the questions in your own opinion, and to the best of your knowledge. Your honest appraisal and perspective is important to understanding the impact of the new de-escalation training program. While there are no direct benefits to you, I believe this research has major implications for dispatching and policing, especially in light of the recent focus placed on the importance of dispatchers. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation. If you have any questions concerning the research

study, please contact either myself, Carlena Orosco caorosco@asu.edu, or my Dissertation Chair Michael D. White, Ph.D., mdwhite1@asu.edu, 602-496-2351. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 480-965-6788.

Selecting I agree below indicates you have read the above information, have had all of your relevant questions answered, and agree to participate in the survey.

- ○ I agree to participate in the survey
- ○ I do not wish to participate in the survey

	Procedural Justice Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. Please select the bubble with the numeric value in the space provided for each statement.			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I always treat citizen callers with respect.	○	○	○	○
I always give citizens an opportunity to fully explain the situation, even if it takes more time than normal.	○	○	○	○
I always remain neutral during phone calls with citizens.	○	○	○	○
I always act professionally when I'm interacting with citizens	○	○	○	○
I care about every citizen's well-being.	○	○	○	○
Most citizens that I interact with on the phone respect me as a dispatcher.	○	○	○	○
Most citizens that I interact with on the phone trust me.	○	○	○	○
Citizens I interact with are generally satisfied with how their situations are resolved.	○	○	○	○

Most citizens in Tempe have respect for the Tempe Police Department.	○	○	○	○
The Tempe Police Department has a positive relationship with the community.	○	○	○	○
I try to uphold Tempe Police Department's core values when interacting with citizens.	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Tactics For each skill listed below, indicate the level of importance for peacefully resolving volatile citizen encounters.

	Not Important at All	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
Patience	○	○	○	○
Communication	○	○	○	○
Active Listening	○	○	○	○
Compromise	○	○	○	○
Staying Calm	○	○	○	○
Professionalism	○	○	○	○
Tone of voice (even, controlled)	○	○	○	○
Empathy	○	○	○	○
Restraint (when frustrated)	○	○	○	○
Knowing when to disconnect	○	○	○	○
Knowing when to call a Supervisor	○	○	○	○
Using appropriate wording/language	○	○	○	○
Speaking in a calm manner	○	○	○	○

In the first column, indicate how often you exercised the following skills in the last month. In the second column, please indicate how often other dispatchers exercise the following skills.

	You and Others					
	Not at all	Rarely	Once per week	Once per shift	Multiple times per shift	Not at all
Patience	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communication	○	○	○	○	○	○
Active Listening	○	○	○	○	○	○
Compromise	○	○	○	○	○	○
Staying Calm	○	○	○	○	○	○
Professionalism	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tone of voice (even, controlled)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Empathy	○	○	○	○	○	○
Restraint (when frustrated)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Knowing when to disconnect	○	○	○	○	○	○
Knowing when to call a supervisor	○	○	○	○	○	○
Using appropriate wording/language	○	○	○	○	○	○
Speaking in a calm manner	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

What type of behaviors should a dispatcher/call-taker avoid using when talking to citizens?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What type of behaviors should a dispatcher/call-taker avoid using when talking to an officer?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

	Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am willing to take part in de-escalation training.	○	○	○	○
I am enthusiastic about de-escalation training.	○	○	○	○
I believe that de-escalation training will provide me with additional tools to better resolve encounters with citizens.	○	○	○	○
I believe if dispatchers take de-escalation training, police-community relationships will improve.	○	○	○	○
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training are better able to communicate with citizens.	○	○	○	○
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training garner more trust from citizens.	○	○	○	○
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training will get into fewer disputes with citizens.	○	○	○	○

Dispatchers who take de-escalation training are better able to communicate with officers.	○	○	○	○
Dispatchers who take de-escalation training use more effective techniques.	○	○	○	○
Since the announcement of the project, I have been more aware of my behavior during interactions with citizens.	○	○	○	○
Since the announcement of the project I have been more aware of how I speak with citizens after talking to my peers about the project.	○	○	○	○

Page Break

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Dispatcher Health and Wellness

In the space provided, please list the strategies you find most effective in dealing with work stress while off duty:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

In the space provided, please list the strategies you find most effective in dealing with work stress while on duty:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

	Q12 Putting aside any medical diagnoses that cause fatigue, please respond to each of the following questions based on how your work as a dispatcher makes you feel. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:				
	Always, or to a very high degree	Often, or to a high degree	Sometimes/ somewhat	Seldom, or to a low degree	Never, almost never, or to a very low degree
How often do you feel tired?	○	○	○	○	○
How often are you physically exhausted?	○	○	○	○	○
How often are you emotionally exhausted?	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you think, "I can't take it anymore"?	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you feel worn out?	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?	○	○	○	○	○
Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?	○	○	○	○	○
Are you exhausted in the morning/start of your day at the thought of another day at work?	○	○	○	○	○

Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?	○	○	○	○	○
Do you have energy for family/friends during leisure time?	○	○	○	○	○
Is your work emotionally exhausting?	○	○	○	○	○
Does your work frustrate you?	○	○	○	○	○
Do you feel burnt out because of your work?	○	○	○	○	○

	Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:				
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat agree	No Opinion	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
People outside of my industry cannot relate to my job demands.	○	○	○	○	○
There is a lot of variety in my assigned tasks.	○	○	○	○	○
My experience and opinion are valued by my coworkers.	○	○	○	○	○
It is hard for me to spend time with my family because of work demands (e.g., overtime, shift hours).	○	○	○	○	○
I plan on seeking advancement and/or promotion during my career with this agency.	○	○	○	○	○
The citizens I speak to are very appreciative of what I do for them.	○	○	○	○	○

I am so busy at work that I often have to work through my breaks	○	○	○	○	○
If I have a bad day at work, I find myself taking it out on my family when I get home.	○	○	○	○	○
Drinking alcohol after a rough day at work helps me to unwind.	○	○	○	○	○
This agency is very efficient at handling problems.	○	○	○	○	○
There is always someone watching over my shoulder or listening to see if I do everything correctly.	○	○	○	○	○
The department cares about my well-being.	○	○	○	○	○
Dispatchers are valued in the department.	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Dispatcher Health and Wellness

Start of Block: Demographics

How many months/years have you been with the Tempe Police Department?

- ○ Years _____
- ○ Months _____

Are you a lateral transfer?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes

If yes, how many previous departments have you been employed with?

- ○ 1
- ○ 2+
- ○ Does not apply

What shift do you work?

- ○ Days
- ○ PMs/Swings
- ○ Overnights/Graveyards
- ○ A combination of shifts

Have you taken the new de-escalation training with the Tempe Police Department?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes

Have you taken training at Tempe PD or another PD in the past?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes

If yes, select the type(s) of training you have been involved in:

- ☐ POST Dispatcher Training
- ☐ CIT
- ☐ Other _____

What is your current rank?

- ○ Dispatcher
- ○ Dispatch Supervisor
- ○ Other _____

What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary
- ○ Prefer not to say

What is your age?

_____

Are you of Hispanic/Latino descent?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes

What is the racial identity you most identify with?

- ○ Black/African-American/Caribbean Islander
- ○ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ○ White/European American
- ○ Native American/Native Alaskan
- ○ Other _____

I primarily identify as

- ○ Heterosexual
- ○ Gay or Lesbian
- ○ Bisexual or Pansexual
- ○ Other _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

- ○ High school diploma or GED
- ○ Some college
- ○ Two-year degree (AAS, AS, etc.)
- ○ Four-year degree (BS, BA, etc.)
- ○ Advanced degree (MS, MA, PhD, EdD, etc.)

End of Block: Demographics

APPENDIX F

CURRICULUM MODULES

1. Defining de-escalation in a dispatch context
2. Importance of de-escalation
    a. Critical role of the dispatcher in de-escalation
    b. Call for service trajectory and opportunities for de-escalation
3. Lines of communication
    a. Language
    b. Tone
    c. Transparency
4. Strategies and Techniques
    a. Call-taker examples
    b. Radio examples
5. Dispatcher health and wellness
    a. Pre-care (before shift)
    b. During shift
    c. Post-shift
6. De-escalation during critical incidents
7. De-escalation with special populations
8. What NOT to do
9. Training exercises
    a. Scenarios
10. Department priorities
    a. CIT
    b. Mental health call triage
    c. PATROL model
11. Call and radio review – internal and external

APPENDIX G

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

APPROVAL: EXPEDITED REVIEW

Michael White
WATTS: Criminology and Criminal Justice, School of
602/496-2351
mdwhite1@asu.edu

Dear Michael White:

On 5/3/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	The Calm During the Storm: Assessing the Effects of Dispatcher De-escalation Training on the Behavior and Attitudes of Citizens, Dispatchers, and Officers
Investigator:	Michael White
IRB ID:	STUDY00013774
Category of review:	(7)(b) Social science methods
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Dispatch De-Escalation IRB Protocol 4.29.2021 V3, Category: IRB Protocol; • Dispatcher DeEscalation Infographic, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Dispatcher DeEscalation Informed Consent, Category: Consent Form; • Dispatcher DeEscalation Peer Nomination, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Letter of Support, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc); • Recruitment Video Script, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Survey Consent (for top of survey), Category: Consent Form; •

	SurveyFramework_DispatchDeEscalation_Version2.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Top Dispatcher De-Escalator Informed Consent Script, Category: Consent Form; • Top Dispatcher DeEscalator Interview Protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);

The IRB approved the protocol from 5/3/2021 to 5/2/2024 inclusive. Three weeks before 5/2/2024 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 5/2/2024 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Carlena Orosco
Carlena Orosco