

Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center



Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1

**An Exemplary Project Submission to the
Commission on Accreditation for Law
Enforcement Agencies, Inc.**

**SANTA CRUZ CONSOLIDATED EMERGENCY
COMMUNICATIONS CENTER**

*** CITIZENS' ACADEMY FOR 9-1-1 ***

While it is common for law enforcement agencies to provide Citizens' academies for their communities, an independent 9-1-1 center, like the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center, is challenged to find a similar forum. Law enforcement agencies have recognized the benefit of educating the public. An informed and educated public is more cooperative and less suspicious of law enforcement practices because they understand the how's and why's of law enforcement procedures. By establishing our own *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center is able to reach the community and promote a better understanding of how the 9-1-1 center operates. Our goal, when developing the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, was to realize the same benefit as our law enforcement agencies: an informed and educated public that is more cooperative and less suspicious of the 9-1-1 process.

The program was designed to provide public education and develop better appreciation of how 9-1-1 calls are handled. Since dispatchers are almost always the first point of contact for a citizen in need of help – and callers frequently identify the dispatcher as the “voice of the agency” – this program is extremely beneficial to both the callers and our User Agencies. An added, unanticipated benefit was the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1's* power as a recruiting tool. Like many 9-1-1 centers, the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center has been challenged to find a pool of highly qualified candidates. Many applicants are uninformed about the intense working environment of a 9-1-1 center. By encouraging interested candidates to attend our *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* we've been able to improve our candidate pool by identifying individuals who are motivated and informed about a career in public safety dispatching.

Target Group

Originally, the target audience for the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* was adult members of the community who had an interest in the 9-1-1 process. A subset of this group was the local media, specifically the print and television reporters who have regular contact with the communications center. To reach this target group, an interest list is generated from citizen inquiries and our agency's website and notices are mailed to the media outlets. The community relations staff of our Law Enforcement User Agencies also provides individual and community group referrals. In addition to this original target group, several attendees from our early academies expressed interest in becoming public safety dispatchers. This helped us to identify our applicant interest list as an additional target group. This expanded target group, which now includes our applicant interest list, provides us with a specific roster of prospective participants for every session of our *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*.

Goals and Objectives

The primary goal of our *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* is to provide a forum for informing and educating the public about 9-1-1 and, specifically, the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center's role within the community. It also provides a means for making positive connections with the media. Since we are a consolidated communications center serving the cities of Watsonville, Capitola, Santa Cruz and the County of Santa Cruz, it is important to explain our organizational structure as our center differs greatly from a communications center that serves a single jurisdiction.

There are three main objectives for the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, as follows:

- *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* participants will have a solid understanding of our organization and how we serve the community.
- *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* participants will understand how a 9-1-1 call is processed from, start to finish.
- *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* participants will see how our organization uses quality improvement processes to provide the community with the highest level of public safety communications services.

Methods of Implementation

Using the Kemp Model for Instructional System Design, a needs assessment was completed that included the students' needs as well as the organization's instructional goals. We also analyzed several different law enforcement citizen academy curriculums. The structure of our *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* was established by combining the needs assessment with the results of our curriculum analysis. This framework was provided to our team of Academy Instructors who, in their regular group meetings, worked out the curriculum details and instructional logistics. Once the details were resolved, the curriculum and lesson plans were documented and the instructional materials were developed and our first *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* was ready for presentation.

Measurements

It's very difficult to measure the effectiveness of our citizens' academy throughout our community. Most callers to 9-1-1 will only dial 9-1-1 once or twice in their lifetimes. Because of this, we cannot measure the success of our citizens' academy by changes in our caller's behavior. The single greatest indicator of the success of this program is its popularity. The *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* has grown from 5 graduates in the first session to a total of 141 graduates. There have been several local reporters who have attended the academy and there is always a waiting list for the next academy. Another measurement is the effectiveness of the citizens' academy in improving our dispatcher candidate pool; approximately 25% of our successful trainees are citizens' academy graduates.

To measure the effectiveness of each citizens' academy class, attendees complete a survey designed to measure how well the Academy met its objectives. The following questions are asked of every *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* participant.

- ***Given what you now know about our training program, are there any areas of training you think we might have missed?***
- ***Do you have any concerns about how dispatchers handle calls in the community?***
- ***Now that you have a better understanding of the Center and its operation, do you have any recommendations or suggestions for improvement?***

The questions are carefully worded to elicit participants' opinions of the program and the agency. Careful review of the completed surveys enables our staff to determine what may be lacking from the academy as well as what the community perceives as inefficiencies or inadequacies within our center. The following are just a few comments from recent academy surveys:

- ***"I felt this was very thorough and all questions were answered."***
- ***"More visual aids/hands on experience would be helpful."***
- ***"This was a very informative class. I never knew how complex dispatching was and how wide the area of work was."***
- ***"I felt the program was extremely informative and helpful. A great introduction into this agency, including history and current practices."***
- ***"It seems that SCCECC has a great system in place that gives employees/dispatchers and everyone involved input into this process. I think that's rare and wonderful."***

Another measurement of success is the feedback received from the User Agencies' community relations staff. Every time User Agency personnel refer a participant to the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, the User Agency staff person is asked to relay any comments the participant made about the citizens' academy. These comments are also analyzed for improvement areas both in the academy and in our operational procedures within the communications center.

Critical Issues

The original proposal for the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* identified several critical issues: funding; curriculum development; scheduling; identification of instructors; marketing; and time constraints.

Since 1996, when we first opened our doors, the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center has supported an in-house training program including an on-site training academy for entry-level dispatch trainees. It was easy to expand the scope of duties for the Training Academy staff to include the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*. This also resolved most of the

funding issues as the facility and equipment needed to conduct the citizens' academy were already in place. Like our other training academies, the citizens' academy is conducted in our Training/Conference Room which is furnished with basic classroom equipment such as white boards, bulletin boards, tables and chairs. Additionally, the room can be configured to accommodate computer aided dispatch (CAD) terminals, projectors, and video and audio presentations; all of which are used to conduct the citizens' academy. Our Academy Staff also publishes training materials such as handbooks, learning activities, and completion certificates. All of these costs – staff time, equipment and facilities, and training materials – were funded by our current operating budget.

Because we had a team of highly motivated and well trained instructors available before implementing the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, the identification of instructors was easy. Our Academy Instructors were more than willing to assume responsibility for developing the curriculum for the citizens' academy and for its instruction. Similar to law enforcement citizens' academies, the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* curriculum is a highly condensed version of the curriculum used for our entry-level dispatcher academy. To achieve the objectives for our citizens' academy, the curriculum covers six topics: orientation to our organization; 9-1-1 call taking; law enforcement dispatching; fire service dispatching; emergency medical dispatching; and our quality improvement program. To ensure academy attendees have a thorough understanding for 9-1-1 center operations, academy participants are also required to complete a four-hour sit-along in the dispatch center. After completing the sit-along, a certificate of completion is issued.

Knowing that time is a precious resource for our attendees, one of our biggest challenges was to organize the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* into a reasonable number of hours. By working diligently, the Academy Instructors were able to fit the entire curriculum into twelve hours: eight hours of classroom instruction and a four hour sit-along with a dispatcher in the communications center. Our first citizens' academy session was scheduled in weekly, three hour blocks and included sit-along time. However, based on feedback from the participants, we modified our scheduling strategy and the academy is now offered as a single day, eight hour class, usually on a Saturday. The four hour sit-along is scheduled individually by the attendees for a date and time that is convenient for them. Participants are required to complete the sit-along within three weeks of finishing the academy. Individual scheduling of the sit-along not only accommodates the participants' schedules but minimizes the impact on the communications center. It is much easier to accommodate one or two visitors than it is to accommodate a large group.

Once the logistics of the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* were addressed and our first academy session was ready for presentation, we developed a marketing strategy. For our first academy, we accepted participants by invitation only. The invitation list included media representatives, elected and appointed officials, community group representatives, and key personnel from our User Agencies. Marketing our first academy to these influential individuals quickly established credibility, support, and recognition for our citizens' academy. The response to the first academy was small but very successful. Subsequent sessions of the citizens' academy have been filled to capacity (30 participants) and a waiting list has been established. For every citizens' academy, press releases and community mailings are issued. Announcements are also posted on our website, in the front lobby, and in the public areas of our User Agencies.

One more critical issue needed to be addressed and this was the issue of offering a Spanish language version of citizens' academy. Our single largest non-Caucasian population is Hispanic and many of these citizens speak Spanish as their native language. Using a bilingual dispatcher, all promotional and instructional materials were translated into Spanish and using bilingual instructors, we have conducted two Spanish language *Citizens' Academies for 9-1-1*.

Length of Time in Effect

The Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center's *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* program was implemented in 1998. At that time, it was the first academy of its kind in the country. After *9-1-1 Magazine* published a feature article about the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* in the September, 2001, issue, we received many requests for additional information from communications centers all over the United States. To the best of our knowledge, our academy is still the only citizens' academy exclusively devoted to public safety dispatching in the United States.

Since 1998, we've conducted ten sessions of the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*, an average of two per year, training a total of 141 citizens.

Resources

The basic resources required to conduct the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* are facility and staff. The Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center is able to provide a training facility that can accommodate up to 30 participants for each session of the academy. Existing Academy Instructors are used to conduct the citizens' academy. As these instructors are also part of the dispatch staff, organizational support is required for scheduling accommodations and overtime approval, if necessary. For a full academy of 30 participants, two instructors are provided. Depending upon the local community, a translator and/or bilingual instructor may be necessary.

The curriculum requires academy participants to complete a four hour sit-along in the Communications Center. A visitor process and a policy regarding confidentiality requirements for visitors is necessary to ensure the integrity of the Communications Center operation.

Other resources are discretionary. The Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center has the ability to publish bound training materials and every academy participant is provided with an academy workbook. We have accumulated a large training library of video and audio tapes and we use these materials to enhance the curriculum presentation. Also, we use a training simulator during our training academies and it is also used during the citizens' academy to enhance the participant's learning experience.

Summary of Impact or Success

Since its inception, the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* has grown in popularity. The program began in September, 1998 and we've conducted approximately 2 academies per year, for a total of 10 academies and 141 graduates. We've successfully used the citizens' academy to improve our dispatcher candidate pool and to develop constructive relationships with local media personnel. Every session of the citizens' academy is filled to capacity and there is a waiting list for future academies.

Suggestions for Improvements

The most urgent need for improvement is to make the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* more available to our community. Given the time restraints of our academy participants and our staff, we've decided to use technology to make this improvement.

An on-line *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* is currently under development. Using the same instructional technology we use for our CD-ROM based dispatcher training the citizens' academy will be available on our website. The on-line course will be produced in English and Spanish languages. A pilot group designed to test this new approach has been formed at a housing development with a large Spanish speaking residency. This pilot group has computers available in their Recreation Room and is looking forward to being involved in testing our new academy format. After completing a self-paced, interactive version of the eight hour academy curriculum, participants will be required to complete a four hour sit-along in the Communications Center to successfully complete the on-line citizens' academy.

Project Summary

Established in September, 1998 the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center's *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* is the only citizens' academy exclusively devoted to public safety dispatching in the United States. Since its inception, the academy has been conducted approximately twice per year and has graduated 141 participants.

The *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* is targeted to reach three main groups: adult community members with an interest in 9-1-1; media personnel who interact regularly with the 9-1-1 center; and prospective dispatcher applicants. The program has successfully reached these groups and has grown in popularity; there are currently 133 people on the waiting list for the next academy session.

Because the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center conducts an in-house academy for entry-level dispatcher trainees, existing facilities, equipment and personnel were available resources for the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*. Organizational support was received to expand the scope of the agency's training program and staff to include the citizens' academy.

The *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* curriculum is a highly condensed version of entry-level dispatcher training. Topics include: orientation to the organization; 9-1-1 call taking; law

enforcement dispatching; fire service dispatching; emergency medical dispatch; and our quality improvement program. To successfully complete the citizens' academy, participants must complete eight hours of classroom instruction (on the above topics) and a four hour sit-along in the communications center. After completing the twelve hour curriculum, participants receive a certificate of completion.

In order to measure the success of the program, all *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* participants are surveyed to ascertain their opinions of the academy and the quality of 9-1-1 service. Survey responses are analyzed and areas in need of improvement are identified.

The most urgent improvement needed for the *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* is a direct result of the program's popularity; we need to significantly increase the availability of the program. Our participants and Academy Staff have indicated that time constraints are the single, biggest limit to their participation in the program so we've decided to use technology to increase the program's availability. Using the same instructional technology we use for our CD-ROM based dispatcher training a self-paced, interactive version of the classroom curriculum will be made available on our website. After finishing the on-line course, participants will be required to complete a four hour sit-along to successfully complete the on-line *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1*. Just like the classroom version, the on-line citizens' academy will be offered in English and Spanish.

The *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* provides an opportunity for our community to participate in their 9-1-1 system. The Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center, by developing an independent citizens' academy devoted to the 9-1-1 process, realized the benefit of an informed and educated community that is more cooperative and less suspicious of the 9-1-1 process. An added benefit of the program is its ability to motivate and inform individuals who are considering a career in public safety dispatching. By dedicating existing resources and gaining organizational support for the individuals who make the citizens' academy happen, the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center has created an exemplary *Citizens' Academy for 9-1-1* program.

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