Crisis Communications

Public safety telecommunicators are the first, most critical link between the public and emergency responders. Every question you ask, every decision you make, and every instruction you give can influence the safety of callers, the effectiveness of responders, and your agency's legal exposure.

This course provides telecommunicators with a structured approach to handling a wide variety of high-stakes calls, including crime in progress, domestic violence, suicidal callers, workplace violence, threats, hazards, and disasters. Learners will explore the role and responsibilities of the telecommunicator, the Journalistic Investigative Approach (JIA), victim-focused call handling, liability and standard of care, active listening skills, and specialized strategies for crisis intervention.

Through videos, audio call examples, reflection activities, and interactive brainteasers/knowledge checks, telecommunicators will build confidence, improve decision-making, and strengthen their ability to provide exceptional service while protecting caller safety, responder safety, and agency reputation.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, learners will be able to:

1. Describe the role and core responsibilities of a public safety telecommunicator as the "first person on the scene" of every emergency.
2. Apply the Journalistic Investigative Approach (5Ws + H + W + H + I) to systematically gather critical information on any call type.
3. Demonstrate a victim-focused mindset that prioritizes caller safety while still supporting suspect identification and apprehension.
4. Identify common threats, hazards, and disasters, and explain how to manage anonymous callers, bomb threats, and red-flag information.
5. Explain key liability concepts, including negligence and standard of care, and identify strategies to reduce individual and agency liability.
6. Use crisis intervention and active listening skills to establish rapport with suicidal callers and individuals in a heightened emotional state.

7. Describe the nature and types of workplace violence, including active shooter incidents, and identify vital intelligence to support responders.
8. Explain the dynamics of domestic violence, including the cycle of violence and high-risk factors, and apply appropriate questioning and pre-arrival instructions to protect victims and responders.

Modules

Module 1: Public Safety Telecommunicator

This module introduces the telecommunicator as the first person “on the scene” of every emergency. Learners explore the core responsibilities of public safety telecommunicators, critical traits of effective call takers, and the concept of victim focus. The module emphasizes the impact of telecommunicator decisions on response speed, response quality, and liability, and highlights the importance of maintaining caller and responder safety.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Explain the telecommunicator’s role as the first person on the scene and how their actions affect response speed, response quality, and liability exposure.
2. Identify key personality traits of effective telecommunicators, including patience, compassion, empathy, calmness, and strong listening skills.
3. Describe the concept of victim focus and explain how it influences questioning, scene assessment, and responder safety.
4. Assess caller and scene safety, and identify when and how to help callers move to a safer environment without increasing their risk.
5. Recognize how failing to maintain victim focus and caller safety can contribute to legal liability for the telecommunicator and agency.

Content/Activities

- Video: Victim Focus
- Audio Example: Caller Safety
- Scenario Reflection: Victim mistaken for suspect due to lack of victim-focused questioning.
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Traits of an effective telecommunicator
    - Brainteaser 2: Responding when the caller's environment is not safe
    - Brainteaser 3: Consequences of telecommunicator questions, decisions, and actions
    - Brainteaser 4: Principles of caller safety and victim focus

Module 2: Journalistic Investigative Approach & Customer Service

This module introduces PowerPhone's Journalistic Investigative Approach (JIA) as a structured formula for gathering information on every call: 5Ws plus H plus W plus H plus I. Learners explore how to prioritize "where" and "what," think in multiples, and integrate the JIA into the dispatch process. The module also emphasizes customer service, first impressions, the "three Cs" (Courtesy, Confidence, Concern), and pre-arrival instructions to preserve life, safety, and evidence.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Describe the Journalistic Investigative Approach (5Ws + H + W + H + I) and explain why "where" and "what" are prioritized.
2. Apply the JIA to collect primary and secondary information and support the four stages of the dispatch process.
3. Explain the purpose and value of pre-arrival instructions in preserving life, improving safety, and preserving physical evidence.

4. Describe how first impressions, courtesy, confidence, and concern shape caller experience and outcomes.
5. Identify and explain the five customer service goals: reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Content/Activities

- Concept Application: Reordering the 5Ws for public safety call handling.
- Reflection Activity: Thinking “multiples” (multiple victims, hazards, incidents).
- Video: Customer Service
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Definition and purpose of the Journalistic Investigative Approach
    - Brainteaser 2: Definition of pre-arrival instructions
    - Brainteaser 3: What constitutes excellent customer service
    - Brainteaser 4: First step in the dispatch process
    - Brainteaser 5: Pre-arrival instructions and preservation of evidence
    - Brainteaser 6: Impact of proper call handling on incident outcomes

Module 3: Threats, Hazards & Disasters

This module focuses on handling threats, hazards, and disasters, with special emphasis on anonymous callers and bomb threats. Learners examine why some callers want to remain anonymous, how to extract critical information during bomb threats, and how to distinguish among threats, hazards, and disasters. The module also introduces the concept of “red flags” and the importance of recognizing inconsistent or coded information to protect callers and responders.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. 1Explain why anonymous callers may contact 9-1-1 and describe appropriate, non-judgmental responses to these callers.
2. Identify essential information to gather during a bomb threat, including location, target, time, and caller characteristics.
3. Differentiate between threats, hazards, and disasters, and describe how each affects response planning.
4. Describe the concept of “red flags” in caller information and explain how to respond when details seem inconsistent or incomplete.
5. Apply the Journalistic Investigative Approach to threat-related calls, including bomb threats and suspicious circumstances.

Content/Activities

- Audio Example: Bomb Threat
- Scenario Reflection: Evaluating credibility of threats and agency as possible target.
- Red Flag Awareness Exercise: Identifying inconsistencies and coded language.
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Key details to listen for during bomb threats
    - Brainteaser 2: Importance of identifying “red flags” in calls
    - Brainteaser 3: Taking anonymous callers seriously

Module 4: Liability

This module explores legal liability in emergency communications. Learners define liability and negligence, examine the components of negligence (duty, breach, injury/damage, causation), and discuss the increasing complexity of the telecommunicator's role. The module highlights vicarious liability, limitations of Good Samaritan protections, the importance of standard of care, and practical strategies to reduce both individual and agency liability.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define liability and negligence in the context of the public safety telecommunicator's role.
2. Describe the elements required to establish negligence: duty, breach of duty, injury/damage, and proximate cause.
3. Explain the concepts of standard of care and vicarious liability and how they relate to telecommunicator performance.
4. Identify common sources of liability from inappropriate responses, including wrong responder, wrong priority, or no response.
5. Describe strategies to reduce individual and agency liability, including training, adherence to protocols, documentation, and thinking in "multiples."

Content/Activities

- Video: Dispatcher Fails to Send a Cruiser (liability reflection scenario).
- Guided Reflection: Was the telecommunicator negligent? How could liability have been reduced?
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Essential information to obtain on every call
    - Brainteaser 2: Definition of liability
    - Brainteaser 3: Methods to reduce agency liability exposure

Module 5: Suicide Intervention

This module provides a focused exploration of suicide intervention for telecommunicators. Learners examine common assumptions about suicide, key statistics, and the concept of "death by suicide" as related to mental illness and crisis states. The module introduces the REACT Model and practical techniques for building rapport and trust with suicidal callers, asking direct questions about suicide, and buying time for responders while protecting the caller

> **Important safety framing:** This module is about helping callers in crisis and emphasizes that suicide is preventable and that telecommunicators play a critical supportive role. It does not train learners to provide therapy, but to stabilize, support, and connect callers to help.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Correct common misconceptions and assumptions about suicide and describe key prevalence statistics in the United States.
2. Describe the characteristics of a crisis state and the purpose of crisis intervention in suicide-related calls.
3. Explain the REACT Model (Recognize, Engage, Assess, Contract, Transfer) and apply it to suicidal caller interactions.
4. Use appropriate language to ask directly about suicidal thoughts and plans without reinforcing stigma.
5. Identify strategies for building rapport with suicidal callers, including exploring commonalities, using the 3Cs, and focusing on the precipitating event.

Content/Activities

- Interactive Assumptions Checks: Multiple true/false-style interactions challenging suicide myths.
- Statistical Overview: Death by suicide in the U.S. and at-risk populations.
- Video: Callers in Crisis State

- Scenario Reflection: Understanding caller mindset in crisis.
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Purpose of crisis intervention
    - Brainteaser 2: Using areas of commonality to build rapport
    - Brainteaser 3: Effective communication techniques with suicidal callers

Module 6: Active Listening Skills

This module introduces seven key active listening skills essential for handling callers in crisis: emotion labeling, paraphrasing, reflecting/mirroring, effective pauses, minimal encouragers, “I” messages, and open-ended questions. Learners explore how these tools build rapport, validate emotions, and create space for de-escalation. The module includes a call analysis exercise to examine effective and ineffective responses.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Identify and describe the seven major components of active listening used in crisis communications.
2. Demonstrate emotion labeling and paraphrasing to show understanding of caller emotions and content.
3. Use reflecting/mirroring, effective pauses, and minimal encouragers to promote caller dialogue and rapport.
4. Formulate appropriate “I” messages that express concern without sounding demanding or threatening.
5. Develop open-ended questions that elicit more detailed and actionable information from callers.

Content/Activities

- Concept Demonstrations: Examples of emotion labeling, paraphrasing, mirroring, and open-ended questions.
- Activity: Suicide Caller – listening and analyzing a call from a distraught caller.
- Video/Audio: Robot Dispatcher (call example).
- Call Analysis Reflection:
    - What did the telecommunicator do correctly?
    - What did they do poorly (e.g., robotic tone, placing caller on hold)?
    - What did the caller need?
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Identifying active listening skills
    - Brainteaser 2: Purpose of reflecting/mirroring
    - Brainteaser 3: Understanding paraphrasing

Module 7: Workplace Violence & Active Shooter Incidents

This module addresses workplace violence and active shooter incidents, focusing on the telecommunicator's responsibilities when chaos and danger are unfolding in real time. Learners examine types of workplace violence, warning signs, and examples of problematic behavior. The module emphasizes collecting vital intelligence (suspects, weapons, locations), asking about "location within a location," and providing pre-arrival instructions to support caller safety and responder tactics

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define workplace violence and identify common forms, including physical assaults, threats, harassment, stalking, and suicides in the workplace.
2. Recognize behavioral warning signs and problematic behaviors that may precede workplace violence.

3. Collect critical intelligence during active shooter and workplace violence calls, including suspect details, weapons, and exact location.
4. Apply the concepts of "location within a location" and the Journalistic Investigative Approach to improve responder safety and effectiveness.
5. Describe pre-arrival instructions for callers in active shooter incidents and explain the purpose of Immediate Action Rapid Deployment (IARD).

Content/Activities

- Video: VA Beach Mass Shooting
- Reflection Activity: Preparedness for handling mass shooting calls.
- Audio Example: Workplace Violence – multiple callers providing varying perspectives.
- Audio Example: Location Within Location – caller hiding while shooter is active.
- Video: Surviving an Active Shooter Incident (Run, Hide, Fight)
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Key questions to ask callers in active shooter incidents
    - Brainteaser 2: Types of workplace violence (e.g., by customers/clients)
    - Brainteaser 3: Examples of workplace violence and problematic behavior

Module 8: Domestic Violence

This module focuses on domestic violence dynamics and telecommunicator responsibilities when handling domestic-related calls. Learners explore the definition and forms of domestic violence, national statistics, the cycle of violence, and the broad range of relationships covered by domestic violence statutes. Emphasis is placed on questioning strategies, pre-arrival instructions, recognizing high-risk indicators, and understanding mandatory arrest conditions.

> Important safety framing: This module is about helping callers in crisis and emphasizes that suicide is preventable and that telecommunicators play a critical supportive role. It does not train learners to provide therapy, but to stabilize, support, and connect callers to help.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define domestic violence and identify its various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, and property/pet destruction.
2. Describe key domestic violence statistics and risk factors, including increased danger when victims attempt to leave.
3. Explain the cycle of violence (tension building, acute battering, honeymoon phase) and how it affects victim behavior and reporting.
4. Apply appropriate questioning to domestic violence calls using the Journalistic Investigative Approach and key domestic-violence-specific questions.
5. Identify when officers are required to make an arrest in domestic violence incidents and recognize that male and female victims are entitled to equal protection.

Content/Activities

- Reflection Activity: Interpreting the definition of domestic violence and identifying impactful words (learned, force, control).
- Statistical Overview: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence statistics and implications.
- Scenario Practice: Key questions for domestic violence calls and pre-arrival safety/medical instructions.
- Interactive Brainteasers / Knowledge Checks:
    - Brainteaser 1: Definition of domestic violence
    - Brainteaser 2/3: Who can be victims and forms of domestic violence (including what is not DV)
    - Brainteaser 4: Cycle of violence and phases
    - Brainteaser 5: Domestic violence risk concepts (true/false)
    - Brainteaser 6: Equal legal protection for male victims

Course Completion Criteria

To successfully complete this course and earn continuing education hours, learners must achieve a minimum score of 75%. The quiz must be completed within one hour.

- CE hours awarded: 3
- Certificate duration: 12 Months

Technical Requirements

- Desktop, laptop, or mobile device
- Speakers or headphones
- High-speed Internet access
- A current web browser