
Dispatchers

(O*NET 43-5031.00, 43-5032.00)

Significant Points

- Alternative work schedules are necessary to accommodate evening, weekend, and holiday work and 24-hour-per-day, 7-day-per-week operations.
- Dispatchers generally are entry-level workers who are trained on the job and need no more than a high school diploma.
- Many States require specific types of training or certification.

Nature of the Work

Dispatchers schedule and dispatch workers, equipment, or service vehicles to carry materials or passengers. Some dispatchers take calls for taxi companies, for example, or for police or ambulance assistance. They keep records, logs, and schedules of the calls that they receive and of the transportation vehicles that they monitor and control. In fact, they usually prepare a detailed report on all activities occurring during their shifts. Many dispatchers employ computer-aided dispatch systems to accomplish these tasks.

All dispatchers are assigned a specific territory and have responsibility for all communications within that area. Many work in teams, especially dispatchers in large communications centers or companies. The work of dispatchers varies greatly, depending on the industry in which they work.

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers, also called public safety dispatchers or 911 operators, monitor the location of emergency services personnel from one or all of the jurisdiction's emergency services departments. These workers dispatch the appropriate type and number of units in response to calls for assistance. Dispatchers, or call takers, often are the first people the public contacts when emergency assistance is required. If certified for emergency medical services, the dispatcher may provide medical instruction to those on the scene of the emergency until the medical staff arrives.

Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers work in a variety of settings—a police station, a fire station, a hospital, or, increasingly, a centralized communications center. In some areas, one of the major departments serves as the communications center. In these situations, all emergency calls go to that department, where a dispatcher handles their calls and screens the others before transferring them to the appropriate service.

When handling calls, dispatchers question each caller carefully to determine the type, seriousness, and location of the emergency. The information obtained is posted either electronically by computer or, with decreasing frequency, by hand. The dispatcher then quickly decides the priority of the incident, the kind and number of units needed, and the location of the closest and most suitable units available. When appropriate, dispatchers stay in close contact with other service providers—for example, a police dispatcher would monitor the response of the fire department when there is a major fire. In a medical emergency, dispatchers keep in close touch not only with the dispatched units, but also with the caller. They may give ex-

tensive first-aid instructions before the emergency personnel arrive, while the caller is waiting for the ambulance. Dispatchers continuously give updates on the patient's condition to the ambulance personnel and often serve as a link between the medical staff in a hospital and the emergency medical technicians in the ambulance. (A separate statement on emergency medical technicians and paramedics appears elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Other dispatchers coordinate deliveries, service calls, and related activities for a variety of firms. *Truck dispatchers*, who work for local and long-distance trucking companies, coordinate the movement of trucks and freight between cities. These dispatchers direct the pickup and delivery activities of drivers, receive customers' requests for the pickup and delivery of freight, consolidate freight orders into truckloads for specific destinations, assign drivers and trucks, and draw up routes and pickup and delivery schedules. *Bus dispatchers* make sure that local and long-distance buses stay on schedule. They handle all problems that may disrupt service, and they dispatch other buses or arrange for repairs in order to restore service and schedules. *Train dispatchers* ensure the timely and efficient movement of trains according to orders and schedules. They must be aware of track switch positions, track maintenance areas, and the location of other trains running on the track. *Taxicab dispatchers*, or starters, dispatch taxis in response to requests for service and keep logs on all road service calls. *Tow-truck dispatchers* take calls for emergency road service. They relay the nature of the problem to a nearby service station or a tow-truck service and see to it that the road service is completed. *Gas and water service dispatchers* monitor gaslines and water mains and send out service trucks and crews to take care of emergencies.



Many dispatchers use computer-aided systems.

Work environment. The work of dispatchers can be very hectic when many calls come in at the same time. The job of public safety dispatchers is particularly stressful because a slow or an improper response to a call can result in serious injury or further harm. Also, callers who are anxious or afraid may become excited and be unable to provide needed information; some may even become abusive. Despite provocations, dispatchers must remain calm, objective, and in control of the situation.

Dispatchers sit for long periods, using telephones, computers, and two-way radios. Much of their time is spent at video display terminals, viewing monitors and observing traffic patterns. As a result of working for long stretches with computers and other electronic equipment, dispatchers can experience significant eyestrain and back discomfort. Generally, dispatchers work a 40-hour week; however, rotating shifts and compressed work schedules are common. Alternative work schedules are necessary to accommodate evening, weekend, and holiday work and 24-hour-per-day, 7-day-per-week operations.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Dispatchers generally are entry-level workers who are trained on the job and need no more than a high school diploma. Many States require specific types of training or certification.

Education and training. Workers usually develop the necessary skills on the job. This informal training lasts from several days to a few months, depending on the complexity of the job. While working with an experienced dispatcher, new employees monitor calls and learn how to operate a variety of communications equipment, including telephones, radios, and various wireless devices. As trainees gain confidence, they begin to handle calls themselves. In smaller operations, dispatchers sometimes act as customer service representatives, processing orders. Many public safety dispatchers also participate in structured training programs sponsored by their employer. Increasingly, public safety dispatchers receive training in stress and crisis management as well as in family counseling. This training helps them to provide effective services to others; and, at the same time, it helps them manage the stress involved in their work.

Licensure. Many States require specific types of training or certification from a professional association. Certification often requires several months in a classroom for instruction in computer-assisted dispatching and other emerging technologies as well as radio dispatching and stress management.

Other qualifications. State or local government civil service regulations usually govern police, fire, and emergency medical dispatching jobs. Candidates for these positions may have to pass written, oral, and performance tests. Also, they may be

asked to attend training classes in order to qualify for advancement.

Communication skills and the ability to work under pressure are important personal qualities for dispatchers. Residency in the city or county of employment frequently is required for public safety dispatchers. Dispatchers in transportation industries must be able to deal with sudden influxes of shipments and disruptions of shipping schedules caused by bad weather, road construction, or accidents.

Certification and advancement. Although there are no mandatory licensing requirements, some States require that public safety dispatchers possess a certificate to work on a State network, such as the Police Information Network. Many dispatchers participate in these programs in order to improve their prospects for career advancement.

Dispatchers who work for private firms, which usually are small, will find few opportunities for advancement. In contrast, public safety dispatchers may become a shift or divisional supervisor or chief of communications, or they may move to higher paying administrative jobs. Some become police officers or fire fighters.

Employment

Dispatchers held 289,000 jobs in May of 2006. About 34 percent were police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers, almost all of whom worked for State and local governments—primarily local police and fire departments. About 28 percent of all dispatchers worked in the transportation and warehousing industry, and the rest worked in a wide variety of mainly service-providing industries.

Although dispatching jobs are found throughout the country, most dispatchers work in urban areas, where large communications centers and businesses are located.

Job Outlook

Employment of dispatchers is expected to grow more slowly than average. In addition to those positions resulting from job growth, many openings will arise from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

Employment change. Employment of dispatchers is expected to increase 6 percent over the 2006-16 decade, more slowly than the average for all occupations. Population growth and economic expansion are expected to spur employment growth for all types of dispatchers. The growing and aging population will increase demand for emergency services and stimulate employment growth of police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers.

Job prospects. In addition to openings due to growth, job openings will result from the need to replace workers who

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Dispatchers.....	43-5030	289,000	306,000	16,000	6
Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers	43-5031	99,000	113,000	13,000	14
Dispatchers, except police, fire, and ambulance	43-5032	190,000	193,000	2,900	2

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Many districts are consolidating their communications centers into a shared area-wide facility. As the equipment becomes more complex, individuals with computer skills and experience will have a greater opportunity for employment as public safety dispatchers.

Employment of some dispatchers is more adversely affected by economic downturns than employment of other dispatchers. For example, when economic activity falls, demand for transportation services declines. As a result, taxicab, train, and truck dispatchers may experience layoffs or a shortened workweek, and jobseekers may have some difficulty finding entry-level jobs. Employment of tow-truck dispatchers, by contrast, is seldom affected by general economic conditions, because of the emergency nature of their business. Likewise, public safety dispatchers are unlikely to be affected by economic downturns.

Earnings

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of dispatchers, except police, fire, and ambulance in May 2006 were \$32,190. The middle 50 percent earned between \$24,860 and \$42,030. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$19,780, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$53,250.

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers in 2006 were \$31,470. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,200 and \$39,040. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,010, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$47,190.

Related Occupations

Other occupations that involve directing and controlling the movement of vehicles, freight, and personnel, as well as distributing information and messages, include air traffic controllers, communications equipment operators, customer service representatives, and reservation and transportation ticket agents and travel clerks.

Sources of Additional Information

For further information on training and certification for police, fire, and emergency dispatchers, contact:

► Association of Public Safety Communications Officials, International, 351 N. Williamson Blvd., Daytona Beach, FL 32114. Internet: <http://www.apco911.org>

► International Municipal Signal Association, P.O. Box 359, 165 E. Union St., Newark, NY 14513.

Internet: <http://www.IMSAsafety.org>

Information on job opportunities for police, fire, and emergency dispatchers is available from personnel offices of State and local governments or police departments. Information about work opportunities for other types of dispatchers is available from local employers and State employment service offices.