

City of Alexandria, Virginia
FY 2024 Proposed Operating Budget & CIP
Budget Questions & Answers

April 21, 2023

Question: Can you provide a recent staffing history for the Department of Emergency Communications, including details on authorized, filled, vacant and over-hire positions for the past 5 years, as available? How does this staffing compare to regional standards? What would be the fiscal impact of additional staffing investments designed to further reduce 911 call answering and dispatch?

Response:

The Department of Emergency & Customer Communication (DECC) has an authorized position strength of 62.5 positions with no over-hire positions. The Department consists of 3 divisions with the associated authorized positions: 911 Operations-34 positions, 311 Operation-14.5 positions, and DECC Administration-14 positions. Of the current 11.0 vacant positions, 6 positions are assigned to the 911 Operations, 2 positions are assigned to the 311 Operations, and 3 positions are administrative positions. DECC's current vacancy rate is 17.6%. DECC continues to struggle with staff shortages within 911 Operations, as tenured employees are retiring, and newer and seasoned employees are leaving for several reasons. Some of those reasons include more favorable pay or the private sector, better hours that do not include weekends and holidays, childcare issues, and some leave for less stressful jobs. Although there is not a lack of applicants for vacant positions, public safety agencies like DECC have strict pre-employment processes that usually reduce the number of qualified applicants that can continue in the process. The recruitment and pre-employment process include dispatcher/call-taker testing, panel interview, background investigation, psychological screening, polygraph, fingerprinting, drug screening, and hearing/vision screening which can take upwards of four months from the time an application is submitted to the hire date.

The current vacancy rate is not reflective of the operating status of the communication center. New hires undergo DECC academy training, attend the Virginia Basic Dispatch Academy, and receive on-the-job training, which can take 6 to 8 months. During that time frame these positions are considered inactive. As a result, DECC runs short-staffed for approximately 10 to 12 months, until a new hire/trainee can be adequately trained to work independently. When factoring in trainees as inactive positions, DECC's vacancy rate increases to 29%, which is significant and comparable to national trends. When comparing DECC's staffing levels with regional jurisdictions, staff received information back from Arlington County, Fairfax County, and Prince William County. Arlington's vacancy rate is currently at 9.4%, Fairfax's vacancy rate is at 13.3% and Prince William's vacancy rate is at 5.8% compared to Alexandria's at 17.6%. In addition, all of these jurisdictions have over-hire authority.

DECC is in conversations with the City Manager's Office about the impact of over-hire positions on the Department and its ability to limit routine turnover, and be prepared for sudden influx of calls. Any over-hire positions (if approved) would be Public Safety Communication Officers I at the cost of \$83,600 per position. Once fully staffed, DECC could continue to work with the Manager's Office and Office of Management and Budget to realize operational efficiencies.