

**E-COMM 9-1-1:  
FIXING A BROKEN  
SERVICE**  
A GUIDE FOR  
B.C. MUNICIPALITIES

BY THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS  
PROFESSIONALS OF BC (CUPE LOCAL 8911)



Emergency  
Communications  
Professionals of BC

**CUPE**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

E-Comm is the first point of contact for 99% of callers who dial 9-1-1 in B.C. and is the provider of call-taking and dispatch services for 33 police agencies and 40 fire departments across the province. E-Comm provides an essential public service to millions of British Columbians, but ongoing challenges have put this vital service at risk of catastrophic failure.

The CUPE 8911 members who provide this service are committed to their work, but the continuing challenges of understaffing in a high-stress environment have led to severe burnout, poor working conditions, and high staff turnover. Ongoing challenges with recruitment and training of new staff, coupled with serious retention problems, have put this vital service at risk of catastrophic failure.

The main problem is a reactive funding formula, based on cost recovery, that prevents E-Comm from getting ahead of existing problems or meaningfully improving the services it provides. A recent report commissioned by E-Comm from the firm Price Waterhouse Cooper concluded that the company cannot be successful with an understaffed system that relies so heavily on overtime and staff missing breaks or that simply abandons efforts to meet its service levels. The situation is bad enough in normal times, but during a crisis—including extreme weather events such as this summer’s heatwave—E-Comm is simply unable to handle call volumes. The company needs increased revenue right now in order to address existing problems before they snowball: if real solutions are not reached soon, the problems will become untenable.

## Recommendations

We are calling for both an immediate infusion of financial resources into E-Comm and a concerted effort by municipalities to right size operations as soon as possible. Ultimately it is up to municipal government, police, and fire for whom our members dispatch to ensure that E-Comm has the staffing levels and support it needs to provide this critical public service. We seek the support of your council for the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation #1:** That E-Comm receive an immediate financial infusion from all its municipal partners to right size operations, consistent with staffing recommendations laid out in the Price Waterhouse Cooper report commissioned by E-Comm. To address the acute risk to public safety, an immediate increase of \$5 million in 2022 is recommended for the recruitment and retention of call-takers and dispatchers, and the hiring of additional front-line supervisors at a 12:1 ratio to support new staff. To meet the recommended staffing levels outlined in the PWC report, additional annual funding



increases of \$3.75 million are needed in the subsequent four years for a total investment of \$20 million over five years.; and

- **Recommendation #2:** That the funding formula for E-Comm be reimagined so that it better reflects inflationary realities of operations and creates room to pre-empt a crisis.

With public safety at stake, there is an urgent need for stabilized funding to hire additional staff and mitigate the extreme stress of dispatchers and call takers.

## WHAT IS E-COMM?

- Established in 1999, E-Comm is a non-profit corporation governed under the Emergency Communications Corporations Act. It is owned and governed by various municipal, regional, and provincial emergency services.
- E-Comm owns and maintains the emergency radio system that is used by police, fire, and ambulance services within Metro Vancouver and parts of the Fraser Valley.
- Many of the employees of E-Comm are represented by CUPE Local 8911, with approximately 422 full-time and 94 part-time members based on a 12-month average.



## WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC EXPECT?

- When you call 9-1-1, you expect that your call will be answered immediately, that critical information will be gathered accurately, and that you will quickly receive the help that you need.
- When you call the non-emergency line, you expect a knowledgeable and timely response from a call-taker who can support you or direct your call as needed.
- In either case, you expect that the call-takers and dispatchers providing these services can recover between traumatic calls, that they have the necessary psychological supports to overcome trauma, and that they are able to attend to basic bodily functions.

## THE PROBLEMS

A report commissioned by E-Comm from the firm Price Waterhouse Cooper outlines the staffing shortage and calls for rightsizing the organization. The report calls for the immediate addition of 125 full-time equivalent staff. Even maximizing the efficiencies outlined in the report as alternate options to adding staff, the authors concede that no less than 45 additional FTEs are needed in a best-case scenario.

- Throughout this year, 9-1-1 Operators have seen service levels deteriorate:

- In January, we were hearing of wait times (before a call is answered) for police emergency lines of more than 7 minutes, and non-emergency wait times of 63 minutes.

## E-COMM'S 9-1-1 AND POLICE CALL-TAKING & DISPATCH SERVICES



### 9-1-1

- Should be answered in 5 seconds or less
- 1.8 million calls annually
- 99% of 9-1-1 calls in British Columbia



### POLICE EMERGENCY LINE

- Should be answered in 10 seconds or less
- 650,000 police emergency calls annually
- 50% of all of B.C.'s police calls to 9-1-1



### POLICE NON-EMERGENCY LINE

- Should be answered in 180 seconds or less
- 700,000 police non-emergency calls annually

- In March, we were hearing of police emergency wait times of more than 10 minutes and non-emergency wait times of over 72 minutes.

- During the heatwave in June, we received the worst reports yet of more than 47-minute wait times for the police emergency line and non-emergency wait times of more than 3 hours.

- In August, wait times continued with police emergency wait times reaching more than 21 minutes and non-emergency wait times exceeding five hours.

## STAFFING

- Understaffing continues to be a problem for E-Comm, with both recruitment and retention needing improvement.
- In a recent survey of CUPE Local 8911 members (primarily call takers and dispatchers), 54% reported having actively looked for other employment outside of E-Comm in the last year, and an additional 9% planned to begin looking.
- There are significant costs associated with training new staff to work in E-Comm, and many who go through training do not transition into staff roles.
- Retention is often a more cost-effective way to address staffing problems than recruitment and such is the case for E-Comm, especially in consideration of the extensive training required to qualify new staff.

## FUNDING

**One of the root causes is a deeply flawed funding formula that lacks responsiveness to technological and human resources changes, and that cannot adequately predict crisis situations. Under the current funding structure, 9-1-1 and emergency wait times are increasing and non-emergency service is deprioritized, resulting in significant wait times.**

- E-Comm operates using a cost-recovery model based on a cost-sharing fee levy structure: it collects revenue from the regional districts and municipalities that use E-Comm for 9-1-1 services, police services, and fire services.
- This deeply flawed funding formula has resulted in a substantial and ongoing staff shortage that requires current staff to work excessive amounts of overtime, to work without rest breaks, leaving them unable to leave their station to go to the bathroom in a timely manner. Staff report feeling overwhelmed by the cumulative effects of the occupational stress they are exposed to daily.

## GOVERNANCE

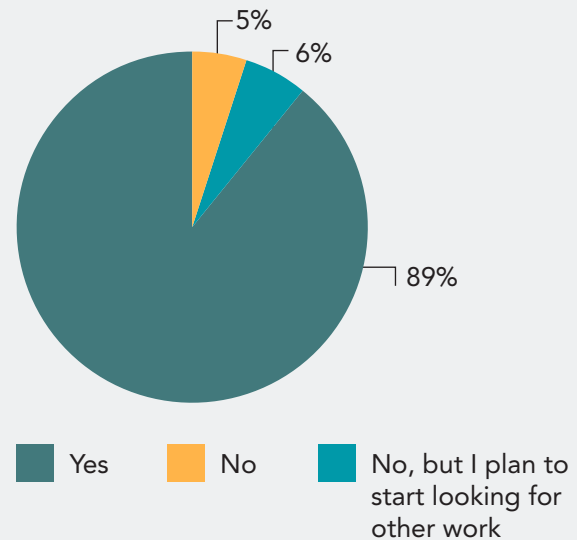
E-Comm is governed by a 22-person board of directors, with representatives from shareholder groups.

- The board is responsible for overseeing the Corporation's strategic direction, finances, and operating results.
- The board also includes representatives from the RCMP, independent police boards, the BC government and independent directors appointed by government.

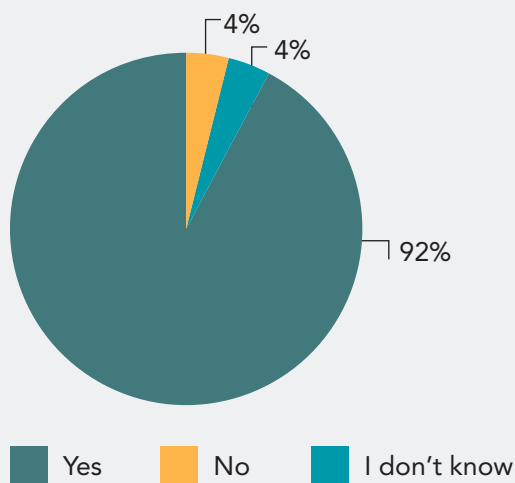
# SURVEY OF CUPE 8911 MEMBERS – KEY RESULTS

CUPE recently conducted a survey of E-Comm staff represented by Local 8911. The results illustrate the impact of the staffing crisis at E-Comm, and raise the possibility of increased staff turnover.

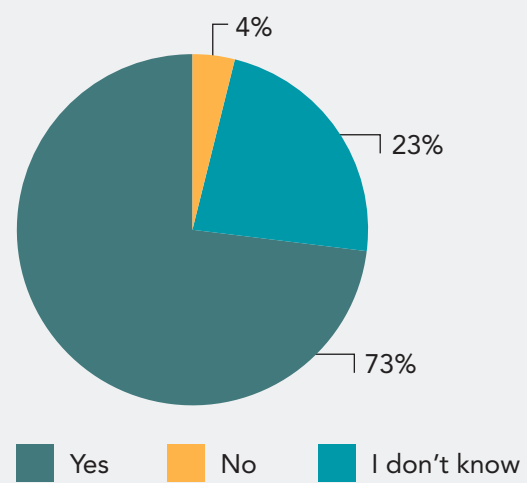
Does workload impact the level of service you are able to provide?



In the past month, have you been negatively impacted by understaffing?



In your opinion, has the quality of service worsened over the last three years?





## NON-EMERGENCY CALLS

- E-Comm refers to calls that do not go to 9-1-1 as non-emergency, although there is some confusion among the public about what does and does not constitute an emergency.
- Fees are incurred by E-Comm for failing to meet benchmarks for answering emergency calls within the set parameters. This financial structure is a further inducement to prioritize emergency calls over those that come in through the non-emergency lines.
- This de-prioritization of non-emergency calls has led to a significant increase in wait times, causing a higher number of callers to hang up while on hold. The nature of these calls varies greatly, from actual emergencies to information inquiries and messages left for police.
- In response, E-Comm is considering adjusting expectations or looking at alternatives moving forward, but that should not mean downsizing the service and the public's expectations. **The current situation makes clear that call volumes are unmanageable; adjusting expectations is shorthand for limiting service.**

## NEXT GENERATION 9-1-1

- Next Generation 9-1-1 is the modernization from analog to digital or IP-based 9-1-1 services that will revolutionize 9-1-1 service as we know it, enabling 9-1-1 operators to respond to video, photo, and text calls for service through 9-1-1.

- One of the first phases is moving 9-1-1 voice calls to digital or IP-based infrastructure, currently mandated by the CRTC to be completed by March 1, 2022. E-Comm is preparing for this transition and has communicated the need for an additional significant funding commitment from each 9-1-1 service partner into 2022 and beyond.

## SOLUTIONS TO E-COMM'S PROBLEMS

### Recommendation 1:

E-Comm needs an immediate financial infusion from municipal partners to right size operations, consistent with staffing recommendations laid out in the Price Waterhouse Cooper report.

A serious staffing crisis at E-Comm is at risk of getting worse, and this will only increase risk to the public. The PWC report lays out a series of recommendations, including a call for significant staffing increases. Based on contents of the report, an investment of \$20 million in new funding is needed over the coming five years. It is recommended that this investment begin in 2022 with an additional \$5 million in funding, followed by four consecutive years of \$3.75 million funding lifts to right size the organization by 2027.

While the cost of not acting could have harmful impacts on public health and safety, the cost of meeting the service needs of the public is, as compared to many other municipal finance priorities, relatively minor. In West Vancouver, where E-Comm has advised the West Vancouver Police Board of additional funding requirements for 2022, the increase equates to between \$1.81 and \$2.15 per person. The total increase, between \$76,800 and \$91,200, is negligible in comparison to the impacts on community health and safety. .

In 2020 alone, E-Comm spent \$2,950,000 on overtime, the equivalent of 35 FTEs. This indicates an organization in distress and also points to a source of significant savings. Fixing the funding crisis will better spend public funds by prioritizing recruitment and training of new staff right now and improved working conditions and supports for existing staff. With additional resources, E-Comm can make its current operations sustainable, meet the needs of the public served and represented by its shareholding municipalities, and potentially generate savings to offset future funding needs.



## Recommendation 2:

The funding formula for E-Comm must be reimagined so that it better reflects inflationary realities of operations and creates room to pre-empt a crisis.

The funding model of E-Comm does not allow it to be effectively responsive to problems, nor does it create space for disaster preparedness, call surges, or innovation. In an environment that is highly technological, the inability to be responsive creates significant challenges. In this environment, funding challenges can have life or death implications because underfunding and staffing problems directly impact the public in the form of responsiveness to emergency and non-emergency calls.