

Printable Dispatcher Terminology Reference Sheet

Use these plain-English definitions to follow career information and preparation materials. Local policies, systems and meanings take priority in operational work. This reference is not a radio-code standard, medical protocol or substitute for agency training.

Read the accessible web version: <https://californiadispatcherpractice.com/resources/downloads/dispatcher-terminology-reference>

How to use this resource

1. Read the full terminology library for examples and official source links.
2. Write down unfamiliar local terms when reviewing an agency's public recruitment material.
3. Do not assume a ten-code, status label or phonetic alphabet has the same meaning everywhere.

Call taking and systems

Term	Plain-English meaning
PSAP / ECC	Public safety answering point / emergency communications center; local titles and roles differ.
Call taker	Person who receives a request, confirms information and records or routes it under local procedures.
Callback number	Number used to attempt to reach the caller again; confirm it as directed by agency procedure.
Incident location	Where the event is happening; it may differ from the caller's current location.
ANI / ALI	Automatic number identification / automatic location identification; displayed information still needs appropriate verification.
CAD	Computer-aided dispatch: software supporting incident records, unit information and dispatch workflow.
GIS	Geographic information system: mapped information used to organize and understand locations.
NG911	Next Generation 911: modern network and technology approaches supporting emergency communications.

Radio and unit status

Term	Plain-English meaning
Call sign / unit identifier	Label used to identify a radio user or resource.
Readback	Repeating key information to check it was understood correctly.
Plain language	Ordinary words used to communicate meaning; approved phrasing depends on context and agency.
Phonetic alphabet	Words used to clarify letters; the adopted alphabet can vary.
Available / busy	Locally defined indications of whether a unit can take an assignment.
En route / on scene	Generally traveling to / arrived at an incident; local status procedures govern.
BOLO	'Be on the lookout': a notice about a person, vehicle or other subject; details and distribution are agency-specific.
Mutual aid	Assistance between jurisdictions or organizations under applicable arrangements.

Fire, EMS and training

Term	Plain-English meaning
Apparatus	A fire-service vehicle or resource; type names and capabilities vary.
EMS	Emergency medical services; dispatch arrangements differ by area.
EMD	Emergency medical dispatch; required training, credentials and protocol systems vary.
Pre-arrival instructions	Agency-authorized instructions given before responders arrive; use requires appropriate training and protocols.
Priority / triage	Methods of ordering or evaluating incidents within an approved local system, not a universal numbered scale.
CTO	Communications training officer in many centers; job titles may differ.
Probation	An employer-defined initial period of evaluation and employment conditions.
QA	Quality assurance: review intended to maintain or improve performance under the organization's standards.

Local vocabulary to verify

For an unfamiliar term, record the agency, its official explanation and where you found it. Confirm the adopted phonetic alphabet and status labels before using them.

Related resources

[Full terminology library and sources](#)

[Roles in police, fire and EMS](#)

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