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Department of Emergency Communications

Talking Points Supporting Emergency Responder Pension Alignment for MNDEC 9-1-1 Public Safety Communications Professionals

9-1-1 is a No-Fail Mission

Simply put, if 9-1-1 breaks down, people die. We never forget our life-saving responsibility.

Who Are We and What Do We Do?

Since the 1950s, 9-1-1 dispatchers (public safety telecommunicators) are classified as office/secretarial workers. But ever since terrorism rocked New York City, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania in September 2001, with aftershocks felt around the nation, these “first” first responders have been recognized locally and nationally as vital pieces of the emergency response system equal to law enforcement, fire and others.

As 9-1-1 dispatchers, we must provide professional and immediate assistance, precisely and with perfection in a matter of seconds. We must always be 100%, processing 9-1-1 calls, non-emergency requests, and dispatching law enforcement, fire and medical responders in the field including special events and major incidents – 24 hours each day, every single day of the year

The experience shared below is real account – shared by 170 Metro Nashville public safety telecommunicators – and lived 120 times every day around the clock.

What’s a Normal Day?

We arrive to work around the clock (early morning, mid-afternoon, midnight, weekends, and major holidays) to be briefed on incidents carrying over from the previous shift and known incidents that are planned for our shift. We stay updated on changes and expectations on a continual basis while we work our assignment for the day, either answering emergency and non-emergency calls or dispatching and tracking those cries for help to responders in the field on the radio all the way to the scene.

When call taking, we quickly attempt to give CPR instructions to a distraught caller to try to save the life of a loved one while struggling to get an address for the field units and simultaneously calming the caller so we can try to help the patient. But other calls are waiting so when we disconnect, there is no time for a quick breath before we’re helping a shooting victim with instructions to stop the bleeding and avoid the suspects who are still on the scene. Around us, other call-takers are taking more calls about the same shooting, some of which provide different and conflicting information so we attempt to sort through the variances – striving to find the

common thread in seconds – to paint the clearest picture for the dispatcher sounding the alarm. When the line disconnects, another call is waiting – a man desperately needing our help delivering a baby on the side of the road. Then we talk to a lost child, and a person wanting to commit suicide while we try to talk them down, then a frantic caller reporting something that looks like a person drowning in the river, followed by multiple car crashes, a storm knocking down power lines, a house on fire, a store clerk robbed, a domestic partner stabbed, a child found dead, a bank robbed, a house broken into with the homeowner inside quietly hiding from the suspects, and officers in trouble. With every answered phone call (60 to 80 per person per shift), we know we will hear another tragedy requiring that we do our best to provide enough help until we can guide field responders to the scene – appropriately informed so they are best prepared to deliver the right help to the right person when they arrive. And there is always another call waiting.

When dispatching responders in the field, we're already in a state of overwhelming stress. We oversee 50 or more officers on any one radio and missing even one transmission could mean the difference between life and death for a citizen, officer, firefighter or medic. When we sit down, no one is allowed to talk on the radio while officers are in a standoff, then shots are fired, while many other calls are stacking up needing responders but we have no one to send. We copy each transmission to ensure we don't miss a word while sending back up, sending other resources, making notifications, and calling back other callers to coordinate the most appropriate help to the right place at the right time. We alert other dispatchers working surrounding radio channels about our needs; a pursuit crossing boundaries, a suicidal person attempting to jump, an officer fighting for his life, while even more calls come in needing help we don't have to send, and more officers try to all talk – often at the same time, blurting out jumbled and disjointed information, too busy to confirm you understood and not available to answer when you call again and again. Other dispatchers ask us for our help with their emergencies, house fires with injured patients that all need extra help now. Maybe we're dispatching fire and medical calls, which is a completely different skillset that requires we transition seamlessly without missing a beat. We ensure calls are coded precisely, to send the right trucks with the right equipment and the properly trained personnel to address the specific emergency, while providing information to the closest units, and keeping them updated as the incident changes and any relevant scene safety issues. We watch their response times to ensure they have not been out for too long, assessing if something may be wrong, and ensuring they answer on the radio all while sending additional resources, making notifications and monitoring for any new changes. We work as a team with the other dispatchers as we work our channel, always and consistently planning for the worst. We have a hand in every facet of public safety including planned events such as Titans games, presidential visits, and festivals, as well as unplanned disasters like tornadoes, terrorist acts, floods, storms, missing person searches, structural collapses and global pandemics. We remain specifically trained and prepared to respond around the country to assist other 9-1-1 dispatch centers impacted by disasters and unable to provide critical help under the headset.

When we look up hours later, we realize we haven't been able to use the restroom, eat once-hot, now luke-warm food or take two consecutive deep breaths. And this day was simply normal – not busy, not exceptional - but when we go home, we replay the tragedies in our minds, struggling to clear our heads to focus appropriately on our family and friends. Sometimes, sleep eludes us, our eating habits change, and we grow distant from others or obsessively overthink many aspects of life. Did we do each step right? Did we help someone? Did we get all the information correct? This happens 30 to 40 times per shift, 120 times each day.

And tomorrow, 120 people return to do it again.

National Recognition for 9-1-1 Dispatchers as Essential Emergency Responders

This diligent work of the nation's *first* first responders through the past 20 years, especially through the last nine months of a global pandemic accentuated in Metro Nashville by civil unrest and two natural disasters in March and May, is finally earning national recognition through three network television shows – two fictional dramas on Fox (“9-1-1”, “9-1-1: Lone Star”) and one reality documentary on ABC (“Emergency Call”) and legislation such as the bipartisan bill sponsored by California Democrat Representative Norma Torres in 2019 to appropriately reclassify the job of public safety telecommunicator from clerical/secretarial to first responder.

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Congress signed into law the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (November) and subsequent Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 (December 2003), with a purpose to “establish policies to strengthen the preparedness of the United States to prevent and respond to threatened or actual domestic terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies by requiring a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal, establishing mechanisms for improved delivery of Federal preparedness assistance to State and local governments, and outlining actions to strengthen preparedness capabilities of Federal, State, and local entities.”

As part of that directive, Section 2, paragraph D identified “first responders” as “those individuals who in the early stages of an incident are responsible for the protection and preservation of life, property, evidence, and the environment, including emergency response providers as defined in section 2 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 101), as well as emergency management, public health, clinical care, public works, and other skilled support personnel (such as equipment operators) that provide immediate support services during prevention, response, and recovery operations.”

<https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/hspd->

[8.html#:~:text=\(d\)%20The%20term%20%22first,Act%20of%202002%20\(6%20U.S.C.](8.html#:~:text=(d)%20The%20term%20%22first,Act%20of%202002%20(6%20U.S.C.)

Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 101)

(6) The term “emergency response providers” includes Federal, State, and local emergency public safety, law enforcement, emergency response, emergency medical (including hospital emergency facilities), and related personnel, agencies, and authorities.”

https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hr_5005_enr.pdf

On March 30, 2020, the Department of Labor issued its third set of guidance explaining the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), which identified family and medical leave provisions for families impacted by the Covid-19.

The latest FAQs also define “emergency responders”:

For the purposes of employees who may be excluded from paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave by their employer under the FFCRA, an emergency responder is an employee who is necessary for the provision of transport, care, health care, comfort, and nutrition of such patients, or whose services are otherwise needed to limit the spread of COVID-19. This includes but is not limited to military or national guard, law enforcement officers, correctional institution personnel, fire fighters, emergency medical services personnel, physicians, nurses, public health personnel, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, emergency management personnel, 911 operators, public works personnel, and persons with skills or training in operating specialized equipment or other skills needed to provide aid in a declared emergency as well as individuals who work for such facilities employing these individuals and whose work is necessary to maintain the

operation of the facility. This also includes any individual that the highest official of a state or territory, including the District of Columbia, determines is an emergency responder necessary for that state's or territory's or the District of Columbia's response to COVID-19.

To minimize the spread of the virus associated with COVID-19, the Department encourages employers to be judicious when using this definition to exempt emergency responders from the provisions of the FFCRA.

<https://www.dorsey.com/newsresources/publications/client-alerts/2020/03/department-of-labor-issues-new-guidance-on-ffcra#:~:text=For%20the%20purposes%20of%20employees%20who%20may%20be%20excluded%20from,patients%2C%20or%20whose%20services%20are>

Despite these critical designations and national attention, we remain largely ignored and misunderstood.

Today, the Metro Nashville Department of Emergency Communications currently employs only one (1) person eligible to take advantage of a full pension.

Twenty-three (23) others are eligible for early service pensions, requiring them to decide to receive reduced benefits to retire at an age similar to their police and fire counterparts, or work many more years.

By 2025, twenty-eight (28) will be eligible for retirement – only three of those at full-pension.

By 2027, eight (8) will be eligible for retirement – only one at full-pension

By 2030, nineteen (19) will be eligible for retirement – only four at full-pension.

In fact, according to a 2011 report by the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials, Intl. (ACPO), "it is estimated that 97 % of public safety communications personnel **WILL NOT** work in the profession long enough to retire. However, it is estimated 97 % of Law Enforcement and Fire- Rescue personnel **WILL** work long enough to retire. The national turnover rate for public safety communications in 2005 was 17%, and this rate increased to 19% in 2009."

https://www.apcointl.org/images/pdf/prochrt_2ndedition.pdf

We implore you to recognize the critical and essential work conducted daily by Metro Nashville Department of Emergency Communications professionals by aligning pension benefits with those of our law enforcement and fire counterparts. We expect 9-1-1 dispatchers to be there every time we need police officers or firefighters to come to the rescue. It's time we allow 9-1-1 dispatchers to leave when their counterparts on the other side of the radio are allowed to retire.