

# POLICY ESSAY

## OCCUPATIONAL RECLASSIFICATION FOR PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATORS: A NECESSARY STEP TOWARD A STRONGER PUBLIC SAFETY WORKFORCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite the crucial role they play in keeping our communities safe, 9-1-1 dispatchers (formally known as public safety telecommunicators) lack the same legal classification as police officers, firefighters, and other public safety professionals. Although public safety telecommunicators are the first point of contact for individuals in crisis, the United States Office of Management and Budget officially classifies them as clerical workers—the same category as secretaries and office clerks—instead of public safety professionals. As the first public safety telecommunicator to serve in Congress, I know firsthand the challenges telecommunicators face and the importance of recognizing their selfless commitment to protecting our communities. I have introduced bipartisan legislation, the “9-1-1 SAVES Act,” to officially reclassify public safety telecommunicators as public safety professionals and bring the profession one step closer to the respect, resources, and support it deserves. In this essay, I discuss the evolution of the public safety telecommunicator profession, the challenges telecommunicators face, and the road to occupational reclassification. Finally, I draw from data, my own lived experience, and the experiences of current public safety telecommunicators to make the case for reclassification as an avenue toward strengthening our public safety system by building and retaining a more robust telecommunicator workforce.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Early in my career as a 9-1-1 dispatcher, I received a call from a young girl—named Yahaira—in crisis. On the other end of the line, I heard horrific screams, the sickening sound of her head being slammed against a wall, and five gunshots. Her uncle was threatening to kill her, and he had a gun. Only later did I learn Yahaira’s screams were a desperate plea: “Uncle, please don’t kill me. It’s not my fault.” She did not survive the night.

Yahaira waited twenty minutes for help because that night we only had two or three dispatchers working—out of twenty-three for the entire city of Los Angeles—who were bilingual. In fact, I was still in training and not supposed to be taking calls in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In honor of Yahaira, I led the charge to change our 9-1-1 system and successfully pushed Los Angeles police departments to hire bilingual dispatchers.<sup>2</sup> Although politics had never interested me, I taught myself to lobby the Los Angeles City Council and eventually secured additional funding for the city’s 9-1-1 call centers, including a grant to help dispatchers more effectively prioritize incoming calls based on severity.<sup>3</sup> While this was an important step toward strengthening our 9-1-1 dispatcher workforce, it also illustrated a larger problem that dispatchers (referred to henceforth by their formal name, “public safety telecommunicators”<sup>4</sup>) continue to face across the United States—the systematic underinvestment in and overlooking of their profession.

My experience as a public safety telecommunicator—from the long hours and low pay to the physical and mental health toll that comes with being

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<sup>1</sup> See Kerry Shaw & Norma J. Torres, *I Was a 911 Dispatcher Before I Got Elected to Congress. This Is the Call That Changed My Life*, THE TRACE (Oct. 25, 2016), <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/10/california-gun-violence-congresswoman-norma-torres/> [<https://perma.cc/KS3A-JCB2>].

<sup>2</sup> See Norma Torres, IOWA ST. UNIV. ARCHIVES OF WOMEN’S POL. COMM’N, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/directory/norma-torres/> [<https://perma.cc/V3TA-TJ5F>].

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Engel, *Congresswoman Takes up Fight to Classify 911 Operators as First Responders*, EMS1 (Nov. 27, 2018), <https://www.ems1.com/2018-year-review/articles/congresswoman-takes-up-fight-to-classify-911-operators-as-first-responders-Kwq35HRnMvTqIMcW/> [<https://perma.cc/QM67-6N56>].

<sup>4</sup> In defining “public safety telecommunicators,” the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics states the following: “Public safety telecommunicators, including *911 operators* and *fire dispatchers*, answer emergency and nonemergency calls and provide resources to assist those in need.” *Occupational Outlook Handbook: Public Safety Telecommunicators*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT. (Sept. 16, 2023), <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/office-and-administrative-support/police-fire-and-ambulance-dispatchers.htm#:~:text=Public%20safety%20telecommunicators%20monitor%20and,to%20assist%20those%20in%20need> [<https://perma.cc/7ZYA-NC9T>].

responsible for human lives—is unfortunately the rule, not the exception. A telecommunicator surveyed by the National Emergency Number Association (“NENA”) stated that “the most principal issue with the job . . . tends to be stress and pay.”<sup>5</sup> Another cited “the disrespect from others in the workplace.”<sup>6</sup> A third telecommunicator described the psychological toll of having to “remain calm and get help when a caller is attempting suicide over the phone, or a woman is screaming her baby isn’t breathing.”<sup>7</sup>

Public safety telecommunicators face “a majority of the same day-to-day stressors as law enforcement officers, yet little attention has been given” to their plight.<sup>8</sup> This lack of attention has resulted in insufficient government funding to implement support systems like those available to other first responders. While the federal government has supported police mental health counseling services for decades,<sup>9</sup> public safety telecommunicators must rely on non-governmental entities to receive similar care.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the Los Angeles Police Department includes a Behavioral Science Services (“BSS”) division, which specializes in providing mental health support to police officers and “has served as the leader in inspiring agencies around the globe to establish similar programs.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the Los Angeles County Fire Department Foundation supports mental health care for the County’s firefighters and rescue workers.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, public safety telecommunicators do not hold the same legal classification—“Protective Service Occupations”—as police officers and other public safety professionals.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they are classified in the same category—“Office and Administrative Support Occupations”—as secretaries and clerical workers.<sup>14</sup> This misunderstanding of telecommunicators’ work may directly

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<sup>5</sup> CARBYNE & NAT’L EMERGENCY NO. ASS’N, PULSE OF 9-1-1: STATE OF THE INDUSTRY SURVEY 23 (2023), <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/oqpuf07lj0r4e0o5zi6/2023-Carbyne-and-NENA-The-Pulse-of-911-State-of-the-Industry-Survey-FINAL-EMBARGOED-TO-7.25.23.pdf?dl=0&rlkey=530pcj11zjjulglx55hn2shh> [<https://perma.cc/Y3BT-B43U>].

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Sandra L. Ramey, Yelena Perkhounkova, Maria Hein, Sophia J. Chung & Amanda A. Anderson, *Evaluation of Stress Experienced by Emergency Telecommunications Personnel Employed in a Large Metropolitan Police Department*, 65 WORKPLACE HEALTH & SAFETY 287, 287 (2017).

<sup>9</sup> See generally Robin Klein, *Police Peer Counseling: Officers Helping Officers*, FBI L. ENF’T BULL. (Oct. 1989) (outlining previous and ongoing peer counseling and mental health programs available to police officers in 1989).

<sup>10</sup> See Russ Bassett, *14 Mental Health Resources for 911 Responders*, RUSS BASSETT (Oct. 5, 2022), <https://russbassett.com/mental-health-resources-911-responders/> [<https://perma.cc/64GM-C7BA>].

<sup>11</sup> *Behavioral Science Services*, LAPD, <https://www.lapdonline.org/behavioral-science-services/> [<https://perma.cc/ENM4-LKVR>].

<sup>12</sup> See *Peer Support*, L.A. CNTY. FIRE DEP’T FOUND., <https://supportlacountyfire.org/peer-support/> [<https://perma.cc/5VKU-MWUD>].

<sup>13</sup> 2018 *Standard Occupational Classification System*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., [https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/major\\_groups.htm#43-0000](https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/major_groups.htm#43-0000) [<https://perma.cc/E928-XK9S>].

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

contribute to the profession's low pay, lack of national professionalization, and staffing shortages. On average, public safety telecommunicators employed by local governments make \$50,130 per year,<sup>15</sup> while police and firefighters employed by local governments make \$71,390 per year<sup>16</sup> and \$57,870 per year,<sup>17</sup> respectively. Like their peers in the law enforcement and firefighting professions, telecommunicators work long hours—sometimes in shifts of up to twenty-four hours—and must be available at a moment's notice at all times.<sup>18</sup>

Since public safety telecommunicators are often the first point of contact for individuals in crisis, these challenges within the profession directly threaten the efficacy of our larger emergency response system. In addition to exploring the role and status of public safety telecommunicators and tracing the evolution of their profession, this essay argues reclassification is a critical step toward giving these dedicated, selfless public servants the recognition, support, and training they need to perform their duties to the best of their abilities and keep our communities safe. Parts II and III of this essay will provide an overview of the telecommunicator profession and its evolution over time. Following Part III's discussion of the challenges telecommunicators face in the modern day, Part IV will discuss telecommunicators' mental health struggles and the lack of support they receive compared to other emergency response workers. Finally, Parts V and VI will explain the importance of reclassifying telecommunicators as public safety professionals and discuss a pathway at the federal level toward achieving that goal.

## II. PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATORS: AN OVERVIEW

Public safety telecommunicators are more than the voices on the other end of the line during an emergency call. Their job involves more than sending police, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), or firefighters to the scene of a crime or accident. On any given day, a telecommunicator may have to provide life-saving emergency medical instruction, keep an individual contemplating suicide alive, or even participate in a hostage negotiation.<sup>19</sup> Transform911, a University of Chicago initiative to better equip 9-1-1 systems for responding

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<sup>15</sup> *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 43-5031, Public Safety Telecommunicators*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes435031.htm> [<https://perma.cc/NP38-DH7H>].

<sup>16</sup> *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 33-3051, Police and Sheriff's Patrol Officers*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes333051.htm> [<https://perma.cc/CYA7-JGDR>].

<sup>17</sup> *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 33-2011, Firefighters*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes332011.htm> [<https://perma.cc/F93H-XBX2>].

<sup>18</sup> See E.B. Furgurson III, *Anne Arundel County 911 Operators Move to 24-hour Shift, Will Require Overtime*, CAP. GAZETTE (Jan. 26, 2020), <https://www.capitalgazette.com/news/ac-cn-911-shift-20200125-20200126-tapygnkcazat7edtiill5jfl3m-story.html> [<https://perma.cc/8GT7-ALJP>].

<sup>19</sup> See Shaw & Torres, *supra* note 1.

to a wide range of emergencies, summarized public safety telecommunicators' role in our emergency response system as follows:

In essence, 911 professionals are America's true first responders, serving as gatekeepers to law enforcement, fire, and EMS responses to community calls for service, and applying their best judgment to discern the appropriate response. 911 professionals are required to understand and comply with a wide array of policies for how to handle specific call types. They also have a critical role in preparing responders—particularly police officers—to arrive on the scene in a manner that protects their safety without predisposing them to approach difficult events in a way that reflects implicit or explicit biases or aggravates the risk that responders will use excessive force. 911 professionals may also be able to reduce reliance on law enforcement, dispatching responses from social workers or mental health clinicians instead of police officers when appropriate.<sup>20</sup>

The unpredictable nature of their work requires public safety telecommunicators to operate—sometimes for up to a day at a time<sup>21</sup>—with unwavering focus, situational awareness, and the ability to make informed, potentially life-saving decisions at a moment's notice. The ability of emergency response personnel to respond to crises successfully depends on the capacity of telecommunicators to carry out their duties.

### III. BEGINNINGS AND EVOLUTION OF THE PROFESSION

#### A. *Early Dispatch Personnel and the Origins of the Modern 9-1-1 System*

Before the establishment of the modern 9-1-1 system, radio dispatching stations<sup>22</sup>—and before that, emergency call boxes<sup>23</sup>—helped police officers respond to emergencies. Unlike the 9-1-1 system, which dispatches all emergency response personnel, early twentieth-century police radio dispatch stations—like the Cincinnati Emergency Communications Center, which was established in 1931<sup>24</sup>—only dispatched law enforcement officers. Rather than having to locate and dial the number for their closest precinct, callers

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<sup>20</sup> S. REBECCA NEUSTETER & HAROLD POLLACK, TRANSFORM911, TRANSFORMING 911: ASSESSING THE LANDSCAPE AND IDENTIFYING NEW AREAS OF ACTION AND INQUIRY 23 (2022).

<sup>21</sup> See Furgurson, *supra* note 18.

<sup>22</sup> See generally GREATER CINCINNATI POLICE MUSEUM, HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER, <https://police-museum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/History-of-ECC.pdf> [https://perma.cc/EU3A-7GAB].

<sup>23</sup> See Alexander Nguyen, *Freeway Call Boxes Going the Way of Pay Phones—Extinct*, NBC 7 SAN DIEGO (Mar. 17, 2018), <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/freeway-call-boxes-going-the-way-of-pay-phone-extinct/162998/> [https://perma.cc/Y2K6-PLLH].

<sup>24</sup> GREATER CINCINNATI POLICE MUSEUM, *supra* note 22, at 1.

in Cincinnati could contact the Emergency Communications Center, where operators would dispatch available officers to callers' locations.<sup>25</sup> This system was essentially a primitive form of the modern 9-1-1 system. Under the 9-1-1 system, one standardized phone number directs calls from across the United States to a caller's nearest public safety answering point ("PSAP"),<sup>26</sup> where an available public safety telecommunicator will pick up the call.

Over time, civilians, many of whom were women,<sup>27</sup> replaced police officers as radio dispatch stations' telecommunications operators. This change occurred during a period in American history when secretarial and clerical work were among the only socially acceptable professions for women.<sup>28</sup> The increased number of women serving as police telecommunications operators as early as the 1930s<sup>29</sup> combined with ongoing institutional bias against women<sup>30</sup> may have influenced the persisting misconception that public safety telecommunicators' work is secretarial, rather than protective, in nature.

In the United States, the modern telecommunicator profession stems from the creation of the 9-1-1 system in 1967, when President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice recommended that a 'single number should be established' nationwide for reporting emergency situations."<sup>31</sup> Johnson's tenure in the White House oversaw a decade when violent crime in the U.S. rose by 126%,<sup>32</sup> and the formation of the Commission served as a key effort to overhaul public safety in the United States.<sup>33</sup> The establishment of a standardized emergency phone number streamlined our country's emergency response process and made emergency services more accessible.

The first 9-1-1 call was placed in 1968—shortly after the Johnson administration recommended the establishment of a standardized emergency number—but Congress did not formally direct the Federal Communications

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> See *Frequently Asked Questions*, 911.Gov, <https://www.911.gov/calling-911/frequently-asked-questions/> [<https://perma.cc/YZ2K-D9AW>].

<sup>27</sup> See GREATER CINCINNATI POLICE MUSEUM, *supra* note 22.

<sup>28</sup> See Janet L. Yellen, *The History of Women's Work and Wages and How It Has Created Success for Us All*, BROOKINGS INST. (May 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/> [<https://perma.cc/RYN2-DRYN>].

<sup>29</sup> See *id.*

<sup>30</sup> See *Female 911 Dispatchers File Sexual Discrimination Lawsuit Against City of Warren*, FOX 2 DETROIT (Apr. 8, 2020), <https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/female-911-dispatchers-file-sexual-discrimination-lawsuit-against-city-of-warren> [<https://perma.cc/7TVY-DRUP>].

<sup>31</sup> *9-1-1 Origin & History*, NAT'L EMERGENCY NO. ASS'N, <https://www.nena.org/page/911overviewfacts> [<https://perma.cc/SKJ8-SCUN>].

<sup>32</sup> Lauren-Brooke Eisen & Oliver Roeder, *America's Faulty Perception of Crime Rates*, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUST. (Mar. 16, 2015), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/americas-faulty-perception-crime-rates> [<https://perma.cc/Z9U4-N9QT>].

<sup>33</sup> See Cheryl Corley, *President Johnson's Crime Commission Report, 50 Years Later*, NPR (Oct. 6, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/06/542487124/president-johnson-s-crime-commission-report-50-years-later> [<https://perma.cc/V2BJ-VG6N>].

Commission to implement 9-1-1 nationally until 1999.<sup>34</sup> Today, the 9-1-1 system serves “[m]ore than 96 percent of the [contiguous] United States.”<sup>35</sup> Under the current system, a 9-1-1 call is directed to a nearby PSAP, where a telecommunicator will ask questions to obtain information about the locations, nature, and details of the emergency. The telecommunicator will then dispatch the appropriate emergency response personnel and provide additional instructions if necessary.<sup>36</sup> Although the 9-1-1 system was formally established by the federal Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act of 1999,<sup>37</sup> state and local governments are responsible for the system’s day-to-day operation.<sup>38</sup> Most public safety telecommunicators are civilian, state or local government employees, like law enforcement and fire rescue personnel.

### B. *Public Safety Telecommunicators in the Twenty-first Century*

Despite the transformation of the profession, the notion that the work of public safety telecommunicators is primarily secretarial—and therefore less essential than the work of first responders—persists to this day. On the surface, the duties of public safety telecommunicators may appear to have changed little since the 9-1-1 system was established over five decades ago. In truth, the day-to-day work of public safety telecommunicators today scarcely resembles the work of their predecessors. In the earliest days of the modern 9-1-1 system, “it was not uncommon for a telephone operator in the police department or sheriff’s office to answer the line, take a few notes, and then pass the essential details on to local first responders.”<sup>39</sup> As a consequence of twenty-first-century phenomena including rising support for political violence,<sup>40</sup> terrorist attacks,<sup>41</sup> and the gun violence epidemic,<sup>42</sup> telecommunicators must respond to a wider

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<sup>34</sup> *911 and E911 Services*, POL’Y AND LICENSING DIV., FED. COMM’NS COMM’N (Jan. 21, 2023), <https://www.fcc.gov/general/9-1-1-and-e9-1-1-services> [<https://perma.cc/AB9L-Y7Y6>].

<sup>35</sup> POLICE EXEC. RSCH. F., CRITICAL ISSUES IN POLICING SERIES: THE REVOLUTION IN EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS 16 (2017), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/Emergency-Communications.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/AR33-C6XZ>].

<sup>36</sup> See *Frequently Asked Questions*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>37</sup> See *911 and E911 Services*, *supra* note 34.

<sup>38</sup> See *Frequently Asked Questions*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>39</sup> Norma J. Torres & Jessica Rosenworcel, *It’s Time to Classify 9-1-1 Operators as Protective Service Professionals*, THE HILL (Nov. 12, 2018), <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/416271-its-time-to-classify-9-1-1-operators-as-protective-service/> [<https://perma.cc/ZN8H-VYTJ>].

<sup>40</sup> See Kira Lerner, ‘Anger and Radicalization’: Rising Number of Americans Say Political Violence Is Justified, THE GUARDIAN (July 25, 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/25/us-political-crisis-radicalizing-republicans-democrats-alike> [<https://perma.cc/J9RD-NFL4>].

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Jenna DeAngelis, “We Had to Help Them:” NYPD Emergency Dispatchers Remember Answering the Call on 9/11, CBS N.Y. (Sept. 11, 2023), <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/we-had-to-help-them-nypd-emergency-dispatchers-remember-answering-the-call-on-911/> [<https://perma.cc/89GU-P39P>].

<sup>42</sup> See Nadine Yousif, *Why Number of US Mass Shootings Has Risen Sharply*, BBC NEWS (Mar. 28, 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64377360> [<https://perma.cc/BNF7-YBNZ>].

range of emergencies than ever before. Today, a telecommunicator may keep community members safe during increasingly severe natural disasters,<sup>43</sup> break through language barriers or interpret coded language to save the life of an elected leader's spouse,<sup>44</sup> or respond to a mass shooting<sup>45</sup> on any given day.

A 2021 study by Dr. Arvind Karunakaran, an assistant professor at Stanford University's Department of Management Science and Engineering, on status dynamics between public safety telecommunicators and law enforcement officers found that telecommunicators "are lower status in the professional order than the sworn police officers. In addition to the professional status characteristics, nominal characteristics such as gender and race reinforced the dispatchers' lower status."<sup>46</sup> Telecommunicators "often feel dismissed and disrespected at work"<sup>47</sup> and are "routinely called lazy, dumb, and asked to perform tasks like call cabs for police officers who've just finished a shift."<sup>48</sup> Most PSAPs are managed by law enforcement personnel, and during my service as a telecommunicator for the LAPD, it was considered a form of punishment to transfer a police captain to the 9-1-1 call center. Despite their perceived lower status, public safety telecommunicators "are ascribed with the functional authority to oversee higher-status professionals," such as police officers or firefighters, due to their control over whether to dispatch emergency services and to what extent.<sup>49</sup> Overlooking the essential, life-saving work that public safety telecommunicators perform not only reduces their morale,<sup>50</sup> but also inhibits the functioning of our broader public safety system.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, our public safety telecommunicator workforce faces a dual crisis of underfunding and understaffing. The International Academies of Emergency Dispatch ("IAED") reports that understaffing affects 9-1-1 dispatch

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Katherine T. Delk, *911 Dispatchers Miss Out on \$1,000 Bonuses from Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis After Hurricane Ian*, S. FLA. SUN SENTINEL (Nov. 18, 2022), <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/2022/11/18/911-dispatchers-miss-out-on-1000-bonuses-from-florida-gov-ron-desantis-after-hurricane-ian/> [https://perma.cc/G6CH-54E4].

<sup>44</sup> See Kelsey Vlamis & Taiyler S. Mitchell, *Paul Pelosi Secretly Called 911 While in Front of the Intruder and Spoke in 'Code' to Dispatcher to Convey What Was Happening: 'Why Are You Here? What Are You Going to Do to Me?'*, INSIDER (Oct. 28, 2022), <https://www.businessinsider.com/paul-pelosi-secretly-called-911-spoke-in-code-to-dispatcher-2022-10> [https://perma.cc/Q2DX-SHFX].

<sup>45</sup> See Ann Emmerich, *A Calm Voice During Chaos: A Dispatcher's Experience During the MSU Shooting*, WILX 10 (Feb. 23, 2023), <https://www.wilx.com/2023/02/24/calm-voice-during-chaos-dispatchers-experience-during-msu-shooting/> [https://perma.cc/TQR7-PMQQ].

<sup>46</sup> Arvind Karunakaran, *Status–Authority Asymmetry Between Professions: The Case of 911 Dispatchers and Police Officers*, 67 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 423, 430 (2021).

<sup>47</sup> Katie MacBride, *911 Dispatchers Hear the Worst Moments of Our Lives. Who Listens to Them?*, VICE NEWS (Mar. 13, 2020), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9398qy/911-dispatchers-hear-the-worst-moments-of-our-lives-who-listens-to-them> [https://perma.cc/8PU5-XQQR].

<sup>48</sup> See *id.*

<sup>49</sup> Karunakaran, *supra* note 46, at 423.

<sup>50</sup> CARBYNE & NAT'L EMERGENCY NO. ASS'N, *supra* note 5.

<sup>51</sup> See generally Cristy Fajardo, *Shortage of Dispatchers Leaving More 911 Callers on Hold*, FOX 11 L.A. (Feb. 28, 2022), <https://www.foxla.com/news/shortage-of-dispatchers-leaving-more-911-callers-on-hold> [https://perma.cc/3CYW-AL5M].

centers of all sizes in most states.<sup>52</sup> Insufficient staffing has forced the closure of dispatch centers from Ohio<sup>53</sup> to Washington.<sup>54</sup> This is likely because, as NENA CEO Brian Fontes explains, “911 has been treated as a stepchild of the public safety community.”<sup>55</sup> Dr. Rebecca Neusteter, the executive director of the Health Lab at the University of Chicago’s Urban Labs, explains the chronic lack of support for our 9-1-1 system has led to a work environment for public safety telecommunicators where “[t]he technology is terrible. The training, benefits, and occupational standards are subpar. Call takers have not been set up for success institutionally.”<sup>56</sup> Budget cuts to police departments are first felt at 9-1-1 call centers—this was the case when I served as a telecommunicator and continues to be the case today. This has contributed to the profession’s ongoing staffing crisis. Setting public safety telecommunicators up for success will require a national change in the conversation about the work they perform.

### C. Impact of COVID-19

Even before COVID-19 forced Americans into isolation, 9-1-1 dispatch centers faced a staffing crisis. The pandemic laid bare and exacerbated the profession’s staffing crisis. As former dispatch center manager Barry Furey writes:

Rather than entering the homes of those who are in need, dispatchers often are sequestered elbow-to-elbow in windowless rooms that are occupied 24/7. Many work prolonged shifts to compensate for continuing staffing shortages. The pandemic served to further thin dwindling ranks and came at a time when many agencies already struggled to maintain minimal workforces.<sup>57</sup>

The pandemic’s impact on 9-1-1 call center staffing led to an increase in caller wait times, leaving callers in limbo during moments when every second could be the difference between life and death. According to the National

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<sup>52</sup> See *More than Half of U.S. 911 Centers Are Facing Their Own Emergency*, INT’L ACADS. OF EMERGENCY DISPATCH (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://www.emergencydispatch.org/in-the-news/press-releases/64632133-7f9f-4d77-8013-d59c445fdb88> [<https://perma.cc/TA9Q-BFU4>].

<sup>53</sup> See Amy Patterson, *Chardon Council Votes to Close Dispatch Center*, GEUGA CNTY. MAPLE LEAF (Feb. 10, 2023), <https://www.geugamapleleaf.com/news/chardon-council-votes-to-close-dispatch-center/> [<https://perma.cc/3A8B-HQJX>].

<sup>54</sup> See Austin Jenkins, *Encore: Rural Washington 911 Center Closes amid Lack of Operators*, NPR (Aug. 25, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/25/1119192916/encore-rural-washington-911-center-closes-amid-lack-of-operators> [<https://perma.cc/U737-AYDV>].

<sup>55</sup> See Roge Karma, *Want to Fix Policing? Start with a Better 911 System*, VOX (Aug. 10, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/2020/8/10/21340912/police-violence-911-emergency-call-tamir-rice-cahoots> [<https://perma.cc/2K48-6FA2>].

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> Barry Furey, *Fire Dispatch: COVID-19 and 9-1-1*, FIREHOUSE (Apr. 18, 2022), <https://www.firehouse.com/covid-19/article/21260434/fire-dispatch-covid19-and-911> [<https://perma.cc/DUB5-MGX8>].

Emergency Number Association's Standard for 9-1-1 Call Processing, ninety percent of all 9-1-1 calls should be answered within fifteen seconds, and ninety-five percent of calls should be answered within twenty seconds.<sup>58</sup> During the pandemic, multiple municipalities did not meet this standard, with cities experiencing above-average wait times and personnel shortages.<sup>59</sup> By September 2021, Denver had lost thirty-five percent<sup>60</sup> of its telecommunicator workforce; Durham, North Carolina's dispatch capacity was nearly cut in half.<sup>61</sup> These were not isolated phenomena, but rather part of a broader telecommunicator staffing crisis that existed before the pandemic and continues today.<sup>62</sup>

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, understaffing remains a chief concern for dispatch centers. A 2023 joint study by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch and the National Association of State 911 Administrators surveyed 774 dispatch centers across the United States and found nearly half of them still struggle with understaffing.<sup>63</sup> Dispatch centers have not recovered from the staffing impacts of the pandemic, as evidenced by Austin, Texas residents' experiences being put on hold for fifteen minutes to nearly half an hour.<sup>64</sup> This is not an isolated incident, but part of a national trend—NENA reports an average staffing shortage of thirty percent at U.S. 9-1-1 dispatch centers.<sup>65</sup>

The ongoing staffing crisis forces public safety communicators to take on additional shifts and renege on their obligations outside of work. Rashawne Haynes, a public safety telecommunicator for the New York City Police Department, summarizes her own experience and that of others as follows:

We dispatch units out to the field, so we don't want anyone to wait, yet we experience delays because there's not enough people to answer those 911 calls. . . . As short staffing goes up, you have to stay for overtime. A lot of the women here are single moms . . . who may miss certain events like birthdays or graduations, a lot of different life things that most people get a chance to do. That's hard.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> NAT'L EMERGENCY NO. ASS'N, NENA STANDARD FOR 9-1-1 CALL PROCESSING 8 (2020), [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nena.org/resource/resmgr/standards/nena-sta-020.1-2020\\_911\\_call.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nena.org/resource/resmgr/standards/nena-sta-020.1-2020_911_call.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/KWU9-QU23>].

<sup>59</sup> See Furey, *supra* note 57.

<sup>60</sup> See *id.*

<sup>61</sup> See *id.*

<sup>62</sup> See *id.*

<sup>63</sup> Leila Merrill, *Study: Staffing an Issue for Nearly 50% of 911 Dispatch Centers*, EMS1 (Mar. 2, 2023), <https://www.ems1.com/communications-dispatch/articles/study-staffing-an-issue-for-nearly-50-of-911-dispatch-centers-n3N0zaPzmKNi7V8/> [<https://perma.cc/5QKX-8K99>].

<sup>64</sup> Carissa Lehmkuhl, *911 Call Center Staffing Shortage in Austin Reflects Nationwide Trend*, FOX 7 AUSTIN (Mar. 1, 2023), <https://www.fox7austin.com/news/911-call-center-staffing-shortage-austin-texas-nationwide-trend> [<https://perma.cc/W9KA-2AN9>].

<sup>65</sup> See *id.*

<sup>66</sup> Anna Dang, *911 Dispatchers Keep Saving Lives, Despite Staffing Shortages*, AM. FED. OF STATE, CNTY. & MUN EMPs. (Apr. 13, 2023), <https://www.afsme.org/blog/911-dispatchers-keep-saving-lives-despite-staffing-shortages> [<https://perma.cc/LW6X-M79J>].

Their low wages,<sup>67</sup> involvement in life-or-death situations, and increasingly demanding hours in a post-pandemic world leave public safety telecommunicators vulnerable to burnout and adverse mental health conditions.<sup>68</sup>

#### D. Gender Dynamics of the Telecommunicator Profession

Compared to the sworn law enforcement and fire and rescue professions, women make up a greater proportion of the United States' public safety telecommunicator workforce. More than three-quarters of public safety telecommunicators are women,<sup>69</sup> compared to fewer than one-fifth of police officers,<sup>70</sup> fewer than one-fifth of firefighters,<sup>71</sup> and fewer than two-fifths of EMTs.<sup>72</sup> Institutional misogyny and outdated cultural beliefs about gender roles may contribute to the overlooking of telecommunicators' essential role in our public safety system.

The current occupational classification of public safety telecommunicators—"Office and Administrative Support Professionals"<sup>73</sup>—consists largely of occupations traditionally considered "women's work." Secretaries and receptionists were among the first socially acceptable occupations for women.<sup>74</sup> Today, these occupations remain women-dominated, with women making up almost ninety percent of secretaries,<sup>75</sup> more than ninety percent of receptionists,<sup>76</sup> and more than three-quarters of both office clerks<sup>77</sup> and bank tellers.<sup>78</sup> The perception that the duties of a public safety telecommunicator are those of a "glorified secretary"<sup>79</sup>—and therefore their classification

<sup>67</sup> See U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 15.

<sup>68</sup> Claudia Lauer, *911 Workers Say Centers Are Understaffed, Struggling to Hire and Plagued by Burnout*, ASSOC. PRESS (Feb. 25, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/911-operator-staffing-shortage-dispatcher-survey-6dd0085c73bdee66d5a5d2795122cb97> [<https://perma.cc/KU8E-N6BX>].

<sup>69</sup> *911 Operator Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/911-operator-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/E5FU-69YS>].

<sup>70</sup> *Police Officer Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/police-officer-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/BR6W-38UH>].

<sup>71</sup> *Fire Fighter Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/fire-fighter-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/3DWB-PEX5>].

<sup>72</sup> *Emergency Medical Technician Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/emergency-medical-technician-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/BSF4-X9FT>].

<sup>73</sup> See U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 13.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *Schooled to Be Secretaries (1900-1980)*, NAT'L MUSEUM OF AM. HIST., <https://americanhistory.si.edu/girlhood/education/schooled-work/secretaries> [<https://perma.cc/2VXU-5K79>].

<sup>75</sup> *Secretary Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/secretary-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/AETH-4HWC>].

<sup>76</sup> *Receptionist Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/receptionist-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/K3ZP-JSF4>].

<sup>77</sup> *Office Clerk Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/office-clerk-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/C9955-M358>].

<sup>78</sup> *Bank Teller Demographics and Statistics in the US*, ZIPPPIA (July 21, 2023), <https://www.zippia.com/bank-teller-jobs/demographics/> [<https://perma.cc/97CN-BGE5>].

<sup>79</sup> See MacBride, *supra* note 47.

as a predominantly clerical occupation—may stem in part from the fact that their profession is primarily comprised of women, which is also true of many clerical jobs. This may, in turn, contribute to the undervaluing of the profession. Conversely, every job classified as a “Protective Service Occupation” by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (“BLS”) is male-dominated.<sup>80</sup>

The devaluation of women-dominated occupations persists to this day. According to Sarah Jane Glynn, a senior advisor in the United States Department of Labor Women’s Bureau, and Diana Boesch, a policy advisor in the office of the Department’s Assistant Secretary for Policy, “[o]ccupations that employ a larger share of women pay lower wages even after accounting for characteristics of the workers and job, such as education, skills and experience.”<sup>81</sup> Although public safety telecommunicators’ day-to-day work involves sitting at a desk and answering phone calls, this is where the similarities to the duties of clerical workers end. Telecommunicators, like their peers in other public safety professions, are expected to use their skill sets to save lives and are exposed to (albeit often virtually) similarly traumatic, life-or-death situations. Neither the fact that telecommunicators’ work is performed most often at desks nor the gender composition of their profession should preclude them from receiving the same formal classification as other public safety occupations.

#### IV. MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATORS

In Michigan, a public safety telecommunicator named Troy answered a call from a man contemplating suicide who told him, “[y]ou’ll find my body in a red Honda parked outside.”<sup>82</sup> Troy tried to talk the caller out of following through, but the call ended when he heard a gunshot on the other end of the line. The man had shot himself in the head. Across state lines in Ohio, a telecommunicator named Candace picked up a call from a woman hiding in her closet from burglars who had entered her home. When the burglars found the caller, Candace heard a gunshot. Recalling the incident, Candace said, “[s]he screamed so loud you couldn’t hear the sirens right outside. Then they shot her point blank in the head.”<sup>83</sup> Lauren Birnbaum, a telecommunicator in Arizona,

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<sup>80</sup> Maria Hussain, *Examining Employment and Diversity in the Protective Service Occupations*, MONTHLY LAB. REV. (Jan. 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2022/article/examining-employment-and-diversity-in-the-protective-service-occupations.htm> [<https://perma.cc/P4Z6-KQJX>].

<sup>81</sup> Sarah Jane Glynn & Diana Boesch, *Connecting the Dots: “Women’s Work” and the Wage Gap*, U.S. DEP’T OF LAB. BLOG (Mar. 14, 2022), <https://blog.dol.gov/2022/03/15/connecting-the-dots-womens-work-and-the-wage-gap> [<https://perma.cc/3WMP-WNJF>].

<sup>82</sup> See MacBride, *supra* note 47.

<sup>83</sup> See *id.*

“cried on the phone with a mother while she did CPR on her 6-year-old son after finding him in the pool.”<sup>84</sup> Neither Troy, Candace,<sup>85</sup> nor Birnbaum<sup>86</sup> was offered counseling following these traumatic experiences. According to Birnbaum, “we are told to cry in the bathroom—but not too long and come back in for more, quickly.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite the serious mental health challenges they face, public safety telecommunicators receive less institutional support and resources than other emergency response professionals. Due to the unrelenting pace of their work and exposure to traumatic and deadly situations, telecommunicators face a range of mental health challenges at rates comparable to or greater than law enforcement and fire rescue professionals. While police officers and firefighters respond directly to the scene of an emergency, telecommunicators are physically removed from the incidents to which they respond and therefore lack the same direct control over the situation afforded to law enforcement and fire professionals.<sup>88</sup> According to psychologist Dr. Michelle Lilly, who studies post-traumatic stress disorder (“PTSD”) in public safety telecommunicators, public safety telecommunicators’ lack of physical proximity to traumatic events “doesn’t mean [they’re] not exposed firsthand to distress and trauma.”<sup>89</sup>

In its National Wellness Survey for Public Safety Personnel, the United States Marshals Service reports that 30% of the telecommunicators surveyed reported experiencing anxiety, compared to 16% of law enforcement and 18% of fire and rescue personnel.<sup>90</sup> The reported rate of depression for public safety telecommunicators (17%) was substantially higher than the rates for law enforcement (6%) and fire and rescue workers (10%).<sup>91</sup> Fourteen percent of telecommunicators reported contemplating suicide, compared to 7% of law enforcement and 10% of fire and rescue professionals.<sup>92</sup> Telecommunicators reported a PTSD rate of 18%, while the rates for law enforcement and fire and rescue personnel were 11% and 12% respectively.<sup>93</sup>

A study published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* found that PTSD “symptoms that may be present in telecommunicators can impair decision-making abilities and functioning, which could pose significant risk to the

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<sup>84</sup> Howard Fischer, *Arizona Law Expands Paid Counseling to Emergency Dispatchers*, ARIZ. DAILY STAR (Aug. 23, 2023), [https://tucson.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/emergency-dispatch-arizona-counseling/article\\_5e7e47d4-41e9-11ee-b3ba-3f1ffd061ac4.html](https://tucson.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/emergency-dispatch-arizona-counseling/article_5e7e47d4-41e9-11ee-b3ba-3f1ffd061ac4.html) [<https://perma.cc/R8JW-ZVGP>].

<sup>85</sup> See MacBride, *supra* note 47.

<sup>86</sup> See Fischer, *supra* note 84.

<sup>87</sup> See *id.*

<sup>88</sup> See Heather Pierce & Michelle M. Lilly, *Duty-Related Trauma Exposure in 911 Telecommunicators: Considering the Risk for Posttraumatic Stress*, 25 J. TRAUMATIC STRESS 211, 211 (2012).

<sup>89</sup> See MacBride, *supra* note 47.

<sup>90</sup> U.S. MARSHALS SERV., NATIONAL WELLNESS SURVEY FOR PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL 6 (2022).

<sup>91</sup> *Id.*

<sup>92</sup> *Id.*

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

general population that relies on them to quickly and effectively coordinate an emergency response.”<sup>94</sup> A majority of telecommunicators surveyed in the study reported emotional or psychological distress related to their work, and the study found a moderate direct relationship between that distress and the severity of PTSD symptoms,<sup>95</sup> including “fear, helplessness, and horror.”<sup>96</sup> Telecommunicators may also experience “survivor’s guilt,” a symptom of PTSD,<sup>97</sup> following their response to an emergency:

It’s also important to understand that survivor’s guilt can occur even for those who were not present during the event. The supervisor who was at dinner, the beat partner at the station buried in paper, the officer who had called in sick, the dispatcher who believes she should have sensed more units were needed, etc.<sup>98</sup>

Public safety telecommunicators are tasked with gleaned crucial information from callers who “are often hysterical and lack control”<sup>99</sup> and may be unable to gather the necessary information in a short enough time period to respond to the incident. Although telecommunicators have no direct control over callers’ circumstances, their personal interactions with callers may lead to a belief that they are at fault in the event of a tragedy.<sup>100</sup> While public safety telecommunicators’ risk factors for PTSD differ from those of law enforcement officers or firefighters (i.e., their physical proximity to life-threatening situations), the grave nature of telecommunicators’ work and engagement with callers facing death or violence demands greater recognition of and support for their profession.

Local police<sup>101</sup> and fire departments<sup>102</sup> offer in-house mental health counseling services, and independent mental health practices<sup>103</sup> across the country

<sup>94</sup> Pierce & Lilly, *supra* note 88, at 214.

<sup>95</sup> *Id.* at 211.

<sup>96</sup> Robert T. Muller, *Trauma Exposure Linked to PTSD in 911 Dispatchers*, PSYCH. TODAY (Sept. 21, 2017), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/201709/trauma-exposure-linked-to-ptsd-in-911-dispatchers> [<https://perma.cc/A5KT-FVS6>].

<sup>97</sup> Jayne Leonard, *What Is Survivor’s Guilt?*, MED. NEWS TODAY (June 27, 2019), <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325578> [<https://perma.cc/G59K-S9YX>].

<sup>98</sup> Pamela Kulbarsh, *Police Week: Dealing With Survivor Guilt*, OFFICER (May 11, 2016), <https://www.officer.com/command-hq/article/12203124/police-week-2016-dealing-with-survivor-guilt> [<https://perma.cc/S87A-47WG>].

<sup>99</sup> Michelle M. Lilly & Heather Pierce, *PTSD and Depressive Symptoms in 911 Telecommunicators: The Role of Peritraumatic Distress and World Assumptions in Predicting Risk*, 5 PSYCH. TRAUMA: THEORY, RSCH., PRAC. & POL’Y 135, 139 (2013).

<sup>100</sup> *See id.* at 140.

<sup>101</sup> *See Peer Support Program*, BALT. POLICE DEP’T (Dec. 7, 2020), <https://www.baltimorepolice.org/transparency/bpd-policies/1711-peer-support-program> [<https://perma.cc/5AF5-4PNJ>].

<sup>102</sup> *See Stress Management Resources*, D.C. FIRE & EMS DEP’T., <https://fems.dc.gov/page/stress-management-resources> [<https://perma.cc/HAN5-YRHU>].

<sup>103</sup> *See First Responders, Military, and Veterans*, FIRST LINE COUNSELING, <https://firstline-counseling.com/first-responders-military-and-veterans/> [<https://perma.cc/P5SV-VP62>].

offer specialized services for first responders.<sup>104</sup> In other words, while police officers and firefighters have access to services that provide closure following traumatic events, public safety telecommunicators do not. Having spent more than seventeen years as a telecommunicator, I have seen this lack of closure contribute to telecommunicators' mental health struggles, particularly PTSD. Given their frequent interactions with people in crisis, public safety telecommunicators could stand to benefit from this sort of specialized attention to their unique mental health challenges.

## V. RECLASSIFICATION AND WHY IT MATTERS

Due to their current classification as secretarial workers, public safety telecommunicators lack the pay, training, support, and respect afforded to professionals classified as first responders. Reclassification may be a pathway toward investing in our telecommunicator workforce and therefore strengthening our emergency response system. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget's ("OMB") and the BLS's Standard Occupational Classification ("SOC")<sup>105</sup> is a vast catalog of occupations that serves as a statistical resource for federal agencies. Within the SOC, occupations are supposed to be classified according to the nature of the work performed. However, the current version of the SOC classifies public safety telecommunicators into the major group "Office and Administrative Support Occupations," the same classification as secretaries and office clerks.<sup>106</sup> Given the life-saving nature of their work, telecommunicators ought to be classified as "Protective Service Occupations," which include police officers, firefighters, lifeguards, and professions such as school crossing guards, school bus monitors, and gambling surveillance officers.<sup>107</sup>

When the OMB revised the SOC in 2018, it did not accept any of the requests it received to reclassify occupations from one major group to another.<sup>108</sup> This left public safety telecommunication classified as one of the Office and Administrative Support Occupations, which reflects an outdated, sexist, misinformed portrayal of telecommunicators' work. Reclassifying public safety telecommunication as a Protective Service Occupation has broad support not only from the telecommunicator community but also from others familiar

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<sup>104</sup> See *Counseling Support for First Responders, Military, and Their Families*, CODE 3 COUNSELING, <https://code3counseling.com/> [<https://perma.cc/7MAN-JDEM>].

<sup>105</sup> See U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 13.

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*

<sup>107</sup> *Id.*

<sup>108</sup> See Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System—Revision for 2018, 82 Fed. Reg. 56271 (Nov. 28, 2017), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-11-28/pdf/2017-25622.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/U6EU-F5CJ>]; *About SOC: SOC Responses*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT. (2017), [https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc\\_responses\\_July\\_2016.htm](https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc_responses_July_2016.htm) [<https://perma.cc/THA2-67TM>].

with their life-saving work. The organizations in favor of reclassification include the Service Employees International Union (“SEIU”);<sup>109</sup> the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (“AFSCME”);<sup>110</sup> the International Brotherhood of Teamsters;<sup>111</sup> the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (“APCO”);<sup>112</sup> the National Emergency Number Association (“NENA”);<sup>113</sup> the Orange County Employees Association;<sup>114</sup> the Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association;<sup>115</sup> the Tennessee Emergency Number Association;<sup>116</sup> International Academies of Emergency Dispatch;<sup>117</sup> National Association of State 911 Administrators;<sup>118</sup> and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, the emergency response community, including the International Association of Fire Fighters,<sup>120</sup> Chino Police Department;<sup>121</sup> Peace Officers Research Association of California;<sup>122</sup> the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department;<sup>123</sup> Las Vegas Fire and Rescue;<sup>124</sup> the California Governor’s Office of Emergency

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<sup>109</sup> *Tell Congress to Support the 911 SAVES Act and Give 911 Dispatchers the Recognition They Deserve!*, SERV. EMPS. INT’L UNION LOC. 668, [https://act.seiu.org/onlineactions/Yq-nPBsbBk6kKp\\_ST\\_n\\_IQ2](https://act.seiu.org/onlineactions/Yq-nPBsbBk6kKp_ST_n_IQ2) [<https://perma.cc/MK85-6JSP>].

<sup>110</sup> See Laura French, *Legislators Reintroduce Bill to Change Job Classification of 911 Dispatchers Nationwide*, EMS1 (Apr. 1, 2021), <https://www.ems1.com/communications-dispatch/articles/legislators-reintroduce-bill-to-change-job-classification-of-911-dispatchers-nationwide-ujPF8hi3WCbVIJcR/> [<https://perma.cc/75N7-NK6E>].

<sup>111</sup> Letter from James P. Hoffa, General President, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, to U.S. House of Representatives (May 3, 2019).

<sup>112</sup> See French, *supra* note 110.

<sup>113</sup> See *id.*

<sup>114</sup> Letter from Congresswoman Norma J. Torres to Members of the United States House of Representatives (Sept. 18, 2013) (on file with author) (“Dear Colleague: Cosponsor 911 SAVES Act”).

<sup>115</sup> *Id.*

<sup>116</sup> *Id.*

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Ty Wooten, Dir. of Gov’t Affs., Int’l Acad. of Emergency Dispatch, to Hon. Norma Torres & Hon. Brian Fitzpatrick, U.S. House of Representatives (Nov. 7, 2023) (on file with author and journal).

<sup>118</sup> Letter from Harriet Rennie-Brown, Exec. Dir., Nat’l Ass’n of State 911 Adm’rs, to Congresswoman Norma Torres & Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick (Nov. 8, 2023) (on file with author and journal).

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Robert J. Martinez, President of Int’l Ass’n of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, to Congresswoman Norma Torres (May 13, 2021) (on file with author and journal) (“International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers endorsement of 9-1-1 SAVES Act”).

<sup>120</sup> See Press Release, Rep. Norma Torres, *Representatives Torres & Fitzpatrick Reintroduce Bipartisan 9-1-1 SAVES Act to Reclassify 9-1-1 Dispatchers as First Responders* (Nov. 8, 2023), <https://torres.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/representatives-torres-fitzpatrick-reintroduce-bipartisan-9-1-1-saves> [<https://perma.cc/V92M-75ZA>].

<sup>121</sup> See *id.*

<sup>122</sup> Letter from Brian R. Marvel, President of Bd. of Dirs., Peace Officers Rsch. Ass’n of Cal., to Rep. Norma Torres (Sept. 27, 2023) (on file with author and journal).

<sup>123</sup> See Letter from Congresswoman Norma J. Torres to Members of the U.S. House of Representatives (Sept. 18, 2023) (on file with author and journal) (“Dear Colleague: Cosponsor 911 SAVES Act”).

<sup>124</sup> See *id.*

Services;<sup>125</sup> and the Palo Alto Police Department<sup>126</sup> support legislation to reclassify public safety telecommunication as a Protective Service Occupation.

Multiple states, including Washington<sup>127</sup> and Arizona,<sup>128</sup> have passed legislation to classify public safety telecommunicators as first responders. In these states, this legislation has unlocked support and benefits previously unavailable to telecommunicators. In Washington state, “[t]he law requires the state’s 911 Coordination Office to form a certification board to establish a statewide training and certification process, similar to how law enforcement officers are required to regularly train at academies for a certain number of hours.”<sup>129</sup> At the time of the law’s passage, no training requirements existed for telecommunicators in Washington state or at the federal level.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, the Washington state law opens the door to more desirable retirement benefits and a lower minimum retirement age for telecommunicators by allowing them to join the same retirement plan as police officers and firefighters.<sup>131</sup> The current state-run retirement schedule for public safety telecommunicators in Washington requires them to wait until age sixty-five to retire with full benefits, while the minimum retirement age for police and firefighters is fifty-three.<sup>132</sup> According to Katy Myers, the president of Washington state’s joint chapter of APCO and NENA,<sup>133</sup> the improved training and benefits unlocked by state-level reclassification “could combat the industry turnover fueled by the high-stress job, and also help recruit new hires.”<sup>134</sup>

The Arizona reclassification law also allows public safety telecommunicators to access enhanced benefits, specifically free trauma therapy.<sup>135</sup> Arizona’s law, House Bill 2717,<sup>136</sup> also “prohibits employers from forcing dispatchers to use their vacation or sick time to attend therapy sessions.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See *id.*

<sup>126</sup> See *id.*

<sup>127</sup> Hayley Day, *More Training, Possibly Better Benefits to Come for Cowlitz 911 Dispatchers Thanks to New State Law*, DAILY NEWS (May 8, 2022), [https://tdn.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/more-training-possibly-better-benefits-to-come-for-cowlitz-911-dispatchers-thanks-to-new-state/article\\_945eed74-cd71-11ec-b398-f7e0b106e94b.html](https://tdn.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/more-training-possibly-better-benefits-to-come-for-cowlitz-911-dispatchers-thanks-to-new-state/article_945eed74-cd71-11ec-b398-f7e0b106e94b.html) [<https://perma.cc/7HJU-A6T6>]; S.S.B. 5555, 67th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Wash. 2022).

<sup>128</sup> Lauren Gilger, *Arizona Needs More 911 Operators – and the Operators Need Better Mental Health Care*, FRONTERAS (Apr. 28, 2023), <https://fronterasdesk.org/content/1845338/arizona-needs-more-911-operators-and-operators-need-better-mental-health-care> [<https://perma.cc/YLE8-KM23>]; H.B. 2717, 56th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Ariz. 2023).

<sup>129</sup> Day, *supra* note 127.

<sup>130</sup> See *id.*

<sup>131</sup> See *id.*

<sup>132</sup> See *id.*

<sup>133</sup> *Chapter Officers*, WASH. APCO–NENA (2023), <https://waapconena.org/about-us/chapter-officers/> [<https://perma.cc/5U39-XJTR>].

<sup>134</sup> Day, *supra* note 127.

<sup>135</sup> Kevin Reagan, *Hobbs Signs Bill Letting 911 Dispatchers Qualify for Free Trauma Therapy*, 12NEWS KPNX (May 1, 2023, 6:15 PM), <https://www.12news.com/article/news/local/valley/hobbs-sign-bill-911-dispatchers-qualify-trauma-therapy/75-477fba3d-d21c-48b0-9a53-a9e9cd22ad87> [<https://perma.cc/7ZTA-BGFF>].

<sup>136</sup> H.B. 2717, 56th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Ariz. 2023).

<sup>137</sup> Reagan, *supra* note 135.

In Arizona, law enforcement officers and firefighters who “witnessed a person’s death, [were] subjected to deadly force, or were involved in a case where children were victimized” in the line of duty already qualified for free counseling services.<sup>138</sup> Public safety telecommunicators, however, were excluded from that program before the passage of the state law.<sup>139</sup> Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs signed House Bill 2717 at a time when “public safety agencies across the state have reported staffing shortages ranging between 25–60%,” according to Arizona’s joint chapter of APCO and NENA.<sup>140</sup> Governor Hobbs stated that offering telecommunicators similar benefits to police officers and firefighters will address the telecommunicator shortage and “give [telecommunicators] the tools they need to thrive outside the workplace as well.”<sup>141</sup>

Reclassification in the SOC may also lead to an increase in wages, which may in turn attract more job seekers to the telecommunicator profession. Although the SOC was established for governmental data collection purposes and has no direct control over wages or employee benefits,<sup>142</sup> the publicly available SOC data is also used by non-governmental entities, including “[e]mployers wishing to set salaries or locate a new business.”<sup>143</sup> Occupational categories typically deemed more prestigious by society (e.g., Protective Service Occupations, which include police and firefighters) tend to be paid more than those typically deemed less prestigious (e.g., Office and Administrative Support Occupations, which include secretaries and receptionists). According to the BLS, the mean wage for all Protective Service Occupations employed by local governments is \$31.98 per hour,<sup>144</sup> while the mean hourly wage for Office and Administrative Support Occupations employed by local government—the category under which public safety telecommunicators currently fall—is \$23.40.<sup>145</sup> The mean hourly wage for public safety telecommunicators employed by local governments is only \$24.10,<sup>146</sup> which is closer to the mean hourly wage of Office and Administrative Support Occupations than that of Protective Service Occupations. Over the course of a year, the hourly wage gap between Protective Service Occupations<sup>147</sup> and

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<sup>138</sup> *Id.*

<sup>139</sup> *See id.*

<sup>140</sup> *Id.*

<sup>141</sup> *See Fischer, supra* note 84.

<sup>142</sup> *See* U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., 2018 STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION USER GUIDE 2, 23 (Nov. 2017), [https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc\\_2018\\_user\\_guide.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc_2018_user_guide.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/Z8Z5-JM3L>].

<sup>143</sup> *NEW: SOC Code Reporting Required*, EMP. SEC. DEP’T WASH. STATE, <https://esd.wa.gov/employer-taxes/about-soc> [<https://perma.cc/ZTU4-D3F5>].

<sup>144</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., OCCUPATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND WAGE STATISTICS: 33-0000 PROTECTIVE SERVICE OCCUPATIONS (MAJOR GROUP) (Apr. 25, 2023), <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes330000.htm> [<https://perma.cc/U22X-NWSM>].

<sup>145</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., OCCUPATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND WAGE STATISTICS: 43-0000 OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT OCCUPATIONS (MAJOR GROUP) (Apr. 25, 2023), <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes430000.htm> [<https://perma.cc/YR6R-69MX>].

<sup>146</sup> *See* U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 15.

<sup>147</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 144.

public safety telecommunicators<sup>148</sup> employed by local governments translates to a gap of over \$16,000 per year. The recognition and potential increase in wages associated with reclassification may boost the morale of current public safety telecommunicators and make the profession more enticing to job seekers, which may in turn lead to more fully staffed 9-1-1 dispatch centers and lower job turnover rates among telecommunicators.

The SOC's classification of public safety telecommunicators as administrative support workers stands in opposition to other occupation classification systems—including the BLS's National Compensation Survey ("NCS"),<sup>149</sup> the U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division's Directory of Occupations,<sup>150</sup> the U.S. Department of Education's Classification of Instructional Programs ("CIP"),<sup>151</sup> and the International Labour Organization's International Standard Classification of Occupations ("ISCO")<sup>152</sup>—that favor classifying public safety telecommunicators as public safety professionals.

The misclassification reflects the SOC Policy Committee's ("SOCPC") misunderstanding of public safety telecommunicators' duties. The SOCPC had the following response to requests to reclassify public safety telecommunicators:

The SOCPC did not accept these recommendations based on Classification Principle 2, which states that workers are coded according to the work performed. The work performed is that of a dispatcher, not a first responder. Most dispatchers are precluded from administering actual care, "talking" someone through procedures, or providing advice.<sup>153</sup>

As a former public safety telecommunicator, I know firsthand that the SOCPC's conclusions are incorrect. Public safety telecommunicators are

<sup>148</sup> See U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 15.

<sup>149</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., NATIONAL COMPENSATION SURVEY: GUIDE FOR EVALUATING YOUR FIRM'S JOBS AND PAY 45 (May 2013).

<sup>150</sup> WAGE & HOUR DIV., U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, SCA DIRECTORY OF OCCUPATIONS 93 (5th ed. 2006), <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/wage/scadirv5/scadirectvers5.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/4LSB-UKJ9>].

<sup>151</sup> See *Detail for CIP Code 43.0399*, NAT'L CTR. FOR EDUC. STAT., U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/cipdetail.aspx?y=56&cipid=91578> [<https://perma.cc/NJ26-UBM2>].

<sup>152</sup> While the ISCO does not include public safety telecommunicators in its list of occupations, a crosswalk developed by the BLS and approved by the SOCPC matches "Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers" to the ISCO label "Protective Services Workers Not Elsewhere Classified." See *5169 Protective Services Workers Not Elsewhere Classified*, INT'L STANDARD CLASSIFICATION OF OCCUPATIONS, INT'L LAB. ORG., <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco88/5169.htm> [<https://perma.cc/FCL7-SB7V>]; U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., CROSSWALKS BETWEEN THE 2010 SOC AND SYSTEMS USED BY OTHER FEDERAL AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL AGENCIES (Aug. 30, 2012), <https://www.bls.gov/soc/soccrosswalks.htm> [<https://perma.cc/87X9-F8QY>].

<sup>153</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED IN RESPONSE TO THE MAY 22, 2014 FEDERAL REGISTER NOTICE 18 (2016), [https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc\\_2018\\_docket\\_responses.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/soc/2018/soc_2018_docket_responses.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/H6ZM-TK2B>].

not “precluded from,” but in fact expected to, utilize their training to rapidly assess dangerous situations and provide potentially life-saving guidance. A telecommunicator who wished to remain anonymous provided the following comment to APCO:

In my years of dispatching [sic] I have saved a newborn from SIDS and got him breathing while calming a panicked teen mother. I have kept suicidal parties from hurting themselves and reassured them they are valued [sic] I have talked armed suspects out of houses without incident or harm to anyone [sic] I have controlled severe bleeding [sic] given CPR many times [sic] talked elevated emotional callers down to a calm level in order to assist them . . .<sup>154</sup>

Another anonymous telecommunicator stated the following:

A hostage stand-off stands out as one of my most stressful and most memorable calls involving a barricaded subject that lasted [sic] for hours. While speaking with the suspect for forty-five minutes we developed a rapport. So much so, that when SWAT and a trained hostage negotiator arrived on the scene and attempted to take over the phone call the suspect refused to speak to him. I remained his first point of contact for the duration of the incident and eventually talked him into letting his ex-girlfriend go and peacefully surrender.<sup>155</sup>

Public safety telecommunicators’ duties extend far beyond simply taking calls and dispatching emergency response personnel. When responding to crises, telecommunicators utilize situational awareness, rapidly make informed conclusions based on limited details, and even offer medical instruction to keep callers safe until emergency services arrive.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, telecommunicators are not required by law to inform perpetrators of their Miranda rights, and the information they glean during calls may serve as key evidence in criminal proceedings.<sup>157</sup> Telecommunicators are an individual’s first point of contact with our emergency response system—true “first responders”—and their ability to perform their jobs well can be the difference between life and death.

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<sup>154</sup> ASS’N OF PUB.-SAFETY COMM’NS OFFS.-INT’L, INC., COMMENTS OF APCO INTERNATIONAL IN RESPONSE TO THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET’S NOTICE OF SOLICITATION OF COMMENTS FOR THE PROPOSED REVISION OF THE 2010 STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION 9 (2016), <https://www.apcointl.org/~documents/filing/apco-comments-soc2018?layout=default> [<https://perma.cc/RB6W-WX9Z>].

<sup>155</sup> *Id.* at 9–10.

<sup>156</sup> See *Dispatcher I Position Information*, CITY OF LOGAN, UTAH, <https://cms9files.revize.com/loganut/911%20Dispatcher%20Position%20Information.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/8SMD-EKSR>].

<sup>157</sup> Miranda warnings are only required in the context of a custodial interrogation. See generally *Miranda warning*, LEGAL INFO. INST., CORNELL L. SCH., [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/miranda\\_warning](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/miranda_warning) [<https://perma.cc/TT8P-HY53>].

In its justification for not reclassifying public safety telecommunicators as Protective Service Occupations, the SOCPC proposed “adding Public Safety Dispatcher as an illustrative example in place of Police Radio Dispatcher.”<sup>158</sup> While this proposed phraseology—which encompasses fire and rescue telecommunicators in addition to police telecommunicators—is more inclusive of the entire profession, this change alone fails to acknowledge the fact that public safety telecommunicators save lives. Their work is unquestionably protective in nature and must be classified accordingly.

## VI. THE ROAD TO A MORE ROBUST PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATOR WORKFORCE

Although an important first step, reclassification alone is an insufficient solution to the simultaneous crises of understaffing, underfunding, and underappreciation facing the public safety telecommunicator workforce. Congress can and must do more to strengthen our 9-1-1 system and support telecommunicators nationwide. As our country modernizes our highway, public transit, air travel, and internet connectivity infrastructure,<sup>159</sup> we cannot neglect our public safety telecommunications infrastructure. Strengthening our public safety telecommunicator workforce will require the federal government to acknowledge the challenges facing telecommunicators, reclassify them as public safety workers, and eventually provide the necessary resources to support them.

Our outdated 9-1-1 system is ill-equipped to handle the unique challenges of the twenty-first century, and the government must play a more active role in changing that. In Congress, I am a member of the bipartisan

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<sup>158</sup> The SOC stated the following:

Multiple dockets requested a new detailed occupation for Public Safety Telecommunicators or workers with similar titles such as Emergency Services Telecommunications Specialists and 911 Communications Operators. Workers with these titles are classified in 43-5031 Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers in the 2010 SOC. The dockets also requested that the occupation be moved from major group 43-0000 Office and Administrative Support Occupations to major group 33-0000 Protective Service Occupations. The SOCPC did not accept these recommendations based on Classification Principle 2, which states that workers are coded according to the work performed. The work performed is that of a dispatcher, not a first responder. Most dispatchers are precluded from administering actual care, “talking” someone through procedures, or providing advice. Moving the occupation to the Protective Services major group is not appropriate and separating them from the other dispatchers would be confusing. Also, dispatchers are often located in a separate area from first responders and have a different supervisory chain. The SOCPC proposes adding Public Safety Dispatcher as an illustrative example in place of Police Radio Dispatcher.

U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 153, at 18.

<sup>159</sup> See Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117–58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021).

NextGen 9-1-1 Caucus,<sup>160</sup> the only congressional caucus dedicated to transitioning our country's 9-1-1 system from its current outdated infrastructure to the internet protocol-based Next Generation 9-1-1 ("NG911").<sup>161</sup> As of 2022, forty-one U.S. states and jurisdictions had Emergency Services IP networks ("ESInets")—an integral component of NG911 infrastructure—operating in 9-1-1 call centers.<sup>162</sup>

In NENA's 2023 "Pulse of 9-1-1" survey, approximately two-thirds of surveyed telecommunicators said their call centers use NG911.<sup>163</sup> By "allow[ing] voice, photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to the 911 network,"<sup>164</sup> NG911 will empower our nation's public safety telecommunicators to better manage the 240 million calls they receive every year. Although I have fought for—and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle have supported—legislation to accelerate our transition to NG911,<sup>165</sup> Congress has so far failed to make this critical public safety issue a priority. Drawing greater attention to telecommunicators' instrumental role in our public safety system and the challenges they face—including through reclassification—may motivate Congress to act.

While NG911 promises a more efficient emergency response system, its implementation will require better training and resources for public safety telecommunicators. Under an NG911 system, telecommunicators will be expected to synthesize and respond to graphic videos from individuals in crisis, which may exacerbate the mental health challenges with which telecommunicators already struggle. Another telecommunicator from NENA's survey stated that under a NG911 system that includes video calling, telecommunicators will have to confront traumatic situations with "[s]ight, hearing, heart, mind, [and] body."<sup>166</sup> Currently, telecommunicators are often separated from callers not only by physical distance but also by a lack of visual information. The modernization of our 9-1-1 system will arguably lead telecommunicators to require greater support, and reclassification is the first step toward ensuring they receive said support.

Legislation to reclassify public safety telecommunicators under Protective Service Occupations is a simple, necessary first step toward adequately supporting telecommunicators and strengthening our public safety workforce.

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<sup>160</sup> See *NextGen911 Caucus Members*, NG9-1-1 INST., <https://www.ng911institute.org/next-gen-911-caucus> [<https://perma.cc/GCD7-UE8L>].

<sup>161</sup> See *Next Generation 911*, 911.GOV (June 9, 2023), <https://www.911.gov/issues/ng911/> [<https://perma.cc/3UFF-CRD9>].

<sup>162</sup> See *Facilitating Implementation of Next Generation 911 Services (NG911)*, 88 Fed. Reg. 43514, 43519 (July 10, 2023) (to be codified at 47 C.F.R. pt. 9).

<sup>163</sup> See CARBYNE & NAT'L EMERGENCY NO. ASS'N, *supra* note 5, at 14.

<sup>164</sup> See *Next Generation 911*, *supra* note 161.

<sup>165</sup> See *Next Generation 9-1-1 Act of 2019*, H.R. 2760, 116th Cong. (2019), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bill/2760/cosponsors?s=1&r=14> [<https://perma.cc/KX3W-CAJZ>].

<sup>166</sup> See CARBYNE & NAT'L EMERGENCY NO. ASS'N, *supra* note 5, at 23.

Telecommunicators guide callers through life-threatening situations.<sup>167</sup> They halt suicide attempts.<sup>168</sup> They help callers perform life-saving emergency medical interventions.<sup>169</sup> They are public safety professionals in every way except on paper. It is long past time for us to officially recognize telecommunicators' life-saving work, and reclassification in the SOC is a natural first step. Leaders from both major political parties agree that building a more effective emergency response system begins with giving public safety telecommunicators the official recognition they deserve.<sup>170</sup>

The Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services Act ("9-1-1 SAVES Act"),<sup>171</sup> which I introduced alongside Representative Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.), earned the support of ninety-four Democratic and thirty-six Republican representatives,<sup>172</sup> as well as eight Democratic and seven Republican senators.<sup>173</sup> Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), who authored the Senate version of the bill alongside then-Senator Richard Burr (R-N.C.), said the following of the bill when it was first introduced in 2019:

No matter where you are, if you dial 9-1-1, dispatchers are there to connect you to first responders... This legislation makes important updates to the classification of 9-1-1 dispatchers to better capture the complex and technical nature of their occupations while also providing valuable statistical tools for federal agencies. I'm proud to work with Senator Burr to properly highlight dispatchers' roles as safety leaders during times of crisis and the work they do to keep our communities safe.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> See Casey Feindt, 'They're Coming, I Promise You: Jacksonville 911 Dispatcher Recognized as Hero After Guiding Rescuers to Trapped Woman During Fire', FIRST COAST NEWS (June 10, 2022), <https://www.firstcoastnews.com/article/news/local/jacksonville-911-dispatcher-recognized-as-hero-after-guiding-rescuers-to-location-of-woman-during-house-fire/77-9410b208-9eed-422d-bea6-cb95e5e744fe> [<https://perma.cc/Y2TV-MKGJ>].

<sup>168</sup> See Caresse Jackman, 'That's Why I'm Doing What I'm Doing': 911 Operator Stops Suicide Attempt, 4WWL (Aug. 16, 2018), <https://www.wwtv.com/article/news/local/thats-why-im-doing-what-im-doing-911-operator-stops-suicide-attempt/289-584994533> [<https://perma.cc/7N77-APED>].

<sup>169</sup> See Gabrielle Chung, 911 Dispatcher Saves Lives of Baby and 71-Year-Old Man Who Stopped Breathing in One Shift: 'A True Hero', PEOPLE, (Sept. 14, 2020), <https://people.com/human-interest/911-dispatcher-saves-lives-baby-man-stopped-breathing-one-shift/> [<https://perma.cc/LV4Z-U6HF>].

<sup>170</sup> See French, *supra* note 110.

<sup>171</sup> H.R. 2351, 117th Cong. (2021).

<sup>172</sup> See *H.R. 2351 - 911 SAVES Act: Cosponsors*, CONGRESS.GOV, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2351/cosponsors> [<https://perma.cc/Z2FP-A367>].

<sup>173</sup> See *S.1175 - 911 SAVES Act: Cosponsors*, CONGRESS.GOV, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1175/cosponsors> [<https://perma.cc/P89N-KMUS>].

<sup>174</sup> Press Release, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, *Klobuchar, Burr Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Reclassify 9-1-1 Dispatchers* (Apr. 5, 2019), <https://www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2019/4/klobuchar-burr-introduce-bipartisan-bill-to-reclassify-9-1-1-dispatchers> [<https://perma.cc/D64D-9U5M>].

Then-Senator Burr said the following:

From dispatching first responders to using advanced technology to retrieve locations, the work 9-1-1 operators do is essential during emergencies... As the co-chair of the Congressional Next Generation 9-1-1 Caucus, I'm honored to introduce this bipartisan legislation with my colleague, Senator Klobuchar, to better recognize the specialized training and critical responsibilities of these professionals.<sup>175</sup>

The 9-1-1 SAVES Act would direct the OMB to reclassify Public Safety Telecommunicators under Protective Service Occupations in the SOC<sup>176</sup>—and it would not cost American taxpayers a single cent. It is both a common-sense legislative solution to decades of improper classification and long-overdue official recognition for the nearly 100,000 public safety telecommunicators in the United States<sup>177</sup> and their life-saving work.

## VII. CONCLUSION

To improve the American public safety system, Congress must provide sufficient support for all professions that play a role in keeping communities safe. For an individual in crisis, a public safety telecommunicator can be the difference between life and death. As the first points of contact during emergencies, telecommunicators are frontline workers in every sense of the phrase. The efficacy of our country's broader public safety apparatus—from sworn law enforcement to firefighters and emergency medical services—depends on the capacity of our public safety telecommunicator workforce.

The demands of public safety telecommunicators' day-to-day work reflect the vital importance of their profession. Telecommunicators work extended hours, often through the middle of the night,<sup>178</sup> and are expected to respond to calls from individuals in life-or-death situations with a level-headed demeanor, while quickly and accurately assessing the circumstances on the other end of the line. As the first point of contact between individuals in crisis and our emergency response system, telecommunicators are true "first responders" and deserve the same treatment and government support as other public safety professionals.

Our country's public safety telecommunicators face numerous challenges, as does the 9-1-1 system in which they work. Congress has the tools

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<sup>175</sup> *Id.*

<sup>176</sup> See 911 SAVES Act, H.R. 2351, 117th Cong. (2021).

<sup>177</sup> See U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., *supra* note 15.

<sup>178</sup> See Interview by Alexa Tsoulis-Reay, *The 911 Operator Who Works the Graveyard Shift*, N.Y. MAG., THE JOB (Mar. 28, 2017), <https://nymag.com/thejob/2017/03/the-911-operator-who-works-the-graveyard-shift.html> [<https://perma.cc/D7BY-CATK>].

and authority to bring our 9-1-1 system into the twenty-first century and ensure telecommunicators have the support they need to stay on the job, attend to their mental health, and improve their quality of life. This process will require widespread technological transformation in 9-1-1 call centers,<sup>179</sup> extensive education and training programs,<sup>180</sup> and more. Improving our nation's public safety system begins with recognizing the indispensable role telecommunicators play in changing the conversation around the nature of their work. Reclassification is not only common sense—it is a simple but essential step toward ensuring our first responders are best equipped to protect you.

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<sup>179</sup> See, e.g., *Transition to Next Generation 911 (NG911)*, U.S. CYBERSECURITY & INFRASTRUCTURE SEC. AGENCY, <https://www.cisa.gov/safecom/transition-next-generation-911> [<https://perma.cc/M94F-772P>].

<sup>180</sup> See, e.g., *Maryland NG911 Education and Training*, MARYLAND.GOV, <https://911.maryland.gov/pages/ng911-education-portal> [<https://perma.cc/2CU2-YCYZ>].