

KANSAS PUBLIC SAFETY TELECOMMUNICATORS

Should be treated as equals to the other heroes in public safety!



Creating a Culture of Change

Immediately after the first COVID-19 related deaths in the United States, Kansas 911 leaders formed a layered response (workgroup, advisory team, and steering committee) and began working aggressively to ensure Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) and 911 professionals alike were being safeguarded.

At a time when our Nation faces intense personal crisis and community-wide disasters, Kansas 911 Professionals have been there for us 24/7. The first access point for those seeking all classes of emergency services is 9-1-1. Public Safety Telecommunicators have selflessly prioritized our health and safety over their own by continuing to work in “close contact spaces” and cannot avoid the inevitable. They have dealt with constantly changing emergency-response protocols and surges in call volume about domestic violence, mental-health crises, and serious, at-home illnesses. They have navigated quarantine-induced staffing shortages and, have no ability to work from home. Like other first responders, they have sacrificed and persevered so that when anyone dials 9-1-1, trained professionals are there to help.

On November 28, 2017, OMB published a final decision in the Federal Register, changing the detailed occupation name of Dispatcher to “Public Safety Telecommunicators” but REJECTING the suggestion to reclassify them as Protective Service Occupations.

COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that a proper definition is necessary so that Public Safety Telecommunicators can be included in rapid testing, vaccines, and relief packages. The Kansas Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) and Kansas National Emergency Number Association (NENA) believe there is need for a clearly defined definition of first responders in Kansas Statute that includes Public Safety Telecommunicators. Although there are current real time benefits to us being identified and properly defined in statute, this is not a new problem for Kansas, it has only been highlighted by the pandemic.

The Federal Standard Occupational Classification definition:
Public Safety Telecommunicators
Operate telephone, radio, or other communication systems to receive and communicate requests for emergency assistance at 9-1-1 public safety answering points and emergency operations centers. Take information from the public and other sources regarding crimes, threats, disturbances, acts of terrorism, fires, medical emergencies, and other public safety matters. May coordinate and provide information to law enforcement and emergency response personnel. May access sensitive databases and other information sources as needed. May provide additional instructions to callers based on knowledge of and certification in law enforcement, fire, or emergency medical procedures.



Together as one: The Thin Gold Line

The Emergency Management Act and relief packages alike do not specifically say 911 Public Safety Telecommunicators are included although, Homeland Security specifically outlines 911 call center employees as essential and part of the critical infrastructure and it is imperative for Kansas statute to be in harmony.

PSAPs face grave uncertainty regarding where they fit in with many of the relief efforts because federal, state, and local guidance are not aligned. The term "Public Safety Telecommunicators" better encompasses both 9-1-1 call taking and emergency dispatch and aligns with the Congressional Resolution that established National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week yet is not mentioned anywhere in Kansas Statute. This leaves PSAP managers confused and frustrated. As an example, Public Safety Telecommunicators are not classified as emergency personnel (first responders), yet for the purpose of keeping Emergency 911 Communication Centers open, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act allows agencies to prevent emergency telecommunicators from qualifying for Family and Medical Leave Act during this pandemic. Several relief packages, with a variety of components, have been, and continue to be, presented on both a federal and state level. And yet, 911 professionals struggle for clarity of eligibility.

As part of our Nation's Homeland Security and Public Safety Program, the Enhanced 911 Services Act (Public Law 108-494-Dec 23, 2004) established enhanced 9-1-1 service as a high, national priority. Public Safety Telecommunicators are the single, vital link for police officers, firefighters, and paramedics. They render lifesaving assistance to our residents during emergency calls, coordinate emergency professionals and equipment response. Despite their irrefutable essential roll, the 1,200 Public Safety Telecommunicators staffing Emergency Communication Centers in Kansas are not clearly identified in relief efforts.

Failure to explicitly include the term "Public Safety Telecommunicator" has led to disagreements among various agencies during the COVID-19 Pandemic as to whether Public Safety Telecommunicators are essential or first responders.

Defining "emergency (first) responders" is not a Kansas specific issue, other states like Indiana, Texas, West Virginia, California, Iowa, Georgia, Virginia, New York, Hawaii, Tennessee, and New Jersey are also taking this proactive approach. While the 911 SAVES Act introduced March 7, 2019 to reclassify Public Safety Telecommunicators remains alive in the House and Senate and is growing bipartisan support, it is still months away from possible fruition. Since COVID-19 is fluid, the need to convene stakeholders in Kansas to act is urgent.

A survey conducted by our organizations yielded responses from 85 PSAPs. Of those responses, 95% of Emergency Communication Centers report having adopted new protocol questions that allow for pre-screening of callers to help identify possible COVID-19 patients which eliminates unnecessary exposure ultimately safeguarding the EMS Crews and ER staff's health and their facilities.

While as much as 90% of the American public is either voluntarily or involuntarily staying home during the COVID-19 pandemic, one group of individuals that generally cannot do so are first responders, and Public Safety Telecommunicators are no exception. Regardless of PSAP quarantine policies, coordination with local emergency management, health screenings and staffing contingency plans, Public Safety Telecommunicators are left vulnerable.

It is imperative that these brave men and women whose stress level and contribution rivals that of police, fire, and medical personnel are first identified in Kansas Statute and then included in statutes meant to support emergency (first) responders. Public Safety Telecommunicators should be treated as equals to the other heroes in public safety.



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