

February 26, 2019

Senator Delores Goodwin Kelley
Miller Senate Office Building, 3 East Wing
11 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

**RE: SB 284 – 9-1-1 Specialists - Compensation and Benefits
Hearing in Finance Committee February 26, 2019 at 1:00 pm**

Good morning Chairman Kelley,

I have been a law enforcement officer for 40 years, retiring in 2017. I have been a First Responder under the current definition, for most of my adult life. I am currently the Director of the Emergency Services 9-1-1 Center for St. Mary's County.

For most of my career, a dispatcher, those who answer calls for "Help" in a time of crisis, have been looked upon as clerical employees. They have been referred to as "second class employees", less important than police officers, firefighters or emergency medical services personnel, but in fact, they are the watchful eye over the safety of our first responders in the field.

As the Director of Emergency Services in St. Mary's County I now embrace the world of public safety dispatchers. While I have always known their value; my time leading dispatchers has given me a completely new perspective. Dispatchers are absolutely critical to public safety.

Think of the process of responding to an emergency as a spectrum of providing a lifesaving service. In this spectrum, a dispatcher is the most critical component; it all begins with the dispatcher when they receive a call for service!

The definition of dispatcher is a person who handles emergencies that you cannot. They do precision guess work based on unreliable data, provided by those of questionable knowledge.

You have heard of the Thin Blue Line that reference police officers, and the Thin Red Line that reference Firefighters. There is also a Thin Gold Line, which is the line that lies between the thin blue and the thin red lines; rarely seen but mostly heard. The voice of the Thin Gold Line, is the calm voice in the dark of night; it is the glue that binds the emergency response spectrum together and make it successful.

If you call the police, or need a fireman or an ambulance... you call the local police, or you dial 911. Imagine that your call goes unanswered. Who will make sure that help gets to you? When you call the police or dial 911, who is the first person to answer your call for help?

A DISPATCHER is the first person you call when you need help and a DISPATCHER is the first person to answer your call for help!


I would like to tell you about a couple of incidents that have occurred in my center. Billy Yost is a Dispatcher that is truly a FIRST RESPONDER. On April 2, 2018 Billy Yost received a call from a young man that reported his daughter had stopped breathing. Billy dispatched an ambulance and then began talking with the young man. He gave calm and clear instructions on how to perform CPR on his daughter. I listened to the tape and all was quiet. As Billy was talking this man through life saving techniques, you can hear the child cough and begin to cry. The sound of this baby crying truly tugged at the heart, as the breath of life filled her lungs. Billy Yost, someone we use to think of as a “clerical employee” saved the life of this child by providing the knowledge and instruction to the father. After the child was breathing, Billy immediately softened, providing comfort and compassion to the father, staying on the line with him until EMS personnel arrived on the scene. Billy kept the calm in the chaos of this life threatening event!

In another incident, March 20, 2019 a tragedy unfolded at Great Mills High School with three students being shot; two of which sadly died. Our dispatchers worked this traumatic event with calm composure and professionalism. One of our dispatchers stayed on the line with the injured student that was suffering from a gunshot wound to the leg. Another dispatcher who is very young graduated just a year or two before from high school and closely identified with the students at Great Mills; she was visibly shaken by the incident. After the situation was stabilized, we rotated the on duty dispatchers out of the room and replaced them with fresh dispatchers who volunteered their time to come to work and support this tragic event.

The dispatchers that handled the original call at Great Mills then met with crisis management professionals to provide them with moral support, and to make sure they were able to adequately process the incident. This is just one of example of the major stressors dispatchers go through every day.

I ask for a favorable response from the committee, allowing it to move forward in the legislative process, resulting in 9-1-1 Dispatchers being properly recognized as such, resulting in adequate compensation.

Sincerely,



Steve Walker, Director
Director, Department of Emergency Services

A DISPATCHER IS THE FIRST... FIRST RESPONDER!