

2/3/22

Dear Delegate Mike Cherry:

I am a 911 operator, fire and police dispatcher for the City of Richmond. I have been employed as a telecommunicator for a total of 26 years.

I am writing today to ask for your support in reclassifying 911 telecommunicators and dispatchers so that they will be eligible to receive enhanced retirement benefits for hazardous duty service (SB 585, HB 131, HB 854). The 9-1-1 dispatchers in our community are critically important public safety personnel. On any given day, they may provide emergency medical instructions, deal with suicidal persons, analyze background noises and a caller's voice to assess a situation, or coordinate the dispatch and safe arrival of police, fire, and EMS personnel.

911 dispatchers are behind the scenes in the public safety field and often go without any type of recognition. Classifying 911 dispatchers as hazardous duty service positions would officially recognize them as the first, first responders.

There is a staffing crisis in 911 across the nation. The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) has reported the turnover rate for many 911 centers is 15 to 20% annually. The International Academy reports that some 911 centers currently have 30 to 50% of their positions vacant. This change to benefits would encourage more of these professionals to make this a career which may assist with reducing the high turnover rates in these positions.

The 911 dispatchers were an essential part of the response to the pandemic and worked many hours of overtime to make sure that calls did not go unanswered. Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Colorado, Texas, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, New Jersey, West Virginia have recognized 911 dispatchers as first responders. It is time for Virginia to join these states and demonstrate to these employees that the General Assembly recognizes their incredible contribution to making the Commonwealth of Virginia, a safer place.

Feel free to stop by my residence some time and I'll tell you anything you want to know about the struggles us 911 telecommunicators endure regularly.

Thank you very much for your time and any efforts you take to show the numerous 911 dispatchers across the Commonwealth that you support them.

Sincerely,

Stuart Keesling

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