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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
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SB714: NG911 Omnibus Legislation

Senate Finance Committee | Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Inspired by the death of Rockville activist and District 17 resident Carl Henn when 9-1-1 failed, I have chaired the Maryland Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG911) Commission for the past three years. The Commission has released three annual reports in [2018](#), [2019](#), and [2020](#) that have been incorporated into nine laws with bipartisan support. As a result of our efforts, Maryland is a national leader as we transition to NG911. As our colleague, Sen. Ed Reilly frequently says, "Our 9-1-1 system is one of the most important services the government provides. It can literally mean the difference between life and death."

[SB714](#) would implement the key recommendations from the Commission's [third annual report](#). This legislation would address the following provisions:

Modify the 9-1-1 Board Membership

There have been very few changes since the Emergency Number Systems Board was created in 1979. Modifying membership would reflect the anticipated expertise needed to implement NG911. Please see the attached table for the changes to the 9-1-1 Board. These new members will provide needed expertise as the Board implements NG911 technology and faces new challenges.

Require Psychological Training for 9-1-1 Specialists

The emotional labor of being a 9-1-1 Specialist takes a toll. Our "First First Responders" experience suicidal thoughts at a rate more than double the general public. Nearly a quarter suffer from work-related depression or probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This bill would require psychological training for 9-1-1 Specialists. Providing our current and future 9-1-1 Specialists with the tools to handle traumatic events will help reduce burnout and long-term onboarding costs

Study Workers' Compensation for 9-1-1 Specialists

This bill would authorize a study that would seek to determine whether Workers' Compensation laws should be amended to include visual and audible traumatic events as a compensable injury for 9-1-1 Specialists. This would be similar to the efforts that led to the creation of the Firefighter Jess McCullough's Cancer Protection Law ([SB646](#) - 2019) which made it easier for a firefighter, firefighting instructor, rescue squad member, or advanced life support unit member to qualify for a cancer or leukemia disease presumption under workers' compensation law. Other states, like Colorado, have expanded Workers' Compensation laws, allowing 9-1-1 Specialists to seek benefits when the exposure to trauma culminates in impaired physical or mental wellness, emotional awareness, or cognitive functioning. Sadly, a 2019 study by the Fairfax County, VA Police Department and the U.S. Marshals showed that First Responders experience suicidal thoughts at a rate more than double the

general population. Now that “text-to-9-1-1” is available statewide, the effects of trauma will only worsen as Maryland Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) accept images and videos.

Provide Funding for Recruitment

Recruitment is costly for our PSAPs, which already struggle with insufficient funds. The [NG911 Commission’s 2018 Report](#) identified a 13% vacancy rate of 9-1-1 specialists in Maryland. While the General Assembly has enacted legislation to provide greater benefits for these positions (such as authorizing counties to offer a \$2,500 tax credit in 2018), it is important that Marylanders know about these public safety career opportunities. The 9-1-1 Board should be authorized to fund these needed services to ensure that our PSAPs are fully staffed.

Mandate 9-1-1 Outage Notification

Approximately 74% of the nearly five million 9-1-1 calls made in Maryland annually are from wireless devices. A 9-1-1 outage on a wireless carrier’s network could cost lives. Our 24 9-1-1 Centers, the 9-1-1 Board, and the public need to know when 9-1-1 is unavailable. In the event of a 9-1-1 outage **lasting more than 30 minutes**, the carrier should inform the affected 9-1-1 Centers and the Maryland Joint Operations Center (MJOC) within the Maryland Emergency Management Agency. The carrier must also notify the 9-1-1 Board before its next meeting. While collaborating with stakeholders, we requested an amendment to make the outage requirement more similar to the FCC requirements by adding “and affecting greater than 600,000 user minutes.” These standard practices would ensure timely notification to our emergency centers and increase the oversight on our carriers.

Ensure NG911 Contracts Use Standardized Geographic Data

NG911 is being implemented on a county-by-county basis and determines which jurisdiction will answer the call. Lack of quality geographic data can cause devastating results-- [as seen in the June 2020 drowning](#) of Fitz Thomas on the border of Loudoun County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland. SB714 would ensure that county NG911 contracts require providers to use standardized geographic data. During an emergency, every second matters and precious minutes can be wasted without correct geographic data. Nobody should be passed from County to County while they are waiting for emergency assistance.

Enforcing Kari’s Law

The law was inspired by a tragic event when a mother, Kari Hunt, was murdered by her husband in Texas. Her nine-year old daughter tried to call 9-1-1 from the hotel room, but she did not know she needed to dial a 9 to get an outside line. Maryland was the first state in the nation to adopt [Kari’s Law](#) in 2015. As a result, anyone, anywhere in the state, should be able to dial 9-1-1 without a prefix. SB714 would allow individual counties to choose enforcement authority for the law. If they choose not to designate a County entity, the State Fire Marshall will have the responsibility.

I urge a favorable with amendment report on SB714 to enhance our State’s public safety system.