



A Union of Professionals
AFT-Maryland

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**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland Senate Finance Committee
SB 633 – Public Safety – 9–1–1 Emergency Telephone System – Alterations
March 8, 2022**

SUPPORT

Chair Kelley and members of the committee, on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers - Maryland (AFT-Maryland), which represents more than 20,000 city, county and state workers across Maryland, we urge a favorable report on SB 633.

A 911 specialist is defined as a professional public safety dispatcher, public safety telecommunicator or emergency response communication employee.

Everyday 911 specialists provide emergency medical instruction; deal with suicides and homicides; must assess emergency situations; and coordinate the safe arrival of field responders while remaining on the phone instructing sick, injured, distraught and frightened callers.

The federal government currently classifies 911 specialists as “administrative/clerical” positions. This is inaccurate and a disservice to the specialized, lifesaving work 911 specialists perform daily, and they need to be accurately recognized as an essential part of the public safety community as first responders.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the 911 Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services (SAVES) Act, a provision to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2020. The act would reclassify 911 dispatchers from Office and Administrative Support Occupations to Protective Service Occupations.¹ However, the US Senate did not include the provision in the final bill.

With the lack of action from the Senate, states and local governments have taken the lead in recognizing 911 specialists as first responders. States including California² and Texas³ as well as numerous counties across America.

¹ <https://conduitstreet.mdcountries.org/2019/07/13/u-s-house-passes-resolution-to-reclassify-9-1-1-specialists-as-first-responders/>

² https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1945

³ <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=86R&Bill=HB1090>

In 2018, Maryland established the Commission to Advance Next Generation 911 (NG911). The commission was tasked with evaluating ways to revamp the state's 911 call centers to reflect the realities of modern communications.

In 2019, Maryland passed legislation to adopt the Commission's recommendations and upgrade statewide 911 call centers to NG911. The call centers will process all types of communications including voice, text, vehicle crash notifications, photos and video.

With NG911 - 911 specialists will now see potentially graphic photos and videos. Industry experts believe the calls will become more of a psychological burden on 911 specialists when they can see what is going on - not just hear descriptions.⁴

In addition to upgrading to NG911, the Commission recommended that 911 specialists be recognized as first responders. And due to a 13 percent vacancy rate, the commission also recommended an increase in compensation for 911 specialists.

Currently, there are approximately 1,400 – 911 specialists in Maryland with a 13 percent vacancy rate. Call centers answer about 5.4 million calls a year statewide. As call centers become more accurate and faster with technology, the audio and visual contacts will increase and will require more highly trained personnel to cover the calls.

Across the country, elected officials recognize the increased required training, responsibilities and workload put on 911 specialists. More importantly, the additional trauma they must endure to perform their jobs. In response, they are reclassifying 911 specialists as first responders.

Maryland must do the same and pass legislation to recognize 911 specialists as first responders. We urge a favorable report on SB 633.

Kenya Campbell
President

⁴ Golding SE, Horsfield C, Davies A, Egan B, Jones M, Raleigh M, Schofield P, Squires A, Start K, Quinn T, Cropley M. 2017. Exploring the psychological health of emergency dispatch centre operatives: a systematic review and narrative synthesis.