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HB989: NG911 Omnibus Legislation

Health and Government Operations Committee

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Chair Pendergrass and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

I write today in strong support of HB989-- Omnibus legislation [endorsed by Maryland's Next Generation 9-1-1 Commission](#). I am a member of the Commission, and I have the honor of representing Maryland's Emergency Communications Specialists, as I am the only member of the Commission that is actively on the 911 floor every day. I have worked at the Frederick County Emergency Communications Center for about 12 years and have been a floor supervisor for about 6 of those years, so I know firsthand just how important some of these measures are for our 9-1-1 Specialists.

Supporting our 9-1-1 Specialists

As an Emergency Communications Specialist, I feel very passionately about the need for mental health training. SB714 will create a baseline standard for these essential coping mechanisms by requiring Communications Specialists to annually complete a minimum number of hours engaging in psychological well-being and resilience activities or trainings. While 9-1-1 Specialists may not have physical interactions with those requesting emergency assistance, there is still significant trauma from each call. *We only hear the voice and frequently don't know how the issue is resolved.* I let my shift know today that I would be working on this testimony, and I had an overwhelming number of people asking how they could help support this bill as well. One team member shared with me that she regretted not seeking help early on in her career after taking a first party suicide call in which she heard a gentleman take his own life while on the phone with him. She said after the call she took a short break, but for the rest of her shift she was afraid to answer the phone when it rang to her and had nightmares and trouble sleeping for months afterward. Having regular trainings and resources with regard to mental health and self-care would make it easier for people to reach out when they need to and not feel a negative stigma when doing so.

Also, cumulative stress builds in this line of work more so than with other first responders. When a traumatic call is taken, the Emergency Communications Specialist remains on the line until firefighters, paramedics, and/or police officers arrive. These field responders remain on that call through the duration of it, often spending an hour or more on one event. In the meantime, the Emergency Communications Specialist moves on to the next emergency, and then the next, and another, often times taking several dozen calls an hour. Each call is different, and there is not time or resources to take a walk or a stretch or much more than a breath in between each.

Annual training will ensure that we have the tools to succeed in our careers. When something terrible happens on the job, we can feel confident that we have the mental capacity to handle the trauma or know how to reach out for help. Creating the standard of mandatory completion of this training each year is no different than in-service trainings/certifications police officers have for weapons qualifications, anti-bias training, and use of force training, or refresher courses firefighters must complete on a regular basis.

Many 9-1-1 Specialists are already struggling to manage their mental health. The NG911 Commission is proposing that there be a summer study regarding Workers' Compensation for 9-1-1 Specialists. We are the "First" First Responders and deserve the same consideration as our colleagues on the frontline, and creating this standard will get us one step closer to classifying us correctly.

Mandating 9-1-1 Outage Reporting

As Maryland continues to upgrade its 9-1-1 infrastructure, it will become even more vital that 9-1-1 Centers, the 9-1-1 Board, and the public are made aware of outages within our 9-1-1 services. Recently, in which “Text-to-9-1-1” was not working after our daily test on more than one wireless carrier. No notification had been made to us by any vendor. Working together with several different jurisdictions, it was discovered this was a multi county outage that had not been reported to any jurisdiction that lasted at least 24 hours.

If a facet of 9-1-1 goes down, emergency calls cannot be answered. HB989 would require carriers to report a 9-1-1 service outage lasting longer than 30 minutes to the 9-1-1 Centers and the Maryland Joint Operations Center. The 9-1-1 Carriers must also notify the 9-1-1 Board before the next meeting. It is imperative that reporting outages are a priority so that alternative lines of communication can quickly be set up. We must keep Maryland residents safe.

I urge a favorable report on HB989.