



Law Enforcement Labor Services, Inc.

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September 30, 2021

Chad Burkitt

(via email: chad.burkitt@lcpr.leg.mn)

Legislative Commission on Pensions & Retirement
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Blvd.
Room 55, State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: LELS-Position Statement Supporting Enhanced PERA Benefits for 911 Telecommunicators

Dear Mr. Burkitt:

Thank you for reaching out to our organization seeking a position paper in consideration of whether 911 telecommunicators/dispatcher should receive enhanced PERA benefits. The issue of whether to provide 911 telecommunicators/dispatchers with improved PERA benefits is certainly not a new one; however, over the last decade demands of the job have significantly changed and absolutely merit an increase in PERA benefits. Law Enforcement Labor Services (LELS) fully supports improvements to the current PERA benefit plan including moving to a full retirement age of 55 as well as an increase in the retirement benefit formula.

As background, LELS is Minnesota's largest Public Safety Labor Union with over 6,400 members, specializing in representing those in public safety positions. LELS represents 911 dispatchers in 48 Minnesota counties and 3 cities. We also represent the dispatchers employed by the Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport. In all, we serve hundreds, 911 dispatchers, all considered "essential" employees pursuant to State statute.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?" This is the first question asked with every 911 call and nothing is routine about the exchanges following that question. From the moment a call comes in, the 911 dispatcher is to remain poised and professional in life-or-death crises. They often handle multiple and stressful calls simultaneously, while also communicating critical information to their law enforcement, fire or other EMS partners. Many times, they are also delivering lifesaving instructions to the caller. A dispatcher's day can start with a fatal car accident, a suicide, a choking child or an active shooter at a school. 911 dispatchers are not clerical workers, rather they are our first, first responders.

911 dispatchers are a vital link in our emergency response system, often suffering the same type of stress that we see in police officers and firefighters¹. They are the first to take in the emergency, they determine the facts, and they make the call to send the appropriate response, often sending others into harm's way. Following a serious incident, the responding peace officers are allowed time off, they are given time to go home, or debrief. 911 dispatchers are most likely required to continue working, moving on to the next emergency despite having just dealt with a very traumatic event. Many times, they are not debriefed and often not given the chance to stop working and emotionally process what just happened.

Studies show that 911 dispatchers endure work related stress at higher levels than most other professions. In fact, research can support that the risk for these emergency dispatchers to experience traumatic stress disorders is significantly higher than for the general public.² This suggests that they are exposed to hazardous psychological working conditions.

Like law enforcement, 911 dispatching is a 24/7, 365-day public service. Again, like law enforcement, dispatchers often work long hours. They had to report to work, like other police, fire and EMS professionals during the pandemic, when most of us worked from home. It is not unusual for their shifts to be 10 or 12 hours long, being subject to mandated overtime bringing their shift length to 16 hours.

In addition to the serious effects of the stressful nature of this work, the physical nature of the job plays a significant role in the longevity of a 911 dispatcher's career. 911 dispatchers are required to sit at a console for hours at a time and in the busy, short-staffed emergency communications centers, and they often go without regular meal or bathroom breaks. We all know of the physical toll long bouts of sitting places on the human bodies. Further, it is rare for a call center to have windows or access to natural light. The physical working environment is more akin to a bomb shelter, having dispatchers working without exposure to daylight for 10-12 hours at a time.

All of the 911 dispatchers we have had the privilege of representing are dedicated professionals, but they also know that this tends to be a shortened career path, not one that can result in retiring from at the age of 65 or older due to the physical and psychological demands this position puts on the brave and dedicated person who serves our State in this way. It is time we acknowledge this service to our State and our State's citizens by providing the deserved PERA benefits to include an earlier full retirement age of 55 and an enhanced retirement benefit formula.

Please review the attached testimonials heartfully written by those serving as a 911 telecommunicators/dispatchers. They can speak to these matters far better than I as they have lived through these traumatic events numerous, maybe even countless, times.

¹ See [Effects of Stress on 9-1-1 Call-Takers and Police Dispatchers: A Study at the San Jose Police Department \(sjsu.edu\)](http://Effects%20of%20Stress%20on%209-1-1%20Call-Takers%20and%20Police%20Dispatchers%3A%20A%20Study%20at%20the%20San%20Jose%20Police%20Department%20(sjsu.edu)) for a thorough analysis of the physical and mental stressors placed on 911 telecommunicators and the impact on their lives and longevity of their careers. See also [NENA 01-002 \(ymaws.com\)](http://NENA%2001-002%20(ymaws.com)) – NENA Standards on 9-1-1 Acute/Traumatic and Chronic Stress Management August 5, 2013.

² [NENA 01-002 \(ymaws.com\)](http://NENA%2001-002%20(ymaws.com)) – NENA Standards on 9-1-1 Acute/Traumatic and Chronic Stress Management August 5, 2013, at pg 9.

If you have any questions or would like copies of the documents cited in the footnotes, please do not hesitate to contact me or anyone here at LELS.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Respectfully yours,

James W. Mortenson

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