

March 13, 2025

Dear Chair Longmuir and members of the Political Subdivisions Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of Senate Bill 2296. My name is Sarah Miller, Public Safety Telecommunications Director and 911 Coordinator for Barnes County Dispatch and President of the North Dakota 911 Association. I have been serving my community and this industry for over 15 years in various roles such as Public Safety Telecommunicator, Public Safety Telecommunications Supervisor, Reserve Deputy, and Emergency Medical Technician.

It is with great excitement I am here today in support of Senate Bill 2296 - defining the men and women who answer 911 calls, dispatch emergency responders, and coordinate life-saving efforts – as First Responders. Public Safety Telecommunicators are the first link in the vital chain of emergency services provided to the public. They are the “first” first responders and first point of contact in an emergency. Their expertise, quick thinking, and ability to make split-second decisions under pressure literally means the difference between someone living and someone dying.

This work requires Telecommunicators to work under intense pressure, often handling multiple emergencies simultaneously. Public Safety Telecommunicators are required to meet the same level of dedication, training, and professionalism as firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, and law enforcement officers. PST's have the same level of security clearances as our law enforcement partners and their training programs are rigorous, often lasting four to six months in order to become proficient at a multitude of difficult skills and multitasking. Whether its dispatching law enforcement, fire, EMS, or other entities, their actions are immediate and directly contribute to the outcome of the emergency. They make life saving decisions, provide critical instructions to callers (such as CPR Guidance and childbirth guidance – often when the caller is in a moving vehicle), and provide coordination in complex situations, keeping responding agencies updated with real-time information. This support ensures that responders arrive on-scene prepared, with necessary resources, and most importantly, safely.

Public Safety Telecommunicators also experience the same, if not greater, emotional and mental strain as first responders in the field. They are exposed to distressing and traumatic calls, yet must remain calm, focused, and professional in order to gather all necessary information and provide critical assistance to their caller. Upon disconnecting with the caller, PSTs rarely receive any closure or notification of outcome after a call has been completed leaving the stress of the call lingering with the PST since they do not know if the person lived or died, if the care, medical intervention, or support they gave to the caller made a difference. With available new technologies, Public Safety Telecommunicators are now exposed to live video feeds during calls as well. In our center alone, dispatchers have witnessed domestic altercations, suicide attempts, received photos of abuse and assault, and more. Their work can be just as hazardous to their mental and physical health and recognizing Public Safety Telecommunicators as first responders will help ensure access to the same support, training, and resources as those of their partner responders, which is desperately needed to continue a high level of service to their communities. It also publicly recognizes their true value and essential role in ensuring a safe community and state. The chain of Public safety simply does not exist without the Public Safety Telecommunicator.

By defining the role of a First Responder, and recognizing Public Safety Telecommunicators in that role, we are acknowledging the true reality of the work these men and women do 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. We recognize the responsibility, the expertise, and the immense pressure they shoulder each day as they leave their families, sign into their consoles, and take that first call each shift. These dedicated individuals are indispensable to public safety, and they deserve to be recognized as equal partners in being a First Responder.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and recognition of this important issue. I will stand for any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Sarah Miller
Public Safety Telecommunications Director/911 Coordinator
Barnes County Dispatch
North Dakota 911 Association, President
701-845-8187