

When you call or text 911, you expect a trained professional will answer and help you. But what if the 911 center doesn't accept text messages? Or the 911 infrastructure doesn't precisely locate you and instead sends your call to the wrong 911 center? What if there aren't enough 911 telecommunicators to answer your call?

You expect the system to work no matter how often you call 911. There are stories of long ring times, text denials, and misrouted or mismanagement of calls. Everyone in the 911 service, from management to technology services to telecommunicators, strives to deliver the best call handling and response to 911 callers. But trying doesn't always make it happen.

911 telecommunicators are federally classified as secretaries. Try as we might, we haven't been able to change that. But in Washington State, with Senate Bill SB-5555, we can finally acknowledge 911 telecommunicators' position in the first responder community and ensure they receive appropriate initial and continuing training.

About 7 million 911 calls are made each year in our state. 911 telecommunicators are the people who answer, triage, and respond to these calls. They need extensive geographic knowledge to help those who call and don't know where they are. Telecommunicators must have exemplary questioning skills to effectively communicate with and give instructions to suicidal callers, angry neighbors, scared children, crime victims and more. With recent behavioral health changes, the job of the 911 telecommunicator has become even more complex. These individuals provide life-saving instructions to people experiencing or witnessing tragedy and mayhem as part of their daily job.

House on fire? Call 911. The telecommunicator will start the fire department and tell you what to do while you wait. Involved in an accident? The telecommunicator will help you figure out where you are, provide safety instructions, and determine the appropriate response.

Witnessed a person collapse? The telecommunicator will give you instructions to help that person survive until medical personnel arrives. These heroes work long, strenuous hours during holidays, special events, and family celebrations. Yes, it is a difficult, almost impossible, job – but we love it.

The technologies 911 telecommunicators use demand an understanding of hundreds of cryptic computer commands. They usually use four or more monitors and at least three separate but necessary 911 systems: 911 telephone, computer aided dispatching, and public safety radio. With the push to modernize 911 throughout the nation, challenges will increase as requirements to accept new methods for receiving and triaging calls for service begin. Imagine your Nest thermostat “calling” 911 when it senses your home’s temperature is 95 degrees or sharing real-time video with a telecommunicator of an assault in-progress.

While most 911 centers provide many hours of high-quality training, there are no national or state curriculum requirements. There are no required certifications or recertifications. SB-5555 changes that by enacting a volunteer certification board made up of stakeholders, including union representatives and telecommunicators.

The board will set standards that ensure telecommunicator training meets the needs of our communities. As technological and societal needs change, critical training can be introduced to address them. Things like crisis intervention training, social justice, communicating with diverse populations, and disability awareness and response can be part of the 911 telecommunicator training. The certification program is vital to meet community expectations and prepare our telecommunicators for the future.

SB-5555 also acknowledges our 911 telecommunicators as first responders. Acknowledging their position is essential in a complex strategy to elevate the profession.

Increased professional awareness and improved community support can grow recruitment for these critical positions. There is a national 911 staffing crisis, and our state needs to aggressively approach 911 telecommunicator recruitment to turn the tide. SB-5555 is a necessary first step. In twenty years, we should hear children talk about growing up to be 911 telecommunicators with as much enthusiasm as becoming a firefighter. As members of our society, I encourage everyone to actively support SB-5555.

Katy Myers is the President of the Washington Chapter of APCO-NENA, the local 911 association that supports 911 professionals. She began her career in 1991 as a telecommunicator and has been in public safety communications since.

Resources

<https://mil.wa.gov/e911-operational-cost-study>

<https://www.oxygen.com/911-crisis-center/crime-news/911-crisis-center-how-dispatchers-handle-stress-trauma>

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2021/10/new-research-suggests-911-call-centers-lack-resources-to-handle-behavioral-health-crises>

<https://komonews.com/news/local/staffing-crisis-impacting-response-to-911-calls-in-seattle>

<https://billypenn.com/2021/08/30/philadelphia-911-calls-ringing-no-answer-police-dispatch-staffing-crisis/>

<https://wtop.com/local/2021/07/dc-911-interim-head-orders-mandatory-overtime-to-halt-staffing-shortages/>