

9-1-1 dispatchers are the first contact that citizens have when calling for help during an emergency. They are a vital link in the chain of individuals who make up our nation's emergency response system and are highly trained in guiding callers by keeping them calm and by de-escalating tense situations.

While the public safety community understands the importance of 911 dispatchers, the Office of Management and Budget currently categorizes 9-1-1 dispatchers as "office and administrative support." This category also includes hotel desk clerks, postal mail sorters, and human resource assistants, to name a few. Those professions do not endure the same amount of stress and trauma that comes from calmly and meticulous handling high risk medical, fire, or law enforcement situations.

In 2019 I conducted a nationwide survey with 741 participants. The survey obtained the following statistics:

86 percent of dispatchers stated they suffer from chronic anxiety related to their career, nearly 5 percent higher than the general population.

73 percent of the dispatchers suffer from depression, while only 6.7 percent of the general population suffers.

18 percent of dispatchers reported being diagnosed with PTSD which is very comparable to the 7-19 percent of Police Officers diagnosed with PTSD.

3 percent of the dispatchers surveyed had attempted suicide, a rate SIX TIMES HIGHER than the general population's 0.5 percent. (sources available upon request)

The State of Oregon has already recognized that 911 dispatchers suffer from PTSD due to on the job trauma exposure and have included them in PTSD legislation under ORS 656.802 along with police, fire, and medical personnel, although the state has yet to declare 911 dispatchers as first responders.

By declaring 911 dispatchers as first responders the State of Oregon sends a very clear message to the rest of the country that the occupation of a 911 dispatcher is more than a secretary pushing buttons and taking notes at a console. We are the eyes and ears on the scene of a crime before law enforcement arrives. We are the calm voice on the other end of the line delivering babies while medics are still enroute. We are the compassionate shoulder many have cried on when they have lost a loved one. We have listened to a mother's screams when her baby is not breathing. We have been entrusted with the ultimate task of ensuring our first responders make it home alive at the end of each shift.

We are the FIRST first responders and we are asking to be recognized for the work we do.