

Public testimony HB 2701

Hello and thank you Chair Greyber, Vice Chair Lewis, Vice Chair Tran and committee members, for allowing me to speak today regarding HB 2701.

My name is Colleen Aldrich and I am currently employed as a Telecommunicator 2 with the Oregon State Police serving at the Southern Command Center in Central point. I have been an emergency dispatcher for approximately 27 years; 17.5 with OSP and 9.5 with Klamath County 911.

I wanted to speak today about how important it is to recognize that working as an Emergency Telecommunicator takes a toll on one's physical and mental health just as much, if not more in some cases, as it does to other public safety personnel, and why being able to retire under the same perimeters is not only needed but necessary.

Furthermore, I want to discuss how improved retirement provisions will help attract and retain perspective new people who may be interested in becoming an emergency dispatcher

According to an article published on Gov1.com in 2/2020, the authors researched how working as an emergency comm professional affects one and their interpersonal relationships. They assert that compassion fatigue can kick in within just a few years. This can lead to breakdowns in personal and family relationship, which is compounded by the constant shift work and overtime, not being able to be at holiday gatherings, birthdays, etc. Additionally, the authors cite another article published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress, April 2012 conducted by Dr. Michelle Lily a study which she has shown that dispatchers are essentially as much at-risk for PTSD as their police officer and firefighter counterparts.

Police1 magazine published an article in 12/2022 listing the 10 most stressful public safety jobs in the US. They pulled information from the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) who recently ranked nearly 900 of the most stressful jobs in the US. In Public Safety 911 dispatcher ranked #1, and ranked 8th overall. Additionally, Adv Practice Psych nurses ranked 16th overall and clinical psychologists ranked 19th overall. All three are ranked higher than Police officers, Correctional officers, and firefighters.

Other studies have shown that Emergency Telecommunicators suffer from physical issues due to the sedentary nature of the job. Obesity, back, neck and joint issues. Stomach and gastrointestinal issues. Diabetes due to irregular eating habits, sleep disturbances, and chronic fatigue are just some of the ongoing medical issues that can plague dispatchers. Over long periods of time these issues can shorten one's life span and reduce the quality of life we live.

Unlike other jobs in emergency services, dispatchers are tethered to a console for 8, 10, 12 and sometimes more hours per day. Anytime we have to get up to use the restroom, someone else needs to cover our area of responsibility. Many centers run with only 1 or 2 people on duty at a

time. This can make getting up for a simple restroom break difficult. Many centers do not allow time off console to eat a meal or go out and get a breath of fresh air.

Please understand that sedentary does not mean we just sit around and answer a couple of phones or talk to one or two officers. During my 27-year career I have literally held life and death in my virtual hands requiring me to make critical decisions in mere seconds. I have had to instruct individuals on life saving techniques through EMD pre arrival instructions; I have had to be ultra-aware and tuned into situations in which my officers were in a stand off with someone who was either shooting at them or threatening to do so.

I have talked to people who are experiencing the worst day of the life because they have found a loved one deceased in their home. These calls came from spouses who woke up next to their life partner not breathing, from a father finding their teenager had overdosed, to a mother who is frantic because she cannot wake her newborn baby.

I have talked to a mother whose son and girlfriend were in a heated domestic dispute in which a shotgun was involved; the shot gun went off killing the girlfriend. The hysteria and panic in the mother's voice when she was asking for help while describing the scene in her son's room and the vivid descriptions she articulated about the scene will be with me forever.

I have talked to a woman whose boyfriend was beating her up. Her child was in the room with her at the time. It is hard to forget the sound of skin striking skin and the force behind the blows and the crying of the child who is witnessing all of this.

I have had officers come up on my radio screaming "shots fired" out of the blue because a suspect, who was being interviewed at one of our patrol offices decided he did not want to cooperate any further and reached for one of the officers firearms. I have had other officers come up on the radio asking for C3 cover because an impaired driver just plowed into his patrol vehicle.

I have done all these things while still answering multiple other calls and monitor and responding to other units on other channels. Unlike field units, we must handle multiple calls simultaneously while making sure that they are handled in a timely fashion and all field units are monitored.

Currently, if I want to receive full PERS benefits I must work another five years, until I am 65 years old. As much as I love my job, the idea of having to do it for another five years adds more stress on top of an already full plate. My compassion storage facility is getting full and my continued ability to provide quality and professional customer service to the citizens we service and the officers that need us is challenged.

Another reason this bill is so very important to the industry is job recruitment & retention. Currently, there are 54 primary and secondary PSAP's in Oregon employing 1054 telecommunicators. The state population as of 2021 was 4.246 million people and it is increasing exponentially. As with LE officers, the current number of TC's is not enough to effectively handle the number of 911 calls received. For perspective candidates, knowing you will not have to stay in the job for 30 years or until the age of 65 is a positive incentive.

I understand PERS's reluctance to modify their method of doing things to create a new fund for telecommunicators and OSH employees however, this bill and provision to allow us to retire with the same benefits as police and fire has been a long time in the making. We as emergency telecommunicators have been trying to get recognized as "emergency personnel" for years not only in the State's retirement system, but also under the Federal Bureau of Labor's occupations classifications. PERS asking us to take a reduced benefit in retirement income just to be able to retire at 25 years is not only unfair, but almost insulting. We do not want to retire "early" because we are being soft, or lazy or weak. We want to retire while we can still have quality of life, enjoy our families, and get our health and sanity back.

I was scheduled to testify via zoom; however, I was not given the chance to do so due to the influx of individuals who showed up in person from the OSH. Therefore, I am submitting my written testimony instead. I am asking for the committee's support for this bill.

Thank you,

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