

March 30, 2023

Submitter: Andi Toombs

Seaside Police Department/South Clatsop County 911 PSAP

Attention: The Honorable Chair Grayber, Vice-chairs Lewis and Tran, and members of the Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

Re: Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 2701

My name is Andi Toombs, and I am testifying in favor of House Bill 2701. I have worked as a 911 Dispatcher for over 18 years with the Seaside Police Department, serving the southern half of Clatsop County. Previously, I served both in the Army and National Guard for a total of 22 years, with the last 5 years overlapping with my Dispatch job.

Although our resident population is small (10,617 residents year-round, in south Clatsop County), our population swells to tens of thousands during tourist season and major events, such as the 4th of July, Hood to Coast and Volleyball weekend. In Seaside, we act as both call-takers and police and fire dispatchers. We are true “puppet masters” in that we quickly and efficiently coordinate numerous resources during critical incidents, such as traffic crashes; cliff, surf or mountain rescues; structure or wildfires; and numerous others, by dispatching police, fire, and/or EMS, Life Flight, the US Coast Guard, and other agencies as requested, including Pacific Power, NW Natural Gas, Oregon Department of Forestry, Department of Human Services – Child Welfare, Chaplains, mental health crisis teams, homeless liaisons, tow trucks, and more.

Over the winter, we had some traffic fatalities. One in particular was when a tree fell on a vehicle during an ice and wind storm, killing 3 family members. This week, another child from the same family was killed in another traffic crash. My former commander at Camp Rilea, James Lyda, was killed when a tree fell on the cab of his commercial truck in Central Oregon the same day as the triple fatality. Just this month, a mother slit the wrists of her infant, then cut her own wrist. We have taken calls regarding children and parents who have drowned, when they didn’t understand the power of the ocean during rip tides and king tides. A driver who killed his 3 week old newborn in a drunk driving accident – yet himself walked away without a scratch. This is just a sample of calls from the last several months. Imagine YEARS of these of calls.... piling up in your psyche. Oftentimes, we can’t even deal with the aftermath in our own minds, because we have to immediately move on to the next call.

Yes, police, firefighters and paramedics are the first to arrive on scene and visually witness these horrific events, but dispatchers are the ones who take and dispatch the initial calls – and bear witness to the horror and anguish the caller is describing; callers who may also very well be angry, hostile and frustrated with help not getting there fast enough.

On the evening of February 6, 2016 I, along with my partner, were the dispatchers on duty the night SGT Jason Gooding was shot and killed in the line of duty. Calling my Chief – Jason’s best friend – to tell him Jason had been shot - GUTTED ME. In my career, this stands out as the worst shift of my life. I work an

average of 60 hours overtime every month for Astoria 911, which is critically staffed at less than 50%. Emergency Communication Centers are struggling with hiring and retention of good dispatchers all over the US. I have missed my daughter's birthday almost every year, since she was born on the 4th of July, which, hands down, is our busiest day of the year. I have missed numerous events and holidays in her life.

The years of cumulative stress and vicarious trauma (aka compassion fatigue) has taken it's toll on my physical and mental well-being. I have chronic headaches, searing muscle pain in my neck and shoulders; arthritis and repetitive use injuries and related surgeries; as well as regular visits to my chiropractor. I also have a hard time feeling empathy toward friends and family with what I consider "minor" problems – I have become desensitized to things most people would normally react to.

We are expected to keep up with ever changing and complex technology. We show up day after day to do the job we love and to support our officers, firefighters and paramedics. We help train the next generation to do the same, through months of rigorous in-house training and attending the DPSST academy for certification. That's in addition to hours of continuing education, annual training and maintenance as required by state and local policies and regulations.

For the reasons listed above, I implore you to consider passage of HB 2701 to benefit dispatchers with the same retirement benefits given to other first responders. In addition, I invite each of you to contact your local Emergency Communications Center and request to do a "sit-along" for a couple of hours. I promise, you will not regret the experience. Remember, we are the FIRST, first responders – the most important person the public never sees.

Thank you very much for your time in reading my testimony today.

Respectfully submitted,

Andi Toombs
Seaside/South Clatsop County 911