

Testimony of Tyrell Morris  
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Committee on Municipal, Parochial, and Cultural Affairs

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and Committee Members. My name is Tyrell Morris, and I am the Executive Director of the Orleans Parish Communication District, home of New Orleans 9-1-1. I also come to you today as the President of the Louisiana Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association, a certified Public Safety Executive, and an appointed member at-large of the United States Department of Homeland Security's SAFECOM advisory group. But most importantly, I come to you today as a first responder and 9-1-1 professional.

We are all moving through our lives knowing that at any moment, if we have an emergency, help is just a phone call away. But far too often when praise is given to our heroic field responders, often forgotten are the nameless and faceless heroes that answered the call for help and coordinated such a seamless response. Throughout the nation over 6,000 emergency communication centers around the nation answer an estimated 240 million calls annually. All the public often knows is that they had an emergency and somehow police officers, firefighters, paramedics and EMTs magically appeared at their front door. But the

reality is that a complex system was worked with incredible accuracy and precision, all at the hands of an emergency communications professional. I often refer to them as the conductor of a well-oiled public safety machine.

Just like our public safety partners in law enforcement, fire and EMS, the work of 9-1-1 professional is not for everyone. Those who join our teams must have a strong commitment to service, quality, accuracy and have the perseverance to work through some of the most difficult situations. A 2012 study by the Northern Illinois University found that roughly 25% of 9-1-1 professionals show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some may find this statistic shocking, but I would venture to say the number is higher here in Louisiana. As public safety emergencies have become more complex and our state has been greatly impacted by repeated bouts of severe weather, this just adds to the already heavy workload, stress and burdens of the job. It is very possible that during a 12-hour shift, some 9-1-1 professionals in our state can take up to 200 emergency calls. One after the other with little to no break in between, from one emergency to the next. When we answer the call, there is no preparation for what we will hear on the other end of the line. This blind trauma is just as intense and has many of the same long-term effects our other public safety partners experience. When we disconnect from a caller, our heroes are often left to

wonder what ever happened to that person. That lack of closure and the inevitable speculation can be overwhelmingly difficult to process.

Over the last three years we have seen significant advancements and changes in 9-1-1. As the nation and our state transition to an IP based, Next Generation 9-1-1 environment, multi-media including video, picture, text message and additional data now enter our 9-1-1 centers. Our team members must be incredibly skilled and have an ability to determine the most appropriate response. Here is a very realistic example. You call 9-1-1 to report an armed robbery. The emergency communication professional must first determine your location using not just your reported location, but by validating that location using maps and coordinates provided by the cellular network and additional data transmitted via your smart phone. You as the caller were able to capture a description of the suspects, the weapon used and their license plate. The call taker must create the incident in the computer aided dispatch system, identify what units and how many should respond; and send them. Simultaneously, they must enter the license plate information into our systems to see if we can get registered owner information, see if the vehicle was reported stolen, if the registered owner is wanted for any warrants, are they a known violent offender and finally are they on the terrorist watch list. On the same call you report that

someone was injured during the robbery so now the call taker must ensure the appropriate medical triage assessment is complete and send the appropriate level of EMS and Fire response. Finally, we need to provide emergency and pre-arrival instructions. This could include bleeding control or CPR instructions while at the same time listening to background sounds to indicate if the scene is becoming unstable and unsafe for field responders. Again, this job is not for everyone but all of us arrive to work every day ready to handle whatever the world may throw at us.

As we all prepare to celebrate National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week April 10<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup>, I challenge you all and members of the public to engage with their local emergency communication center, learn how it works and show your appreciation for the work they do each and every day for us all.

Now to the reason we are here. House Bill 392 which sits before this committee today provides a definition and the authority for a communication district in the state to declare that those performing the lifesaving work of a 9-1-1 professional be considered “first responders”. As part of a nationwide initiative, Louisiana would be added to a list of 28 states that have already or are in the process to make this same declaration. I want to take a moment and thank Representative Jason Hughes of New Orleans for his sponsorship of this bill. We

have heard from many members of this legislature, and the bipartisan support for our 9-1-1 heroes is incredible. The initial version of this bill declared that all 9-1-1 professionals “shall” be considered first responders. After receiving a request from some 9-1-1 leaders across the state, an amendment was filed to make the bill permissive and state that a communication district “may” declare their staff as first responders. In true transparency, I believe the word “shall” sends a heartfelt and strong message to our heroes that their state legislative officials support them, but I understand the request to change the language to “may” which makes the bill permissive and eliminates unintended consequences. Ultimately, what we are looking for is access to resources, training, mental health services, and pay equity amongst other first responder agencies so that we may recruit and retain top talent. Staffing of emergency communication centers across the state of Louisiana is currently a very difficult challenge, but we aren’t alone as national news outlets have recently reported on staffing shortages around the country. This has resulted in longer call holding times and staff resignations from burn out. With both the national and Louisiana unemployment rate being at an all-time low, we are losing some of our best team members to higher paying jobs that offer a fraction of the stress and personal sacrifice. The passage of this bill will not only make a clear statement of support for our 9-1-1 professionals; but also provide

the communication districts in the state the necessary authority to begin to plan for adjustments to benefits, services and training to help stabilize staffing. Our communities and your constituents will be able to receive high-quality 9-1-1 service, and our emergency communication centers will be places for our dedicated public servants to thrive. Thank You!