

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Session: January – April
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Official Business

Sponsor Statement **HB 415 – 911 Privacy**

Public records disclosure is an essential tool for Alaskans to track the performance of state agencies. 911 transcripts and audio recordings are among the public records available for citizen inspection. Access to these records serves a legitimate public purpose; playing actual calls over the airwaves does not. The growing practice of broadcasting 911 recordings on the radio, television, and internet is a disturbing trend that not only serves little public value, but violates the privacy rights of the Alaskans making those calls.

In an effort to protect the privacy of 911 callers, House Bill 415 bars recordings of 911 calls from being played over broadcast media. Emergency calls are often desperate cries from vulnerable individuals, and placing such a call should not consent to the caller's extremely private moments being splashed over the airwaves. Transcripts and call audio will remain open to the public, thus balancing the public's right to know with the privacy rights of the caller.

Widespread unease at the public airing of 911 calls has spurred legislative action across the country. Five states keep 911 recordings confidential, and an additional four place restrictions on the release of tapes. Four more states have legislation pending addressing the issue.

House Bill 415 strikes the appropriate balance between the public interest and the privacy of 911 callers. There is little public value in airing the distressed voices of 911 callers, and Alaskans should have the expectation that the extremely personal and often distressed calls they place to 911 will not be fodder for the evening news.

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