

03/06/2026 House Labor & Commerce Committee Testimony – HJR 38 Public Safety Telecommunicators

Introduction: Erann Kalwara, Public Safety Manager at the Juneau Police Department

Multiple roles since 1999 related to public safety including public safety dispatcher, communications training officer, emergency medical dispatch instructor, lead dispatcher and 9-1-1 coordinator for CBJ.

Why I am Here: I currently manage the Police Services Division of the Juneau police department which includes multiple units including the 24 x 7, 365 days per year operations of Juneau's public safety communications center staffed by public safety dispatchers and call takers.

Part of my job is to ensure police and fire radio systems, computer networks and the 9-1-1 system are functioning and I manage the hiring, training and retention of staff while ensuring we meet internal policies and procedures as well as national standards.

As a member of the joint State Board for the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) and the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), I have an interest in advancing this profession. These two non-profit organizations provide standards for public safety dispatching, 9-1-1 operations and technical issues.

Public safety dispatchers and call takers are not clerical staff. They answer 9-1-1 and other emergency calls for service. Many lives have been saved because of our 9-1-1 professionals' dedication to public safety and service. They are the first of the first responders who assist individuals in crisis and play a vital role in almost every emergency. Most emergencies start with a call to 9-1-1 or another number answered by people trained to handle emergency calls for service.

Details: Juneau communications center staff hold licenses from the State of Alaska Department of Health and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) as emergency medical dispatchers. State licensing recognizes that just as paramedics or EMTs require training and continuing education, so do emergency medical dispatchers. This certification is for a profession in the EMS field.

Most Alaska dispatchers are multidisciplinary - law enforcement, medical, fire, search and rescue, mobile crisis team, mobile integrated health. The partners, the work and technologies are expanding every year. For example, we now work with 9-8-8 in Alaska.

Our public safety dispatchers use many technical systems. 9-1-1, phone, GIS/mapping, computer aided dispatch systems that are unique to our field and difficult to use.

Dispatchers are required to use these systems so well that they use them without pausing to think or look to quickly get the information out there. Police officers, firefighters and medics depend on the information to be absolutely accurate when it goes over the air or transfers into CAD or other technical systems like fire station alerting.

Keeping up with the different technology necessary to perform the job is very and can be difficult. Internal systems change frequently. These are not clerical or reception types of tasks our dispatchers are performing. Dispatchers must have a mastery level of knowledge and experience with the systems to process every call appropriately.

Systems and technologies that the public uses such as wireless phones also change frequently. Dispatchers must be aware of how these devices and systems work, how they interface, how to turn features on such as GPS. If a caller doesn't know how to use their own technology, dispatch immediately starts helping them leverage features needed to help them such as finding the caller's location.

Our staff are trained to be professional, courteous and ready to answer any call for service. The next call could be a barking dog, CPR in progress or a traumatic injury. Dispatchers I know have been on the phone with people talking to callers who commit suicide *while they are on the phone with them*. They answer calls from mothers whose infants have died. There were plane crash survivors of an aircraft crash who called in when others onboard died. Dispatch provided medical instruction to sustain the survivor's lives, used technology to ping the location, advocated and helped the people stay calm for several hours while help was on the way to the remote crash site.

These calls generate a lot of stress for the dispatcher, like they would for any other first responder. Dispatchers hold it all in until they can walk away. They have to return for their next shift. These requirements are very different from those in the clerical field.