



MEDIA RELEASE

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Florida's Professional 9-1-1 Associations Join Together to Gain First-Responder Recognition for Florida's 9-1-1 Professionals

All three Florida Professional 9-1-1 Associations have now banded together, representing Florida's more than 8,000 highly skilled and certified 9-1-1 telecommunications personnel. Our goal is to elevate legislative and public awareness to improvements necessary to deliver optimal emergency service to the people of our Nation's 3rd largest State.

The leaders of the Florida Chapter of the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (FL APCO), the Florida Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association (FL NENA) and the Florida 9-1-1 Coordinators Association have entered into a joint agreement to combine and unify efforts to properly recognizing 9-1-1 Public Safety Emergency Telecommunicators as First Responders. The three organizations' focus is on 9-1-1 operations, technologies and personnel. Reclassification is pivotal to maintaining professional operations of Florida's Enhanced and Next Generation 9-1-1 systems.

9-1-1 Public Safety Emergency Telecommunicators are most often the first contact when residents, visitors, students, and the elderly reach out to for help in times when they are most vulnerable. When the public needs emergency services, they are there to answer the call.

They go by many names and titles: 911 Dispatcher, Emergency Communications Officer, 911 Call Taker, Duty Officer, Communicator, etc. They all have one thing in common. Florida's Professional 9-1-1 Public Safety Emergency Telecommunicators (PSTs) are the voices you hear when you dial 9-1-1; they are mission critical. Emergency Public Safety Telecommunicators provide life-saving instruction, calm callers in distress, and set a safe scene for fellow emergency responders. While they may be located miles away from the incident, they directly witness traumatic events by hearing all that is occurring at the scenes of crime or tragedy. With the advent of new technologies, such as video, they may soon be viewing the scene as other emergency responders race to the location.

In 2012, Florida took a great step forward requiring all of Florida's Emergency 9-1-1 Telecommunicators to be state-certified and licensed. Reclassification acknowledges their achievement by bringing their duties & responsibilities in line with the services they provide, that of First Responder.

"This is long overdue," said Dan Koenig, FL NENA President, "Florida was one of the first states that certified 9-1-1 personnel, the Florida Legislature should now recognize them for the work they do and the conditions they do it under." This became especially apparent during the COVID pandemic. The groups advocated for the inclusion of 9-1-1 PSTs in prioritization of vaccines and inclusion in the first responder stimulus. Both requests were ignored. 9-1-1 telecommunicators regularly work much longer hours in confined spaces. At times, the need for social distancing was not possible at some emergency communications centers. 9-1-1 telecommunicators were often called upon to work extended hours to minimize interaction and the possibility of contamination. This was often compounded by COVID procedures that often changed daily to protect the public and first responders.



Working under stressful conditions is nothing new in the 9-1-1 profession. Daily activities in Florida's 9-1-1 call centers create an indescribable amount of traumatic stress. Call takers move from one call to the next without any warning or knowledge of what's next. They can be giving CPR instructions on a call, immediately followed by speaking with a suicidal caller. The moments on the phone before units are physically on scene are crucial as they can literally determine the outcome of the incident. The moment a 9-1-1 call is answered, Florida's elite 9-1-1 telecommunicators are on scene, both intellectually and emotionally! This not only includes daily operations but also large-scale incidents and disasters. "Florida's Professional 9-1-1 Telecommunicators are often called into service during major disasters. They are deployed alongside law enforcement officers, firefighters, and paramedics to assist and support recovery efforts both in state and regionally. Reclassification provides continuity for the level of care expected by communities we serve," remarked Natalia Duran, State Coordinator for the FL Telecommunicator Emergency Response Team.

Along with protecting the public, the 9-1-1 PSTs are also charged with helping protect their fellow First Responders in Law Enforcement, Fire-Rescue and Emergency Medical Services. This begins with the questions asked during the initial stages of 9-1-1 call(s) and continues with the radio traffic between the 9-1-1 center and the field units for the duration of the call. The high level of stress these responsibilities create have led to escalating turnover rates, staffing shortages and exorbitant amounts of mandated overtime. Many days these positions must go unfilled.

Most recently, we have seen high numbers of open positions at 9-1-1 centers across the state. As 9-1-1 centers attempt to maintain minimum staffing levels to meet operations efficiently for the sake of public safety and that of responders, there are many times when these levels cannot be met and 9-1-1 telecommunicators are often tasked with longer hours that jeopardize both safety and efficiency. This exacerbates stressful situations occurring within the working environment and is also responsible for stressors outside the professional domain. "Our agencies regularly endure a 25-40% turnover rate, meaning that for every class of new personnel hired, a large percentage of them will not make it past the first year of employment. A change in this classification will bring resources to manage stress and provide some relief to the turnover issue," said Jody Kenyon, Vice-President of the FL 911 Coordinator's Association. Vonda Jones, FL APCO President added, "PSTs often work 12-16 hours per day and come in on their days off to work additional hours to assist with shift coverage". She has realized, "In most cases, PSTs spend more time working in Emergency Communications than they do with their children, spouses and loved ones".

The organizations contend that reclassification of 9-1-1 Public Safety Telecommunicators will help alleviate many of these issues, while creating opportunities and avenues for support where none are currently available. The professionalization of the occupation will enhance recruiting and invigorate retention efforts. "This is giving them the recognition and respect they deserve!" stated Koenig. Several states and counties across the country have already reclassified 9-1-1 personal as First Responders, among them are Indiana, Kansas, New York, Texas and West Virginia. Jones agreed, "It's now time for Florida



9-1-1 PSTs to share the title they’ve earned and should be recognized for the hard work and dedication they provide as unsung heroes who continue to be the calming voice heard over the phone or radio”.

“It is our hope that this partnership will bring the much-needed recognition for our PSTs and deliver on our commitment to 9-1-1 in the State of Florida,” stated Kenyon.

Contact:

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| Dan Koenig | FL NENA | president@flnena.org |
| Vonda Jones | FL APCO | FloridaAPCO@gmail.com |
| Jody Kenyon | FL 911CA | jkenyon@mypasco.net |