

Hello House Committee Members. I am writing to you today in support of HB2701 – Increases retirement benefits and lowers normal retirement age under Oregon Public Service Retirement Plan for telecommunicators and employees of Oregon State Hospital.

I retired from 911 Telecommunications in March, 2022 after serving over 25 years as a 911 dispatcher, and 7 years as support staff for a Sheriff's Department. Both jobs are classified the same as general administrative services, but the jobs are vastly different in scope, responsibilities, and the mental, physical and spiritual toll they take. Some of the necessary skills are the same, answering phones, typing, organization etc.

However, over the span of my career I have listened to hundreds if not thousands of residents take their last breath, including children, I have listened to sexual and physical assaults as they were occurring, listened to officers fighting for their lives as someone was trying kill them, and heard firefighters searching for their teammates after a roof collapse. I have taken phone calls from thousands of frantic parents when their toddler has gone missing, citizens from across the world worried about a family member during active shooter incidents. I have spoken to veterans in the middle of a PTSD crisis. I have talked to people wanting to end their lives, trying to convince them to accept help, and listened as they made the choice to end their lives. I have taken thousands of mundane calls as well, someone upset about how the neighbor parks, or a barking dog, or complaints about holiday traffic jams. I have talked to lonely senior citizens who had no medical need beyond a friendly voice. I have listened to thousands of voices during mental health crises and tried to help them navigate a broken system.

I have been verbally abused, threatened with violence, threatened with lawsuits all for complying with industry and department standards. I was always aware that every call, every interaction was a public record and subject to public scrutiny, that I could follow all policies and do 'everything right' but still have my reputation and career destroyed by public outcry. None of the above is exceptional or surprising to anyone who has answered a 911 call. Every Telecommunicator can tell your stories of the trauma these calls take on your mental wellbeing. There is no outlet, very little opportunity to decompress after helping a frantic mother give her infant CPR then listening to her sobs after the child is pronounced deceased. There is only the phone ringing for the next 911 call, another person who needs urgent help.

911 Telecommunications is a 24/7/365 job. I missed countless family holidays and events. I missed even more hours of sleep. In the 911 Telecommunications industry staffing is always low, leading to long hours for the employees. Forced mandatory is common and working only your regular hours is rare.

As with many jobs technology is always changing. There is never enough staff or time for adequate training adding to the pressure of the job. Learning new skills take place at the desk and mistakes can have tragic consequences.

In 911 Telecommunications the job is not considered physically taxing but it still takes a toll on your body. A 911 Telecommunicator sits for hours at a time, bound to your desk by the phone or microphone. Restroom breaks are minimal, and you hold your bladder beyond healthy limits. Meal breaks are often taken at your desk, while working, meals room temperature, and usually not considered healthy.

As a young 911 Telecommunicator I was uneducated about the long-term effects of stress on the body. I was not aware of the mental or spiritual suffering that would occur. I had the luxury of youth to combat fatigue, poor diet, adrenaline surges, and trauma.

As my career advanced naturally, my skills declined, my physical and mental health suffered. But it was the decline in skills that was really worrisome. When I couldn't type as fast, when I couldn't make the mental leaps in problem solving as quickly, I couldn't hear the words on the radio as well, when new technology meant to help made the job harder because I couldn't retain the new information as well. The last years of my career were not a joyful end to a rewarding career as every day I was worried my decline in skills might cause harm to a citizen or user. Unfortunately there was no soft landing at the end of my career, a place where I might age out of the profession. 911 Telecommunications is an all or nothing career.

So I do believe that 911 Telecommunicators should be allowed to retire younger without a penalty to their retirement. Not because they are not valuable and capable but because the inevitable toll of the stresses of the job combined with the nature declines of aging create dispatchers who are not as adept and cannot perform as the extreme proficiency level 911 requires to serve the public and users.

I hope you never need to call 911 for help, but if you do, you deserve to have a Telecommunicator professional who is at their very best. Just as every resident of the state deserves and should expect.

Thank you for your consideration.

Suzanne Baughman