



Date: March 14, 2024
To: PERA Board of Trustees
From: Doug Anderson, Executive Director
Amy Streng, Policy Coordinator
Subject: 2024 Stakeholder Initiative: 911 telecommunicators enhanced retirement benefits

Background:

Throughout the last few years conversations have occurred regarding the appropriate retirement benefits for 911 telecommunicators. Currently, 911 telecommunicators are in the PERA General Plan. Employee groups have advocated for enhanced retirement benefits for 911 telecommunicators. The Legislature authorized a study in 2021 to explore the cost and impact of moving 911 Telecommunicators to the PERA Correctional Plan.¹ PERA Correctional offers a higher multiplier at 1.9 percent, a lower unreduced retirement age of 55, lower employee contributions (5.83 percent vs 6.5 percent for General Plan members), and different disability benefits.

The study included the Minnesota Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO), the National Emergency Number Association of Minnesota (NENA), League of Minnesota Cities (LMC), Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC), Minnesota Inter-County Association, Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS), PERA, MSRS, 911 telecommunicators employed by a county/municipality and state, and Correctional Plan members.

The outcome of that study determined that there was significant cost to moving 911 telecommunicators to PERA Correctional Plan particularly when past service is included. The study did not conclude in agreement that 911 telecommunicators' retirement benefits should be modified. The working group did agree that if the Legislature establishes a plan for providing enhanced retirement benefits for 911 telecommunicators, the working group recommended the following:

- a. The eligibility criteria for the plan should clearly define the employees who are eligible and those who are not by providing a clear definition of "911 telecommunicators". Participation in the plan by eligible employees should be mandatory.
- b. Third-party certification or licensure as a 911 telecommunicator should not be the sole criteria for determining eligibility to receive enhanced pension benefits.
- c. The state should provide sufficient funds to ensure that the funding ratio and projected funded status of any existing plan is not negatively impacted by any change in pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators. The state should also provide funds to cover the expenses related

¹ See attached study

to establishing a new plan or tier of benefits, including actuarial fees for evaluating benefit proposals.

d. 911 telecommunicators who are state employees should be covered by the same plan as 911 telecommunicators who are local government employees. The plan should be administered by PERA.

Stakeholder Initiative:

AFSCME Council 5, LELS, and Teamsters Local 320 seek enhanced retirement benefits for 911 telecommunicators. These groups developed a legislative proposal to move 911 telecommunicators prospectively to the PERA Correctional Plan. In summary, the proposal provides for an increased employee contribution to address employer concerns and also acknowledge the difference in work environment. If a different legislative proposal, which increases the PERA Correctional Plan multiplier, occurs there may be a different multiplier for correctional officers than 911 telecommunicators.

Letters provided by AFSCME Council 5, LELS, and TEAMSTERS specifically request:

We respectfully request an endorsement of our proposal in-principle and additionally request the Board of Trustees to authorize Executive Director Anderson and PERA staff to engage with employer stakeholders and ourselves, to assist in crafting and negotiating a final product reflective of this proposed concept and conduct actuarial work as necessary. Alternatively, we request PERA staff to propose a different solution to enhance the retirement benefits for Public Safety Telecommunicators, ensuring those benefits are commensurate with other public safety and first responder public employee retirement benefits. (AFSCME Council 5)

We respectfully request an endorsement of our proposal in-principle, and additionally request the Board of Trustees to authorize Executive Director Anderson and PERA staff to engage with employer stakeholders and ourselves, to assist in crafting and negotiating a final product reflective of this proposed concept and conduct actuarial work as necessary. (LELS)

We respectfully request your endorsement of our proposal in principle and seek authorization for further discussions and negotiations to refine and implement the necessary changes. We are committed to working collaboratively to ensure that the retirement benefits for Public Safety Telecommunicators align with those of other public safety and first responder public employees. (Teamsters Local 320)

The letters provided by these groups and employee stakeholders explain the rationale for seeking enhanced retirement benefits for 911 telecommunicators.²

Unequivocally, public safety telecommunicators are a part of the first responder, protective services profession. We're writing to ask for your consideration and support to properly

² See attached letters from ASFCME Council 5, Teamster Local 320 and the individual letters.

recognize this profession and adjust their retirement benefits accordingly. (AFSCME Council 5)

We are writing to bring attention to the crucial role these individuals play as the initial first responders in our public safety infrastructure. Despite their critical responsibilities, PSTs have historically been classified as office and administrative support staff at the federal level, overlooking their role in the protective services profession." In addition, the Teamsters noted that "Our proposal also takes into account the potential cost-savings and benefits of enhancing recruitment and retention in a profession with high turnover rates. By incentivizing an earlier retirement age for PSTs, we believe this change could lead to significant indirect savings for employers in the long run. (Teamsters 320)

Our proposal is to move 911 Dispatchers from the PERA General plan to the PERA Correctional plan; our specific proposal, you will note, incorporates significant alterations and concessions from recent requests from stakeholders to do the same. We are asking for this move to be done on a prospective basis, thereby eliminating the roughly \$79 million initial cost to cover the transfer of past service credits. We understand, as fiduciaries defined by 356A.02, why you were unable to support the past proposal to pay for the transfer of past service credits prior to the PERA General plan being sufficiently funded. We hope you will support this compromise position. (LELS)

In addition to eliminating the up-front cost, our compromise proposal addresses other barriers. Under 356A.04, you owe a fiduciary duty to the taxpayers of political subdivisions. The difference between the employer contribution rate for the PERA General plan and PERA Correctional plan is an increase of 1.25% of pay, and while seemingly small, you must take this increased burden on the taxpayers into account. Our proposal addresses this; we agree to, at a minimum, maintain the PERA General plan employee contribution rate (6.5%) for PSTs. The employee contribution rate for PERA General is .67% of pay greater than that of the PERA Correctional plan. This concession will help buy-down the increased cost to employers and is a recognition by PSTs that they lack a threat of physical harm, differentiating their contribution rate from that of Correctional Officers and Guards. If the entire .67% of pay were to be applied to buying down the cost to employers, the increase to the employer's contribution would still be .58% of pay. (AFSCME Council 5)

Our proposal, as drafted, does not yet reflect the full buy-down potential created by our members' willingness to maintain a higher contribution rate; additionally, our members have expressed a willingness to increase their contribution rates to cover the additional cost incurred by employers as well as create a funding sufficiency to protect future COLA increases for current and future retirees. (AFSCME Council 5)

Employer Stakeholder Feedback

In a letter, the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) and the Minnesota Inter-County Association (MICA) provided feedback regarding the stakeholder initiative.³

³ AMC/MICA Letter

County governments understand our workforce is our greatest asset when it comes to administering critical public services to our community and on behalf of the state. To compete effectively with often higher paying private sector opportunities, county governments offer competitive pension benefits.

While an important tool for attracting and retaining workforce, pension benefits are not the only tool, and may not be the most important tool for recruitment and retention. In recent years, county employers have invested in our employees and recognize their dedicated service such as: achieving historic collective bargaining agreements; increasing a variety of hourly and overtime rates; and implementing creative approaches to performance, recruitment, and retention bonuses. Counties are spending significant taxpayer resources to invest in their workforce—to this point, and employee salary increases ranked as the top overall impact to levies for 2024 budget year.

Within that context, and the reality of limited local resources, we urge that these and other pension benefits consider the following principles:

1) Any plan enhancements should not compromise the funding status of the existing plan. Since 2010, county employers been paying a 1% higher contribution rate to reduce unfunded liability for PERA-General. That objective has not yet been met, and employers (taxpayers) are still paying the 1% higher rate.

2) Increases to employee-requested retirement benefits should be equitable across all generations of employees and pension members.

3) There is employer and employee consensus on significant pension changes with a fair allocation of contributions between employee and employer. For example, just because there are statutory funding ratios for plans does not limit the Legislature from also adopting different standards for employee-requested supplemental retirement benefits, or that the Legislature should pay for the costs of such benefit enhancements.”

Lastly, we cannot help but notice an increased trend of employee groups requesting additional pension benefits and/or earlier retirement. As the PERA Board and Legislature continue to evaluate these requests, we urge a broader policy discussion of the role of pensions in overall compensation, the policy considerations for granting differential pension benefits across different classes of employees, and the long-term fiscal sustainability for pension funds and local budgets.

AMC and MICA concludes that their position is

At this time, our organizations are not supportive of the proposed plan enhancements without further dialogue on how these proposed changes reflect those three considerations as well as a more robust analysis on potential impacts to taxpayer-funded budgets.

Staff Review:

PERA's long-term board positions include a position specifically addressing expanding membership of the PERA Correctional Plan:

Absent a purpose statement or any clear criteria defining the types of positions intended to be covered by the Local Government Correctional Service Retirement Plan, the PERA Board of Trustees defers to the Legislature the policy determinations as to which local government correctional employee groups should be included in the Plan.

PERA asks that the Legislature ensure that any groups approved for participation in the Plan either come into the Plan as new members at contribution rates sufficient to fully fund the higher level of benefits, or if members enter the plan with past service credit, the merging group's sponsoring entity agrees to a payment or series of payments sufficient to fully fund the associated unfunded actuarial accrued liability of the merging group.

The question of providing enhanced retirement benefits to 911 telecommunicators requires thorough review and consideration. The first policy question that needs to be addressed is whether or not there is agreement that 911 telecommunicators require enhanced retirement benefits. This is not a question to be answered by PERA. Nor is it PERA's place to agree in principle to this policy. That policy question belongs in the realm of the employers, employees, and the Legislature.

If it is determined that 911 telecommunicators require enhanced retirement benefits, PERA should weigh in on the method that these enhanced benefits are provided.

The initial proposal moves 911 telecommunicators from PERA General to PERA Correctional. The proposal establishes different employer and employee contribution rates and potentially different multipliers within the Plan essentially creating a plan within a plan. One of PERA's long-term board positions states that:

The PERA Board of Trustees generally opposes legislation that provides an exception with respect to the benefits made available to one or group of individuals but may review such legislation on a case-by-case basis.

The PERA Board of Trustees should consider that moving the 911 telecommunicators into the PERA Correctional Plan with different contribution rates and/or different multipliers creates exceptions for one group of members within PERA Correctional. The PERA Board of Trustees should also consider the precedent that such a move would have for future groups advocating for different benefits and/or contributions within the same plan.

The PERA Correctional Plan is currently comprised of one group- correctional officers. This group has a set of assumptions that have established the current contribution level. Introducing a new group may alter the dynamics of the Plan. For example, if a new group has significantly different turnover, disability, or retirement rates than the existing group, the contribution requirement may be higher or lower. The cost for a new group should not be assumed to be the cost for the existing group.

Another area of consideration focuses on what occurs when a group leaves a plan. Another long-term board position addresses issues that occur when a group either enters or leaves a plan:

The PERA Board of Trustees opposes providing benefits that add to the actuarial accrued liability for individuals or groups requesting membership in a PERA fund unless the merging group's sponsoring entity agrees to a payment or series of payments sufficient to fully fund the associated unfunded actuarial accrued liability of the merging group.

The PERA Board of Trustees opposes the discontinuation of membership for an individual or group in a PERA fund unless the departing individual or group's sponsoring entity agrees to a payment or series of payments sufficient to fully fund the associated unfunded actuarial accrued liability for the departing group.

The description of a payment or series of payments sufficient to fully fund the associated unfunded actuarial accrued liability for the departing group in the second paragraph of the above stated long term position is also known as a withdrawal liability,

An alternative to moving 911 telecommunicators to PERA Correctional Plan would be to establish a new plan focused exclusively on 911 telecommunicators. This alternative addresses issues raised from creating a plan within a plan and some of the potential negative impacts to the Correctional Plan. It allows for the assumptions and contributions to reflect the experience of 911 telecommunicators. It allows for the disability benefit to be crafted to fit the needs of 911 telecommunicators. However, there are still issues that would need to be addressed such as payment of a withdrawal liability and employer and employee agreement on appropriate benefits.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board oppose providing an endorsement of the proposal in principle due to numerous details needing to be addressed. The Board also directs PERA staff to continue to work with stakeholders to help address the issues related to withdrawal liability, potential benefit structure, and appropriate plan costs.

Report of the 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits Working Group

Adopted by the Working Group on January 28, 2022

Prepared by Staff of the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement

Submitted to the Commission on February 6, 2022

For assistance with accessibility, please contact any of the LCPR staff at lcpr@lcpr.mn.gov or 651.296.2750.

Table of Contents

I.	Overview	1
II.	Description of the Working Group.....	1
	A. Working Group Membership.....	1
	B. Working Group Meetings	2
III.	Background Information on 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits.....	3
	A. 911 Telecommunicators	3
	B. Current Pension Benefits for 911 Telecommunicators.....	3
IV.	Summary of the Working Group’s Study of 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits.....	5
	A. Whether 911 telecommunicator pension benefits should be changed.....	5
	911 Telecommunicators	5
	City and County Government Organizations.....	6
	Pension Fund Directors.....	7
	Participants in Correctional Plans.....	7
	B. The Cost of Changing 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits.....	7
	C. Survey Results.....	8
	911 Telecommunicator Surveys	9
	Employer Surveys	9
	Survey of other States’ Pension Systems (NASRA).....	9
	D. Whether 911 Telecommunicators Should Be Covered by a Correctional Plan	10
V.	Recommendations of the Working Group.....	11

I. Overview

The 2021 Legislature included a provision in the omnibus pension and retirement bill that required the formation of a working group to study the pension benefits of 911 telecommunicators.¹ The session law required the working group to report to the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement (Commission or LCPR) on:

...whether changes to the pension plan coverage for 911 telecommunicators are appropriate. If the working group finds that such changes are appropriate, the working group must recommend changes to the pension plan coverage for 911 telecommunicators. The recommended changes may include but are not limited to moving 911 telecommunicators to the correctional plans.²

The 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits Working Group (Working Group) was established and held its first meeting on July 30, 2021. The Working Group met through the fall of 2021 to gather information and discuss pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators. The Working Group, however, was unable to come to a consensus on whether changes to pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators are appropriate. This report contains a description of the working group, background information regarding 911 telecommunicator pension benefits, a summary of the Working Group's study of 911 telecommunicator pension benefits, and the Working Group's recommendations to the LCPR.

II. Description of the Working Group

A. Working Group Membership

The 911 Telecommunicators Pension Benefits Working Group was made up of the following members:

Name and Title	Representing
Dar Pankonie (Chair) President of the Minnesota Chapters of APCO and NENA	Minnesota Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) and the National Emergency Number Association of Minnesota (NENA)
Matt Hilgart (Vice Chair) Govt. Relations Manager	Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC)
Anne Finn Assistant Intergovernmental Relations Director	League of Minnesota Cities (LMC)
Matt Massman Executive Director	Minnesota Inter-County Association (MICA)

¹ Laws of Minnesota 2021, Chapter 22, Article 9, Section 1.

² Laws of Minnesota 2021, Chapter 22, Article 9, Section 1, Subdivision 2.

Name and Title	Representing
Dana Wahlberg ECN Director	Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS)
Doug Anderson Executive Director	Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA)
Erin Leonard Executive Director	Minnesota State Retirement System (MSRS)
Mark Lallak Communications Lieutenant, Itasca County Sheriff's Office	911 telecommunicator employed by a county or municipality
Timothy Boyer Statewide Director of Communications, Minnesota State Patrol	911 telecommunicator employed by the state
Heidi Paumen Correctional Officer, Sherburne County	A participant in the PERA Local Government Correctional Service Retirement Plan, designated by the PERA Board of Trustees
Dan Gorman Correctional Officer, Department of Corrections	A participant in the MSRS Correctional Employees Retirement Plan, designated by the MSRS Board of Directors
Jeremy Hanson Emergency 911 Dispatcher, Itasca County Sheriff's Office	Invited by the LCPR Executive Director
Kirk Oswald 911 Telecommunicator, Rice/Steele 911 Center	Invited by the LCPR Executive Director

The Working Group was advised on issues related to the PERA Local Government Correctional Service Retirement Plan by Wade Laszlo, a retired participant in the plan.

The staff of the LCPR established the Working Group, organized its first meeting, and provided ongoing administrative support, including drafting this report.

B. Working Group Meetings

The Working Group met six times between July 2021 and February 2022. At its meetings, the Working Group reviewed data, surveys, position statements, and other information, discussed the appropriateness of changing 911 telecommunicator pension benefits and proposed recommendations, and approved this report. The Working Group met remotely via video conferencing technology because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting materials and video recordings of the meetings are available on the LCPR website (lcpr.mn.gov) or upon request from the office of the LCPR.

III. Background Information on 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits

A. 911 Telecommunicators

For the purposes of this report, “911 telecommunicators” is the term used to describe the public employees, including supervisors and managers, who receive or otherwise handle emergency calls made through the 911 service or other communication methods to seek emergency services and who are covered by a Minnesota public pension plan. The term does not include federal employees or tribal employees unless the employee is covered by a Minnesota public pension plan.

There are approximately 1,500 911-telecommunicator positions in Minnesota.³ Except for the 911 telecommunicators employed by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, all of the 1,500 positions are in county and local governments with most positions at public safety answering points (PSAPs) administered by counties.

B. Current Pension Benefits for 911 Telecommunicators

Most the state’s 1,500 911-telecommunicators are covered by the PERA General Employees Retirement Plan (PERA General Plan). However, three small groups of 911 telecommunicators receive pension benefits from a different retirement plan instead.

The first group is employed by several outstate counties that have 911 telecommunicators who also serve as correctional officers in the counties’ jails. Many of these jailer-dispatchers are covered by the PERA Local Government Correctional Service Retirement Plan (PERA Correctional Plan). A survey of 911 telecommunicators conducted by the Working Group identified 93 jailer-dispatchers currently covered by PERA Correctional Plan.⁴ The actual number may be slightly higher.

The second group is employed by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, which is authorized to employ about 81 dispatchers and supervisors in two units located in Roseville and Rochester, respectively. These 911 telecommunicators handle 911 calls and other dispatch duties for state troopers, conservation officers, Department of Corrections probation agents, Bureau of Criminal Apprehension special agents, and Department of Transportation field personnel. As employees of the Department of Public Safety, they are state employees and are covered by the MSRS General Employees Retirement Plan (MSRS General Plan).

³ “Overview of 911 telecommunicator positions in Minnesota (state and local government employees) by public safety answering points (PSAP’s),” [Appendix](#) p. A-2, (showing a total of 1,602 positions at PSAPs, statewide, of which 143 positions appear not to qualify for Minnesota public pension coverage; e.g., EMS dispatchers for North Memorial Ambulance Service; the spreadsheet is missing numbers for some outstate PSAPs).

⁴ “Survey of 911 Telecommunicators Employed by the State and Local Governments - Survey Results,” Q6, [Appendix](#) p. B-19.

The third group is employed by Hennepin Health Services, which employs about 25 emergency medical dispatchers. These emergency medical dispatchers are certified emergency medical technicians (EMTs) or paramedics and their job duties include paramedic, EMT, and dispatch duties. These emergency medical dispatchers are covered by the PERA Police and Fire Plan.⁵

The following table contains a comparison of the four different pension plans providing pension benefits to 911 telecommunicators:

	PERA General Plan	MSRS General Plan	PERA Correctional Plan	PERA Police and Fire Plan
Approx. No. of 911 Telecommu- nicators covered by plan	1,300	81	93	25
Retirement Formula (percentage of average salary for each year of covered employment)	1.7%	1.7%	1.9%	3%
<u>Employer</u> Contribution Rate (percentage of salary)	7.5%	6.25%	8.75%	17.7%
<u>Employee</u> Contribution Rate (percentage of salary)	6.5%	6.0%	5.83%	11.8%
Normal Retirement Age	66 years old	66 years old	55 years old	55 years old
Early Retirement Age (age at which a person may retire with a reduction for early retirement) ⁶	55 years old	55 years old	50 years old	50 years old
Vesting period ⁷ for newly hired employees	5 years	5 years	50% at 5 years, increasing 10% each year thereafter until 100% vested	50% at 10 years increasing 5% each year thereafter until 100% vested
Coordinated with Social Security (participants receive both their pension benefit and a Social Security benefit for their employment)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

⁵ See Minnesota Statutes, Section 353.64, Subdivision 10.

⁶ The MSRS General Plan, PERA General Plan, and PERA Correctional plan each provide for an actuarially equivalent reduction for early retirement. For the PERA and MSRS general plans the reduction for early retirement is greater than 60% for a participant retiring at age 55.

⁷ Here, “vesting period” is the period of time that a participant in the plan must work in covered employment before the participant becomes entitled to an annuity benefit. A participant who is 50% vested is entitled to receive 50% of the annuity they would be entitled to if they were 100% vested.

IV. Summary of the Working Group's Study of 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits

The information collected and considered by the Working Group includes detailed survey results, information from agencies, unions, employer associations, and the pension funds, position statements, and testimonials, all of which are included in the appendix to this report (the [Appendix](#)). Four of the topics considered and discussed by the Working Group are also summarized below. The topics are: (A) whether 911 telecommunicator pension benefits should be changed; (B) the cost of changing 911 telecommunicator pension benefits; (C) survey results; and (D) whether 911 telecommunicators should be covered by the PERA Correctional Plan.

A. Whether 911 telecommunicator pension benefits should be changed

The Working Group was directed to recommend whether 911 telecommunicator's pension benefits should be changed. The Working Group was unable to come to a consensus on this issue. The members of the Working Group expressed positions on this issue that were generally consistent depending on whether the members were 911 telecommunicators, represented city and county government organizations, represented PERA or MSRS, or were a participant in a correctional plan. The positions of each group of Working Group members are summarized below.

911 Telecommunicators

Members of the Working Group who are 911 telecommunicators were in favor of changing pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators. They expressed several concerns with the adequacy of current pension benefits, including the following:

- Employers have historically had difficulty recruiting and retaining 911 telecommunicators and have difficulty filling openings for 911 telecommunicators at many of the public safety answering points (PSAPs) around the state. Enhanced pension benefits would help to recruit and retain 911 telecommunicators.
- 911 telecommunicators are essential to providing public safety to Minnesotans. Other workers who are essential to providing public safety services, like police, firefighters, and correctional officers, receive enhanced pension benefits. 911 telecommunicators should likewise be entitled to enhanced pension benefits.
- The work performed by 911 telecommunicators is hazardous. Exposure to traumatic events exposes 911 telecommunicators to high stress levels, thus susceptible to occupational mental and physical impairment. The 911 telecommunicators interface with the public at a higher daily rate than any other public safety responders. Their exposure is further influenced by the nature of not knowing the outcome of many of their interactions. Emotional and mental health resiliency are crucial for the 911 telecommunicator.

- 911 telecommunicator essential functions require technical aptitude, sharp acuity skills, and stable mental and emotional health. As 911 telecommunicators age, these skills decline, causing them to become less effective at their job. The normal retirement age of the PERA and MSRS General Plans is not early enough for aging 911 telecommunicators.

City and County Government Organizations

Members of the Working Group who represent city and county government organizations were not in favor of changing pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators. They expressed several concerns with changing the current benefit arrangement, including the following:

- Employer representatives noted that a significant factor for establishing and providing enhanced pension benefits to police, firefighters, and correctional officers is that there is an element of physical danger inherent in their duties. The duties of 911 telecommunicators do not place them in the same physical danger as correctional officers.
- While the role of 911 telecommunicators often involves unique and stressful work, government employers noted multiple other public employee classifications that also involve mentally and emotionally demanding work. As such, public employers expressed concerns about providing enhanced pension benefits and lowering the retirement age for 911 telecommunicators, but not for employees in similarly stressful careers.
- There is insufficient evidence to substantiate employee group claims that 911 telecommunicators' ability to perform their duties degrades significantly with age.
- Local government groups acknowledged that the recruitment and retention of 911 telecommunicators is challenging while also noting national and statewide trends that point to several employment challenges in a variety of public employment classifications. Government employers noted that pension benefits are one of several forms of employee compensation and may not equitably provide benefits to all those who serve as a 911 telecommunicator. Moreover, employers noted that early retirement may serve to exacerbate workforce shortages. Cities and counties suggested that local governments should be implementing a wide variety of means for increasing recruitment and encouraging retention, including reassessing flexible scheduling options, reviewing compensation schedules, and partnering with the state to provide additional mental health supports.
- Local government employers also questioned what lowering the retirement age and increasing benefits would cost, what mechanisms would be used to pay for a benefit change, and what the ongoing costs would be to maintain a new benefit structure.

Pension Fund Directors

The executive directors of PERA and MSRS provided position statements that are included in the Section D of the Appendix. They did not take a position on whether 911 telecommunicators' pension benefits should change but did express concerns that any changes to pension benefits should be fully funded and that a full scope actuarial study be performed to accurately estimate the costs. Since such a study would be costly, the directors stated that the cost should not be borne by the pension funds but should be funded from an appropriation or another source.

Participants in Correctional Plans

Members of the Working Group who are participants in the MSRS or PERA Correctional Plans were neutral on whether 911 telecommunicator benefits should change. However, they were opposed to 911 telecommunicators becoming covered by a correctional plan. The Minnesota Department of Corrections and Minnesota Department of Human Services also provided position statements (included in the appendix) objecting to 911 telecommunicators being included in the MSRS Correctional Plan.⁸

B. The Cost of Changing 911 Telecommunicator Pension Benefits

The Working Group sought estimates from MSRS and PERA of the costs incurred under two scenarios. The first scenario was the transfer of 911 telecommunicators to the MSRS and PERA Correctional Plans, along with their past service. The second scenario was the establishment of a new plan for 911 telecommunicators with benefit provisions similar to those provided under the PERA Correctional Plan. The Working Group discussed four categories of costs that should be considered under either scenario: (1) the cost of transferring past service; (2) ongoing contributions; (3) administrative expenses; and (4) actuarial fees.

The Working Group struggled with two issues in obtaining estimates for these scenarios. The first issue is that PERA lacks the ability to accurately identify all the 911 telecommunicators currently covered by the PERA General Plan. The second issue is that obtaining an accurate cost estimate requires the services of an actuarial firm, but there was no money appropriated to the Working Group for the payment of actuarial services.

Despite these issues, Doug Anderson, the executive director of PERA, provided a rough estimate of the cost of transferring past service from the PERA General Plan to the PERA Correctional Plan for 911 telecommunicators. He estimated that such a transfer would cost about \$79 million, which is the amount that the PERA Correctional Plan would have to receive

⁸ Position or Policy Statement from the Minnesota Department of Corrections, [Appendix](#) p. D-2; Position or Policy Statement from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, [Appendix](#) p. D-4.

in addition to an amount equal to the present value of the benefit earned by each 911 telecommunicator under the PERA General Plan.⁹

The major driver of the cost is the difference in the normal retirement age between the two plans. The PERA Correctional Plan has a normal retirement age of 55 while the PERA General Plan has a normal retirement age of 66. This would mean that 911 telecommunicators who transferred from the PERA General Plan to the PERA Correctional Plan would be expected to receive their pension while not making contributions to the plan for 11 additional years.

The ongoing contributions for the PERA General Plan and PERA Correctional Plan are set in statute. Under the PERA Correctional Plan, employees currently contribute at a rate of 5.83% of covered salary and employers at a rate of 8.75% of covered salary. Under the PERA General Plan, employees contribute at a rate of 6.5% of covered salary and employers at a rate of 7.5% of covered salary. It is possible that the addition of 911 telecommunicators to the PERA Correctional Plan would necessitate a change in the contribution rate for the PERA Correctional Plan but determining whether a change would be necessary requires a thorough actuarial study. Similarly, a thorough actuarial study is required to determine the ongoing contribution requirements for any new plan that the Legislature might choose to create for 911 telecommunicators.

The pension fund directors noted that administrative expenses are a consideration for the structure of any change going forward. They noted that setting up and administering a new plan would come with more administrative expense than would transferring 911 telecommunicators to an existing plan.

Finally, the Working Group noted that any changes in pension coverage would require extensive actuarial work to ensure that the plans remain properly funded. The fees for the actuarial work could range from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars depending on the changes being made. The pension fund directors noted these actuarial costs should be provided for in any legislation making a change to pension coverage for 911 telecommunicators.

C. Survey Results

The Working Group commissioned several surveys to obtain information about 911 telecommunicators and their employers. The Working Group also asked the National Association of State Retirement Administrators (NASRA) to survey its members about national trends for providing pension benefits to emergency dispatchers. The full results of the surveys are available in Section B of the Appendix. Some notable results are summarized below.

⁹ “Public Employees Retirement Association on Transferring 911 Telecommunicators from the PERA General Plan to the PERA Correctional Plan,” [Appendix](#) p. C-2.

911 Telecommunicator Surveys

A statewide survey of 911 telecommunicators received responses from 921 respondents, which represents over half of all the 911 telecommunicators in the state.¹⁰ When asked whether they would prefer coverage by the PERA General Plan or the PERA Correctional Plan, 94% of respondents indicated a preference for the PERA Correctional Plan. Additionally, 65% of respondents indicated that the most important benefit feature was the option to retire with a full pension (no early retirement reduction) at age 55. Respondents were also asked, “Do you feel that your ability to perform your job effectively and efficiently has declined as you age?” 49% of respondents answered “yes,” while 51% of respondents answered “no;” of respondents age 60 or older, 57% answered “yes” and 39% answered “no.”

Employer Surveys

A survey of counties found that separation rates for 911 telecommunicators are higher than for all county employees.¹¹ The reasons given for the higher separation rates for 911 telecommunicators included high turnover rates during the probation or training phases and in the early years of employment due to night and weekend hours or because the employees left to pursue promotions or higher pay in other positions. Mental or emotional stress and the difficulties of the job were also noted as factors. The survey also indicated that 911 telecommunicators are far less likely than correctional employees to file for and receive workers compensation, a conclusion that was supported by information provided by the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry.¹² The survey also indicated that counties were split on whether hiring 911 telecommunicators is more challenging relative to hiring other classes of employees.

Survey of other States’ Pension Systems (NASRA)

NASRA conducted a survey of its member public pension systems on behalf of the Working Group and received responses from 18 pension systems that administer pension benefits for emergency dispatchers.¹³ Of those 18 systems, one pension system responded that emergency dispatchers are covered by a public safety plan and 17 responded that they are covered by a general employees plan. Three systems also indicated that they had a process through which a particular local government could provide coverage for 911 telecommunicators by a public safety plan instead of by a general employees plan.

¹⁰ “Survey of 911 Telecommunicators Employed by the State and Local Governments - Survey Results,” [Appendix](#) p. B-16.

¹¹ “Survey of county employers on 911 telecommunicator recruitment, retention, other, by Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) and Minnesota Inter-County Association (MICA),” [Appendix](#) p. B-29.

¹² “Workers Compensation Data,” [Appendix](#) p. A-20; “Emergency dispatcher workers’ compensation claims,” [Appendix](#) p. A-28.

¹³ The term “emergency dispatcher” is used here instead of “911 telecommunicator” because that is the term used in the NASRA survey and because the survey described personnel not located within the state of Minnesota.

D. Whether 911 Telecommunicators Should Be Covered by a Correctional Plan

The Working Group discussed whether 911 telecommunicators should be covered by the PERA Correctional Plan, or in the case of state employees, by the MSRS Correctional Plan. The Working Group decided not to recommend that 911 telecommunicators be placed in the correctional plans. This decision was in response to position statements submitted by groups urging that 911 telecommunicators not be placed in a correctional plan, including from the Minnesota Department of Corrections, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and the Minnesota Correctional Officer Retirement Association (MNCORA). These position statements are included in the Section D of the Appendix.

V. Recommendations of the Working Group

The legislation directing the formation of the Working Group directed the group to report to the LCPR whether changes to the pension plan coverage for 911 telecommunicators are appropriate and, if so, to recommend changes. The Working Group was unable to come to an agreement on whether changes to pension plan coverage for 911 telecommunicators are appropriate. However, the Working Group agreed to make the following recommendations to the LCPR:

1. The Working Group recommends that public employers of 911 telecommunicators evaluate the wages, compensation schedules, other employee benefits, work scheduling, and work environment of 911 telecommunicators for adequacy and parity.
2. The Working Group recognizes that the nature of 911 telecommunicators' work is stressful and regularly exposes 911 telecommunicators to traumatic situations. The Working Group recommends that the Legislature provide for improved availability of mental health care for 911 telecommunicators.
3. The Working Group did not agree on whether pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators should be changed. However, if the Legislature were to establish a plan providing for enhanced pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators, the Working Group recommends the following:
 - a. The eligibility criteria for the plan should clearly define the employees who are eligible and those who are not by providing a clear definition of "911 telecommunicators". Participation in the plan by eligible employees should be mandatory.
 - b. Third-party certification or licensure as a 911 telecommunicator should not be the sole criteria for determining eligibility to receive enhanced pension benefits.
 - c. The state should provide sufficient funds to ensure that the funding ratio and projected funded status of any existing plan is not negatively impacted by any change in pension benefits for 911 telecommunicators. The state should also provide funds to cover the expenses related to establishing a new plan or tier of benefits, including actuarial fees for evaluating benefit proposals.
 - d. 911 telecommunicators who are state employees should be covered by the same plan as 911 telecommunicators who are local government employees. The plan should be administered by PERA.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
One strong united voice for Minnesota workers

300 Hardman Avenue South
South St. Paul, MN 55075
Council5@afscmemn.org



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March 6, 2024

Doug Anderson
Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association
60 Empire Drive
St. Paul, MN 55103

Re: Position Statement Supporting Enhanced PERA Benefits for 911 Dispatchers

Dear Mr. Anderson and PERA Trustees:

One of the primary responsibilities of government, and perhaps the origin and most refined justification for government altogether, is to provide its citizenry amiable assurances of safety. Broadly, our labor union represents an extensive group of dedicated workers whose calling in life has led them into public service to fulfill this sacred and original duty of government, ensuring public safety. More specifically, we represent public safety workers within our state's county correctional facilities; additionally, we represent Public Safety Telecommunicators (PSTs)/911 dispatchers, the initial first responders of our government's public safety infrastructure.

Though the work of the public safety telecommunicator has historically been classified at the federal level as clerical in nature, including the use of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Standard Occupational Classification code 43-0000, "Office and Administrative Support Occupation", most objective observers, once given the opportunity to reflect on the current-day reality of the responsibilities of the role, would disagree. Unequivocally, public safety telecommunicators are a part of the first responder, protective services profession. We're writing to ask for your consideration and support to properly recognize this profession and adjust their retirement benefits accordingly.

Our proposal is to move public safety telecommunicators from the PERA General plan to the PERA Correctional plan; our specific proposal, you will note, incorporates significant alterations and concessions from recent requests from stakeholders to do the same. We are asking for this move to be done on a prospective basis, thereby eliminating the roughly \$79 million initial cost to cover the transfer of past service credits. We understand, as fiduciaries defined by 356A.02, why you were unable to support the past proposal to pay for the transfer of past service credits prior to the PERA General plan being sufficiently funded. We hope you will support this compromise position.

In addition to eliminating the up-front cost, our compromise proposal addresses other barriers. Under 356A.04, you owe a fiduciary duty to the taxpayers of political subdivisions. The difference between the employer contribution rate for the PERA General plan and PERA Correctional plan is an increase of 1.25% of pay, and while seemingly small, you must take this increased burden on the taxpayers into account. Our proposal addresses this; we agree to, at a minimum, maintain the PERA General plan employee contribution rate (6.5%) for PSTs. The employee contribution rate for PERA General is .67% of pay greater than that of the PERA Correctional plan.

This concession will help buy-down the increased cost to employers and is a recognition by PSTs that they lack a threat of physical harm, differentiating their contribution rate from that of Correctional Officers and Guards. If the entire .67% of pay were to be applied to buying down the cost to employers, the increase to the employer's contribution would still be .58% of pay. Direct employer costs ought not not be your sole consideration in making policy decisions as fiduciaries; indirect savings, though more difficult to measure from an actuarial standpoint, should also be considered.

Consider this: what could the cost-savings be for our employers by helping initiate a near-immediate increase in recruitment and retention in a high-turnover profession, incentivized by an earlier retirement age? Is it worth the contribution increase of a modest .58% of pay? It's arguably worth more.

According to a 2023 national survey, conducted by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch (IAED™) and the National Association of State 911 Administrators (NASNA), which collected data from 744 respondents in 48 states, the vacancy rate in 911 centers across America was close to 25%, across a four-year period from 2019-2022.ⁱ Another survey, this one conducted by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) in partnership with CARBYNE, notes the top two issues cited by respondents for their call centers were understaffing (82%) and burnout (75%).ⁱⁱ

Conversations with stakeholders are ongoing and we will continue to work toward an agreeable solution. Protecting or enhancing the funding status of the Correctional plan and ensuring the inflationary protection available to retirees through COLA increases is not jeopardized, are, and will remain primary priorities in pursuing this change; the final compromise must safeguard or enhance current COLA increases for retirees.

Our proposal, as drafted, does not yet reflect the full buy-down potential created by our members' willingness to maintain a higher contribution rate; additionally, our members have expressed a willingness to increase their contribution rates to cover the additional cost incurred by employers as well as create a funding sufficiency to protect future COLA increases for current and future retirees.

We respectfully request an endorsement of our proposal in-principle and additionally request the Board of Trustees to authorize Executive Director Anderson and PERA staff to engage with employer stakeholders and ourselves, to assist in crafting and negotiating a final product reflective of this proposed concept and conduct actuarial work as necessary. Alternatively, we request PERA staff to propose a different solution to enhance the retirement benefits for Public Safety Telecommunicators, ensuring those benefits are commensurate with other public safety and first responder public employee retirement benefits.

In Solidarity and With Appreciation,

Bart A Andersen

Bart Andersen
Interim Executive Director
AFSCME Council 5

ⁱ https://www.911.gov/assets/IAED_NASNA_Staffing-Survey-Report-2023.pdf

ⁱⁱ https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nena.org/resource/resmgr/docs/2023_Carbyne_and_NENA_The_Pu.pdf



MINNESOTA TEAMSTERS PUBLIC & LAW ENFORCEMENT EMPLOYEES' UNION, LOCAL NO. 320, STATE OF MINNESOTA



AFFILIATED WITH
International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Brian Aldes
Secretary-Treasurer

Erik Skoog
President

Curt Swenson
Vice President

Joshua Loahr
Recording Secretary

Jill Nitke
Trustee

Brett Ohnstad
Trustee

Connie Westlund
Trustee

March 6, 2024

Doug Anderson
Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association
60 Empire Drive
St. Paul, MN 55103

Subject: Position Statement Supporting Enhanced PERA Benefits for 911 Dispatchers

Dear Mr. Anderson and PERA Trustees,

Teamsters Local 320 has historically been a strong advocate for public safety workers in Minnesota, including Public Safety Telecommunicators (PSTs)/911 dispatchers. We are writing to bring attention to the crucial role these individuals play as the initial first responders in our public safety infrastructure. Despite their critical responsibilities, PSTs have historically been classified as office and administrative support staff at the federal level, overlooking their role in the protective services profession.

We are proposing a shift of public safety telecommunicators from the PERA General plan to the PERA Correctional plan. This proposal aims to recognize the unique nature of their work and adjust their retirement benefits accordingly. By transitioning them to the Correctional plan, we aim to address concerns such as the prospective move to avoid an upfront cost of approximately \$79 million for past service credits.

Furthermore, we understand the fiduciary duties involved, particularly in considering the impact on taxpayers. To mitigate any increased burden, we propose maintaining the employee contribution rate for PSTs at the level of the PERA Corrects plan, acknowledging the financial implications for both employers and employees.

Our proposal also takes into account the potential cost-savings and benefits of enhancing recruitment and retention in a profession with high turnover rates. By incentivizing an earlier retirement age for PSTs, we believe this change could lead to significant indirect savings for employers in the long run.

Given the critical staffing issues highlighted in national surveys regarding 911 centers, including high vacancy rates and issues of understaffing and burnout, it is clear that action is needed to support and retain these essential workers.

We respectfully request your endorsement of our proposal in principle and seek authorization for further discussions and negotiations to refine and implement the necessary changes. We are committed to working collaboratively to ensure that the retirement benefits for Public Safety Telecommunicators align with those of other public safety and first responder public employees.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to engaging with you to address the needs of our dedicated PSTs.

Respectfully,

Brian Aldes
Secretary-Treasurer

BA/ss, OPEIU#12

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United To Protect
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Law Enforcement Labor Services, Inc.

2700 FREEWAY BOULEVARD SUITE 700 • BROOKLYN CENTER, MN 55430
651-293-4424

March 4, 2024

Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association
Attention: Executive Director Doug Anderson
60 Empire Drive
St. Paul, MN 55103

Re: Position Statement Supporting Enhanced PERA Benefits for 911 Dispatchers

Dear Mr. Anderson and PERA Trustees:

One of the primary responsibilities of government is to provide its citizenry assurances of public safety. Law Enforcement Labor Services (LELS) is Minnesota's largest public safety labor union and represents approximately seven-hundred (700) 911 Dispatchers in fifty-eight (58) different dispatch centers throughout Minnesota, whose calling in life has led them into public service to fulfill this sacred and original duty of government, ensuring public safety.

Though the work of the 911 Dispatcher has historically been classified at the federal level as clerical in nature, including the use of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Standard Occupational Classification code 43-0000, "Office and Administrative Support Occupation", most objective observers, once given the opportunity to reflect on the current-day reality of the responsibilities of the role, would disagree. Unequivocally, 911 Dispatchers are a part of the first responder, protective services profession and are considered "Essential Employees" under the Public Employee Labor Relations Act of Minnesota. In fact, they are commonly referred to as the first, First Responder. They are one of the most important lifelines in any critical incident, whether it is the victim on the scene, someone in need for medical assistance, or assistance needed from our own public safety workers while they respond and work at the scene of an incident or crisis. We're writing to ask for your consideration and support to properly recognize this profession and adjust their retirement benefits accordingly.

Our proposal is to move 911 Dispatchers from the PERA General plan to the PERA Correctional plan; our specific proposal, you will note, incorporates significant alterations and concessions from recent requests from stakeholders to do the same. We are asking for this move to be done on a prospective basis, thereby eliminating the roughly \$79 million initial cost to cover the transfer of past service credits. We understand, as fiduciaries defined by 356A.02, why you were unable to support the past proposal to pay for the transfer of past service credits prior to the PERA General plan being sufficiently funded. We hope you will support this compromise position.

In addition to eliminating the up-front cost, our compromise proposal addresses other barriers. Under 356A.04, you owe a fiduciary duty to the taxpayers of political subdivisions. The difference between the employer contribution rate for the PERA General plan and PERA Correctional plan is an increase of 1.25% of pay, and while seemingly small, you must take this increased burden on the taxpayers into account. Our proposal addresses this; we agree to, at a minimum, maintain the PERA General plan employee contribution rate (6.5%) for 911 Dispatchers. The employee contribution rate for PERA General is .67% of pay greater than that of the PERA Correctional plan.

This concession will help buy down the increased cost to employers and is a recognition by PSTs that they lack a threat of *physical* harm, differentiating their contribution rate from that of Correctional Officers and Guards. If the entire .67% of pay were to be applied to buying down the cost to employers, the increase to the employer's contribution would still be .58% of pay. Direct employer costs ought not be your sole consideration in making policy decisions as fiduciaries; indirect savings, though more difficult to measure from an actuarial standpoint, should also be considered.

Consider this: what *could* the cost-savings be for our employers by helping initiate a near-immediate increase in recruitment and retention in a high-turnover profession, incentivized by an earlier retirement age? Is it worth the contribution increase of a modest .58% of pay? It's arguably worth more.

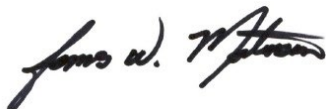
According to a 2023 national survey, conducted by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch (IAED™) and the National Association of State 911 Administrators (NASNA), which collected data from 744 respondents in 48 states, the vacancy rate in 911 centers across America was close to 25%, across a four-year period from 2019-2022.ⁱ Another survey, this one conducted by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) in partnership with CARBYNE, notes the top two issues cited by respondents for their call centers were understaffing (82%) and burnout (75%).ⁱⁱ

We respectfully request an endorsement of our proposal in-principle, and additionally request the Board of Trustees to authorize Executive Director Anderson and PERA staff to engage with employer stakeholders and ourselves, to assist in crafting and negotiating a final product reflective of this proposed concept and conduct actuarial work as necessary.

ⁱ https://www.911.gov/assets/IAED_NASNA_Staffing-Survey-Report-2023.pdf

ⁱⁱ https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nena.org/resource/resmgr/docs/2023_Carbyne_and_NENA_The_Pu.pdf

Respectfully yours,



Jim Mortenson
Executive Director
Law Enforcement Labor Services (LELS)
Email: JMortenson@lels.org
Cell: 320-980-6815

TESTIMONIAL #1

I became a 911 dispatcher/telecommunicator in July 2022. Before transitioning to this role and organization I was working as a Deputy. Having experience from both sides of the radio gives me a unique perspective; both jobs are challenging and crucial. Not including schooling for Law Enforcement, my training was 3-4 months longer to become a Dispatcher than it had been to get off FTO as a Deputy. During that time, I found that being a dispatcher is far more complex than being an officer; we have to be faster with our actions during our entire shift and not just during critical moments along with multi-tasking in more ways than you can imagine.

Another thing is that as dispatchers, at least at my agency, we more often than not work longer hours than officers. As a Deputy I worked 10-hour shifts and only every now and then went over that time frame. As a Dispatcher I am very often, usually two or more times a week working 12-, 14-, and 16-hour shifts. This results in mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, time away from my husband and kids, little time for self-care or even getting more than 6 hours of sleep.

As Dispatchers we are abused, berated, exhausted, and mentally/emotionally impacted by the public. I have been sworn at more times than I can remember, something that surprisingly didn't occur as often as a Deputy. I have assisted families through multiple hangings and emergency medical situations, heard people screaming, crying, and physically fighting during domestic situations, heard the panic of parents as they have realized their child is either missing or hurting themselves, and many more situations full of distraught and chaos. My most recent experience has been the worst I could ever have during my career; I was working during the Burnsville incident on Feb 18, 2024. The stress and trauma from that incident is different than what the first responders on scene have but it is NOT less. I am experiencing many symptoms of trauma and grief, as are many of my coworkers here in dispatch.

We may sit behind a desk "safely" but that does not change the impact this job has on us. I loved being a Deputy and I love being a Dispatcher, but I have had far more chronic stress from being a Dispatcher. We are the first to speak to people, we are the resources and eyes/ears for our responders, and we are deeply affected mentally, emotionally, and physically by our job. We deserve to be labeled as First Responders and to receive the same benefits as them because just as it takes a unique and strong person to be a Police Officer, Fire Fighter, and Paramedic, it takes the same person to be a 911 Dispatcher.

Katarina Monjaras
911 Dispatcher
Dakota County

TESTIMONIAL #2

I have been a Dispatcher for 23 years in St. Louis County. We dispatch more than 170 Police/Sheriff, Fire, and Ambulance services in Minnesota's largest county, more than 7000 square miles. I am also a Dispatcher for the St. Louis County Emergency Response Team, the Duluth Police Tactical Response team, and the Child Abduction Response team. I am a Lead Dispatcher working nights, overseeing one of four crews that work in the center. I have received multiple LifeSaver awards for my work during critical incidents.

Here is my story: I was a News Anchor in Duluth for five years prior to starting this career wanting to make a difference. I was excited to be a part of public safety. In my first few weeks of training, I said to another trainee, "I don't want this job to change me". It has done that very thing. In good ways and in other ways. The day I helped a woman deliver a healthy baby girl; my life changed. I have since assisted in the delivery of two other healthy infants.

I've listened to screams as a drug dealer pointed a gun through a front door and through the commotion a child sleeping on the other side of the wall sat up and was shot in the head. I could hear the pain in the voice of the paramedic who carried this 5-year-old child to the Ambulance and then learned the outcome. Another caller provided a description of the suspect vehicle, when an off-duty officer heard the radio traffic and happened to be following it in his personal vehicle. Squads scrambled toward him as he provided location updates. Two of the squads crashed at an intersection and one of the officers was ejected but survived. My life changed.

I have given CPR instructions to a man whose wife collapsed just after the family left Christmas dinner. He begged her to live. I cried as I heard him say her name and the helplessness in his voice in his fight to keep her alive. I was asked to contact the family and ask them to return to the house. She did not live. My life changed.

I have given CPR instructions to a mother whose child was found underwater at a beach and still have a poignant visual of this mother trying to resuscitate her daughter. She did not live. My life changed.

Among my most blessed CPR calls was at a beach where a grandfather was swimming with his grandchildren. He went underwater and the children found him and brought him to the surface. They were able to get him onto the dock and begin CPR. They resuscitated him and he walked to the ambulance. My life changed.

I was dispatching a pursuit which stopped near a bowling alley where children were playing inside. The K9 Deputy got out of his vehicle and approached the suspect who fired at the Deputy. The Deputy returned fire and the suspect died. This happened on the road in front of a woman in a minivan and two children inside with her. My life changed.

Every call we handle is like a small stone that we put in our backpack until one day it is too heavy to carry. I have attended weekly therapy appointments for PTSD due to the horrific incidents that we deal with every day. 52 appointments. 52 hours of learning to live with the grief that changed me.

We are essential employees. We are required to work when other citizens are told to stay home. During COVID, during snowstorms, during other emergencies. We are Dispatchers and we are essential, outstanding and exceptional!

Sarah Kemp
Lead 911 Dispatcher
St. Louis County Sheriff's Office

TESTIMONIAL #3

It's 2 o'clock in the morning, a child calls 911 because her Mother & boyfriend are having a domestic situation that is both verbal & physical. The child is emotional, she has no idea what the address is of the house she's at. The child is pleading with you, the 911 Dispatcher, to PLEASE send help.

It's the middle of harvest season, a call comes into 911 from an emotional Father whose son was riding with him & has fallen out of the tractor & hit his head & they're in the middle of a field.

These are just 2 examples of the MANY, MANY different calls that come into a Dispatch center in this state. Dispatchers in the state of Minnesota are currently categorized as simply "secretaries" - as someone who "just answers the phone" - but the Dispatchers are in some form the 1st First responders. A dispatcher takes the initial burst of emotion/energy a situation. They are trained to be the voice of calm, the voice of reassurance, when a scared child calls in asking for help or an emotional Father is asking for medical help for his son. Day after day, calls of traumatic nature are taken in centers across the State.

Law Enforcement officials, Officers, Deputies, Firefighters, & even Correctional Officers can retire at 55. Dispatchers have to wait to retire until whatever age Social Security has set, which is currently 67. Imagine working as a Dispatcher & taking on another 12 years of calls that cause emotional trauma, all because the State views you simply as a secretary answering a phone. If you or your loved ones needed help in an emergency, would you consider the person who was able to reassure them, determine their location & the resources needed, just a secretary?

The Dispatchers of the State of MN are asking you to consider reevaluating the category our job field is classified as. We're asking for you to allow us to retire at the same age as the First Responders who handle the traumatizing events we dispatch them to. Thank you.

Deb Wettergren
911 Dispatcher
Nicollet Co. Sheriff's Office

TESTIMONIAL #4

When I chose to start this career eight years ago, I was pregnant with my first child and looking for a job I could be proud of to provide for my family. I didn't know if I could handle it or if I wanted to. Now, I know I don't want to do anything else. This job becomes part of your blood and your soul. I have missed holidays with my family, story time and bedtime with my children, countless sunny days and worked so much overtime I didn't know what day it was. I have heard assaults, people dying or being killed, been called terrible things, but also helped so many with just my voice. I pick up the phone in the middle of the problem. Not before something has happened. In the middle. Or sometimes after. I am the first one to hear that there is a problem and my job is to try to make it better before the officer gets there. I talk you into putting the gun down away from your temple. I tell you to lock the door to protect yourself from your raging husband. I stay on the phone with you while you hide in a closet terrified because there's someone in your house. I have heard officers get shot and crawl on the ground away from gunfire.

Stress and anxiety are a constant in my life either from the job itself or from the time I have missed in my personal life. I have lost patches of hair and have high blood pressure. But, I never want to do anything else. Right now, I am in my thirties, but I don't know how I will be able to handle this job in my fifties or sixties. Technology changes daily along with the physical toll that all the stress continues to take on my body and mind. Retiring early or quitting when I can't do the job anymore is the reality we all face in this line of work. Mistakes are life and death and this job is not kind to those getting older. I will do this job until I can't anymore because it is part of me. I want to do this. I feel like it is my duty to help people and to keep everyone safe. We are first responders even if we don't ever see who we talk to on the phone or the radio. We aren't just a secretary or a receptionist. Reclassify us as first responders because that's what we deserve.

Jenna Pulvermacher
911 Dispatcher
Anoka County Dispatch

TESTIMONIAL #5

A day in the life of a dispatcher. Close your eyes, put yourself in the center, you are the dispatcher. You are dispatching for The Duluth Police Department, have fifteen plus active calls on the board, all of your squads are out on calls, ten pending calls; some of which you believe a squad should go to right away, one squad asks you to call the medical examiner on a death call, you call the M.E., phones are ringing, while on the phone with M.E. another squad calls out a traffic stop, you enter the stop check the registered owners driving status and check for warrants all while still on the phone with the M.E., phones are ringing, you hang up with M.E. and see an attempt to locate come in on a reckless driver but it is on the highway so you call state patrol to advise, it then goes across the bridge to Wisconsin hitting someone on the bridge, you call Wisconsin to advise of attempt to locate, phones are ringing, Squad asks for medical to be sent to a person in a parking ramp stairwell not responding, you dispatch fire/medical, phones are ringing, squads at the ramp are asking you to run and attach 4 names to the call, fire department on another medical is asking for law enforcement for an aggressive patient but all your squads are tied up, phones are ringing, you get a water emergency on Lake Superior come in of a swimmer who got caught in a rip current, phones ringing.....there is not enough people to answer...you answer the phone and it is a woman screaming help her child is not breathing. Now, you are her lifeline as well as all of the squads you are dispatching for. All of that pressure is on you. All those lives are in your hands. This is 911.

Hello, my name is Krysten and I have been a dispatcher for three and a half years. To fully understand our center, I must start by giving you some background information on where I come from. I am a dispatcher for St. Louis County, the largest county in Minnesota. St. Louis County is home to more than 200,000 people and has a diverse landscape which includes cities, ports, lakes, forests, wetlands, trails, mines, and two Indian reservations. Our county is the gateway to both the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and to Lake Superior, the greatest of the Great Lakes. It consists of 27 cities, 72 townships, 75 unorganized townships and portions of two reservations. In total our center is responsible for dispatching 185 different agencies. These include Law enforcement agencies, Fire Departments, First Responders, Ambulances, and our Rescue Squad. Although we dispatch them, we are also responsible for working closely with our partner agencies such as MN State Patrol, many different public works, Air Medical, Medical Examiner, Tow Companies, Hospitals, and our neighboring Counties.

In our center, each person is trained at six different "boards." The boards are South County Law, North County Law, Duluth Police Department, South County Fire/Duluth Fire, North County Fire, and Call Taking. At any given moment, you must be ready to be able to dispatch any of these boards. While dispatching, you are also expected to be able to answer the phone as needed. This may lead to you being on the phone doing CPR or dealing with an in-progress burglary/robbery/assault all while also dispatching (at any board). This can also put you in the position of being the dispatcher on a priority call (example: fire dispatcher dispatching a structure fire) and picking up the phone and it being a miniscule barking dog complaint or another priority call (CPR, Burglary, Assault, Robbery, Structure Fire, Security Alarm, etc.) This

can be extremely stressful as you may imagine.

Most of us try to leave work at work but it can prove very difficult at times. Even though we do not go to the scene, we are there from the beginning to the end. We are there when the caller is crying out for help because their vehicle rolled over in a water filled ditch, we are there dispatching an officer and medics to help, we are there calming the caller down and reassuring them we have sent help, we are there when the officers arrive first on scene and call out exactly what they are seeing, we are there now hearing the screams on the phone and the panic in the officers voice, and we are there when the line disconnects...everyone clears...and no comments are typed in the call. We are here, left wondering what happened. Anyone who has been in dispatch will tell you a similar story. We are the first first responders and we are there through it all, yet we are the last ones people think of and are almost never given the ending to the story. That takes a huge mental toll. The secondary trauma and stress of this job has impacted most of us emotionally, physically, and mentally. There are calls that we don't talk about because we can still hear the voice. I have only been dispatching for three and a half years and I have been involved in a number of barricaded subjects, officer involved shootings (one of which our K9 officer was killed in the line of duty), fatality crashes, a homicide, a plane crash, and CPR calls. I was dispatching fire/medical at the time that we had a domestic turn into a barricaded subject with a hostage, I can still hear the officer scream over the radio "shots fired! send medical send medical code 3 code 3!". That was me. They were asking for me. I had no idea who was hurt. Those were some of the longest moments I have ever had to go through. They finally called out that K9 officer Luna was shot. The days that followed her death were quiet and depressing. There was a funeral procession. I still cannot listen to the sound of bagpipes playing without going back to that moment because that is what they played as they carried her casket out of the vet. As "funny" as it sounds, I cannot even watch dog movies anymore or anything that has anything sad for a dog because it brings me back to the officer screaming over the radio. That happens to me, and I never went on scene... all of us dispatchers have similar stories, and I cannot stress enough how just because we are not there does not mean we don't experience what is happening to the fullest extent. In training, which for me was about 7-8 months, I had given CPR instructions more times than people who have been a dispatcher for many years. My highest count was 3 CPR calls in one shift. I still don't know the ending to most of those calls, and the mental cost from that is great.

This job is a lot. Not only do we have to endure stress, compassion fatigue, PTSD, and other mental health issues; but we also endure physical symptoms from the job as well. Our eyes are strained from staring at computer screens for ten plus hours a day while sitting in a dark room. I have noticed when I leave work in the daylight it's painful and takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the natural light. When I leave at night, I find myself feeling as if the night is even darker and the lights are brighter, making driving a bit difficult. This has worsened since working in dispatch. Our ears are constantly being affected by the volumes needed to hear on the radio and phone. Having someone scream and yell in your ear is a regular occurrence as well as excited K9 officers barking in your ear. I have talked to retired dispatchers who after many years

of service could tell a difference in hearing. I have also noticed a change in my health from not being able to move around much during the day. We are lucky to have standing desks but as for walking, we cannot leave our desks for very long amounts of time.

Every single one of us (dispatchers) chooses to be here even though the load is heavy, and the takeaway is minimal. I love my job. I choose to bear the immense burden of the job because I love helping people. The toll is great though, and there comes a time when it becomes too much for people who have been here for many years. I have seen many dispatchers have to stay past when they were capable in order to be able to retire with full retirement benefits. I believe this not only puts more pressure and stress on their partners, but also affects the safety of many people (callers, firefighters, responders, paramedics, law enforcement). This is not a job where you can lack in any department. You need to be on top of your game one hundred percent of the time. Your response time cannot slow. Seconds matter in this job and can be life or death. I have seen many of the retired dispatchers who did stay past time have slower response times which did affect the call. You must be ready for anything. You must be ready for them to call out one running, vehicle pursuit, shots fired. You must be prepared to type as fast as you can and think even faster. You must be able to hear them and see your screens adequately. You must be able to multitask. But the reality of this job is that the job wears you down, like I have previously stated, and by the time we are able to retire we are not doing the job at one hundred percent. I cannot stress enough how dangerous this is, for everyone.

It is now that we have come to you to request a reclassification for dispatchers to First Responders. This change would be immense for the dispatch world and would provide relief knowing that we do not have to continue to do the job when we know we are not one hundred percent capable of doing the job. I only hope I have given you a glimpse of our daily lives. We give everything to this job. We give up our family time, our home life, our normal schedule, our sleep, our mental well-being, our physical well-being, our lives... all to help others. We only hope you see this too, and that we have earned the title First Responder.

I am 911. I am the calm voice in the chaos, the light in the darkness, the unseen responder: the first First Responder. And on your worst day I hope I can be there for you too.

Krysten Selhorst
911 Dispatcher
St. Louis County

TESTIMONIAL #6

As I sit here and write this, it is hard for me to know where to start. Let's start with the definition of a secretary: definition taken from dictionary.com

noun, plural **sec·re·tar·ies.**

1. a person, usually an official, who is in charge of the records, correspondence, minutes of meetings, and related affairs of an organization, company, association, etc.:

the secretary of the Linguistic Society of America.

2. a person employed to handle correspondence and do routine work in a business office, usually involving taking dictation, typing, filing, and the like.

On the surface this definition loosely fits a 911 dispatcher. We type out correspondences we have with the public, the police, the firefighters and the paramedics. We create calls which turn into public records. But we don't work Monday through Friday 9-5. We don't get to sit around a water cooler discussing the news or office gossip. Now I'm not saying a secretary has an easy job, I am not a secretary, nor have I ever been, but what I do every day is not a "secretarial" job.

I have worked for Minneapolis for 5 years. I started during the Pandemic and was there the day George Floyd died. I have been there almost every day since. I was there for the riots, through the city on fire, through civil unrest, through the Capitol of the United States being stormed. At Minneapolis we are constantly short staffed both in officers and dispatchers. We work ten plus hours a day and for a while were only getting one day off. This job takes more than time away from you. It changes you in ways you can't even imagine.

During this time we took thousands of calls a day. Calls from citizens threatening to rape us or our families, threatening to come find us and kill us. They threatened to blow up our homes, cars and where we worked because they assumed we condoned the murder of George Floyd. And it was a murder. We also took calls from people terrified and heart broken because their livelihoods were on fire. Terrified because a peaceful protest had turned into a blood bath and rioters were preventing medical attention from reaching those who desperately needed it.

I have personally been on the phone with someone taking their last breaths of life. This man had been walking up to his home and had started to unlock his front door when another man walked up behind him and shot him in the chest before running away. This man had enough life left in him to call 911, give me his address, tell me he had been shot in the chest then take his last breath. I was the last voice he ever heard but he wasn't the last person I was on the phone with while they died.

I have had to talk a teenager and her siblings through crawling out her bedroom window to the police and firefighters waiting below because her father was holding their mother hostage at knifepoint. Talked to an 8 year old as he watched his mother shoot his father during an argument and many other countless situations.

I have talked people out of killing themselves and been there for callers who have found a loved one dead. The helplessness we feel is like nothing else I have ever felt. Yes we are on the phone and get a call started but we aren't PHYSICALLY there to get a man off of a woman who is raping her, we aren't there to carry a child into another room so they don't have to see their parents hurting each other, or put pressure on a dying man's wounds so he maybe has a chance to live.

On the radio side we hear firefighters call out they are trapped in a burning or collapsed house. We hear officers call out they need help because they are fighting with someone or being shot at or have been stabbed. We hear the panic in their voices, the desperation to live and we have to always remain calm. We have to always take action and push aside our own trauma to get the job done.

We look at at least six to eight computer screens, handle anywhere from five calls to thirty by ourselves all at once. We have to remember details, locations, suspect descriptions, and many other things for every single call and keep them straight for when a responder on scene asks for that information.

A secretary doesn't have to deal with half of what we do. We miss time with family, time with friends, time with ourselves. We have no time to take care of ourselves mentally, emotionally and physically. This job gives us trauma as much as any other first responder yet we are treated lesser than by the government. Our benefits don't reflect the mental health needs we crave and desperately need. Nor do we get the same health benefits a police officer or firefighter gets. We also have to work longer into our lives before we can retire with a decent pension. This job doesn't just take your time, your energy and your mental health; it takes a part of who you are. We deserve to be recognized as first responders because we are THE first person in an emergency a citizen calls for help.

Alexandra Swanson
911 Dispatcher
City of Minneapolis

TESTIMONIAL #7

My name is Darcy Ziller and I am a Public Safety Telecommunicator (PST) in Cook County. I fell into this profession quite by accident just shy of 26 years ago.

This was not the career I had initially intended. I will go so far as to say I've never heard anyone say they want to grow up to be a 911 dispatcher. I believe this is mostly in part because very few outside of public safety understand the role we play. Unfortunately, this also includes the groups of people tasked with deciding our worth.

As a long serving member of the profession, I have to accept some of the blame for this. I, like so many others, always preferred to do our work behind the scenes and not be especially vocal about the work that we do. Most people now get their ideas about what we are based on what they see on TV or in movies, or the rare headlines when we do something very well or very badly. We have done ourselves a disservice that we now need to put right.

Although different agencies may call us by different titles, we in Public Safety Communications perform ultimately the same duties across the state. We are the very first 1st responders in our community's emergencies, and the lifeline to our law enforcement, emergency medical services and fire department personnel. We are the first incident commander in all events, large or small. We train hard in Emergency Medical Dispatch so that we can provide life support in medical emergencies, such as CPR, blood control in traumatic injuries and accidents, childbirth, anaphylaxis, and choking. We are trained in crisis negotiations, suicidal callers, domestic abuse and assaults, sexual assaults, mental health events, active shooters, Incident Command, missing and abducted children, search and rescue and countless others. We train on how we need to react differently when these calls may involve Veterans with PTSD, children and adults with autism & special needs, and with people with deafness/ hard of hearing.

We are the very first contact for people having the worst day of their lives, and sometimes the last day of their lives. We often have the ability to diffuse hostile and volatile situations before our law enforcement partners arrive, making it safer for both them and our public.

In my almost 26 years serving in an outstate agency, I have coordinated many search and rescue events for missing people inside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and other wilderness areas. I have performed CPR by phone countless times, frequently when either or both the caller and patient are known to me personally. I've walked a father through the delivery of his baby, spent many hours on the line with both suspects and victims in domestic assault or other high intensity situations in order to render the scene as safe as possible for our law enforcement responder's arrival. I've developed a 911 for Kids program that has allowed us to visit with young elementary students and teach them how and when to call 911. I've moved on to a program that

will allow me to instruct other 911 professionals in active shooter events that may allow us to buy back some time between the initial call and the first officer's contact with the suspect. We save seconds, and seconds save lives. I, like the hundreds of emergency communications professionals around the state, spend my time leaping from emergency to emergency in order to try to calm the chaos suffered by our communities.

I, like the rest of us, have done this with no small cost to my own personal life. Families often struggle with missing us during our night, weekend or holiday shift rotations. The horrors that stay in our ears when the shift is over can affect the way we interact with our spouses, children, parents and friends. We can't always explain to our children why they can't go to a particular friend's house for a sleep over because we know that address from things such as domestics, drugs or child abuse calls. We can't tell our husband the massive heartache we have from trying to walk a 80 year old woman through CPR on her husband of 50 years, but her wrists are too weak to do compressions and we just have to wait until EMS arrives to take over. Talking to someone as they are in the process of killing themselves and are only calling to let us know where to find their body, or a person calling for themselves having a medical crisis and they are all alone and the line goes dead, these are things that we won't forget the sounds of.

In my own case, between the stress and the shiftwork, it took my husband and I six years to be able to get pregnant with our first child. Now, two children later, they can tell you things like exactly what is situational awareness. They count the exits in large buildings and scan the crowds of any event we attend for people who just don't look right. They will also warn any newcomer that when mom arrives home from work, if she walks to the garden instead of the door, it's best to stay away and wait for her to come in on her own time. You may wonder why we do this, when the pay, benefits, stress and hours are such a challenge. For many of us, once we have changed a life for the better, saved a life, helped turn a life around or been able to steer a situation into not turning into a fatality, we're hooked. For every incredible moment we get to have a hand in, we can handle so many more bad ones.

The Occupational Information Network (O*NET), which is part of the US Department of Labor, recently listed Public Safety Telecommunicators as #8 in their list of the country's most stressful occupations (out of 873 occupations). In 2022, Police1 Magazine listed Public Safety Telecommunicators as #1 most stressful job in Public Safety.

To be classified as clerical/administrative gives zero consideration to the role that we are central to in emergencies. Reclassification of this profession is well past due. We clearly do not fit the administrative & clerical class we are currently assigned. Our duties and expectations do not align with what the public expects of us. With reclassification, we may be eligible for more support and be on par with our other emergency services partners for training, PTSD services, and possibly even retirement changes. Thank you for taking the time to be educated on the

particulars of this profession, and in your consideration in giving it a more appropriate classification.

Darcy Ziller
911 Public Safety Telecommunicator/Jailer
Cook County Sheriff's Office

TESTIMONIAL #8

Almost exactly 4 years ago, just a couple of months before my 19th birthday, and not even a year after graduating high school, I put on a headset and plugged into a dispatch console for the first time. I didn't know at the time, but this career would begin to affect almost every aspect of my life, both negatively and positively.

I sit here, tethered to my console as I write this, and I'm struggling immensely in placing my words in a way that conveys exactly what I am trying to say properly. Honestly, I don't know that I can put it into words in a way that's less than novel length, because this career entails so much.

This career is both rewarding and lacks reward at the same time. We are the "unseen heroes", the true FIRST first responders. We are hidden, in my case quite literally in a basement, and the people who call us on the worst days of their lives aren't thinking about the person on the other side of the phone. When they do, and we get a true, genuine, thank you, that is one of the most rewarding experiences for a dispatcher.

This career gives you a great amount of responsibility and purpose, and for me, it gives me reason. It inspires me and has taught me a great deal not just about my community but also society in general. I knew the second I answered my first phone call that this would be tough, but that it was my calling. I had no idea what sacrifices would need to be made along the way, but I knew they would be worth something.

Us dispatchers sit for hours at a time and we use the bathroom when time allows. We aren't allowed an hour lunch break, or even a half an hour lunch break. We heat up our food when the calls slow down, and we are all much too used to eating cold food and taking bites between calls and transmitting on the radio with food in our mouths. Sometimes, we finish our 12 hour shift and realize that we didn't see the light of day a single time during it.

Countless holidays and family gatherings are missed because a dispatch center needs to be staffed, even on Christmas. There are birthdays and anniversaries that we cannot be there to celebrate, mandated and unexpected forced overtime each month that forces us to cancel the plans we've made with people we haven't seen in years because we work night shift and sleep through the entire day while everybody else is out living.

We are classified as secretaries, and NOTHING we do is secretarial from the content we deal with to the hours we work.

There isn't any extensive research involving dispatchers and mental health, not in the same way there is for other first responders, however, per a national study conducted in 2015 (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25964163/>), approximately 24.6 percent of 911 telecommunicators may suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. We aren't on scene to see what other first responders do, but we are still there for it.

We hear the panic of a home nurse who just started CPR on a 4 year old boy, the cries of a wife who just found her husband hanging in the garage, the small voice of a child who is witnessing her father hit her mother.. We sit, chained to a desk with a cord, holding our breaths as we wait for our officers' backup to arrive after we check their status and the only response we get is silence. We stay stoic, but helpless as we listen to our officer call out for emergency backup because he's fighting with a person at a traffic stop.

Those are all real life examples of situations that I, and many other 911 dispatchers have experienced.

I have witnessed the way this career can break a person down after too many years of helping others, not enough breaks and not enough support or understanding from people outside of this industry.

As the years go by and we all get older, our eyesight and hearing start to falter, our patience fades, the multi-tasking skills we once had are no longer there and our general mental capacity begins to diminish. It's inevitable and happens to everybody, not just dispatchers.

This is a career that I can see myself retiring in, but I will NOT be able to effectively do this job until I am 65 years old. That is 43 more years of my skills slowly fading, and by the time I hit the age of 45, I will no longer be anywhere near as efficient as I am today.

My request as you read these testimonies is to please consider the type of career that 911 dispatch truly is while using these personal statements to reconsider how 911 dispatchers are classified, and to genuinely weigh the benefits of expanding the dispatchers pension benefits and lowering the retirement age.

Although we aren't seen, our sacrifices aren't any less than the ones our other first responder colleagues make. We are the ones behind the scenes that allow for the rest of the community of first responders to effectively do their jobs. Without 911 dispatchers, there would be no first responders.

Samantha Gust
Anoka County Emergency Communications Center

TESTIMONIAL #9

My name is Joy Hill with St Louis County Communications, 911 dispatch. In my last 24 years of service with the county, I have answered the call of duty as the first, first responder as a call taker and police/fire dispatcher. The biggest part of my job is to provide appropriate help with emergency or non-emergency services in a timely manner.

I am proud of what I do. Not anyone can do this job. Dispatchers multitask many things at once. We can listen with one ear in our headset to a 911 call or radio traffic while listening with the other ear to what else is going on in the room. The sacrifice has been great. My family life has suffered. Dispatchers do not take any day off at a time, we pick our days of vacation a year in advance. Dispatchers miss Christmas and birthday celebrations. Our shifts are long and sometimes we are forced to work extra hours to compensate for a sick dispatcher. As dispatchers, we sit for 10-12 hours during a shift with few breaks and only if there is time to leave the room. There are times I get 4 hours of sleep combined with a 60 minute commute which happened after the consolidation of the north dispatch center into the south center several years ago.

There are the calls my mind will never forget. The young man trapped in a burning vehicle who did not survive hearing the pleading of the caller for help, the suicidal male with a distorted voice after shooting himself in the face in which I had to stay on the line with him until squads determined it was safe to enter, the heartbreak in the voice of a father after finding his son with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head and deceased. The stories do not end. After a traumatic call, we brush it off, pick ourselves up and move on performing our duties quickly while keeping up with a fast pace workload. One time when working as the fire dispatcher, there was a house fire. Well into the call, fire personnel asked for a medical dispatch. Confused, I paged the ambulance to respond to the location. Fire personnel had discovered the body of an infant in an upstairs bedroom, no one was home with the infant at the time of the fire. I did not have any further information of the circumstances which alone causes stress. Not knowing any further outcome, I continued with my shift as if I was not affected by this incident. It wasn't until the debriefing did I discover the circumstances of the call. As dispatchers, most of the time do not know the result of what happened.

Most recently, I received a stork pin for assisting over the phone with the delivery of a baby. What an honor! At the time I did not feel that way. I was terrified for the lives of the mother and baby. The delivery was not normal and Emergency Dispatch protocols did not cover such a delivery. Shaking inside, I had to remain calm and collective so as to not alarm the female caller. Another obstacle was the female caller was alone. I did the best I could to advise using practical knowledge and help her get through the delivery. The baby was born without incident while ambulance personnel and law enforcement officers entered the room. What was minutes, seemed like hours for them to get on scene. I remember thinking while they were on scene what is going

on? Is the baby still alive? Are they providing life saving support? When the ambulance went enroute to a local hospital and not the trauma center, I felt some relief that perhaps everything was fine. I had difficulty settling down afterwards, playing the incident over again in my mind. This lasted a few days in which it was in my thoughts still wondering if everything was okay. What if it had not been a good ending?

These are just a few accounts of what we do as first, first responders in the dispatch center. I am appealing to you and the delegates who will be determining the fate for those of us asking for a reclassification of this field of work. We are forgotten and unseen, but the silent stress lives within for the rest of our lives. I carry many scars, but my sacrifice to this profession has left me with a high sense of loyalty and compassion for others. Because of my age, I am glad to be leaving soon (I'm tired) and hope for an earlier retirement and boost in benefits for those remaining. Thank you.

Joy Hill
911 Dispatcher
St. Louis County Sheriff's Office

TESTIMONIAL #10

In between the firefighters' red line, the white line of EMS personnel and the blue line of the police, is woven the thinnest gold line that ties them all together. It is that gold line allows the others to communicate, it provides synchronization and information. The gold line is that of the 911 telecommunicator. In the words that follow, I will share what I've learned in my five years as a 911 telecommunicator and show you how critical that golden line is to all the others.

In every emergency there exists a point at which the situation exceeds the control of those involved in it. It is at that point that it is decided that additional help is needed. Consider for a moment, how fortunate for those in that situation, that there is a single phone number that they can call to get the help of every possible kind in only a matter of moments. One number to call for police, fire, ambulance, air ambulance, suicide crisis center, tow trucks, aviation support, power and gas companies, social services and so much more available by calling one number. That one number to send highly trained experts in every critical field directly to the victims of any, and every, tragedy.

Now, consider the people who answer all of the calls to that number. They may be called telecommunicators, dispatchers, operators or some other name. They must be knowledgeable and proficient in all aspects of law, emergency medicine, the environment, psychology, sociology, human nature, grief counseling, technology, communication and most any other discipline that can be considered within the realm of emergency management. They must be able to gather information while talking on a phone, to inform responders while talking on a radio, to direct additional responders on another radio, to page out more responders on a paging system, to search multiple local, state and federal databases, and to document all of the information and their actions in real time. Emergencies occur around the clock, so these people have to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. When not engaged in active emergencies, these people routinely manage records, enter warrants for the courts, manage protection orders and complete numerous other administrative functions. They answer general questions regarding the criminal justice process, direct callers to experts of all manner of problems and sometimes they go out and teach children about calling 911.

If someone had given me this to ponder five years ago when I sought to become a 911 telecommunicator, I'd have been overwhelmed and completely awed. The true depth of knowledge required to be proficient in this position is staggering. The ability to multitask is mind boggling, as I routinely perform all of the functions listed above, nearly all at once. The cost of failure at any of those functions is death.

It was only five years ago that I took this position. Prior to that, I spent 21 years in the United States Army Reserve as Military Police. In that capacity, I provided security to US personnel and

bases all over the world, I worked in correctional facilities internationally, and I served in war. Concurrent to my service, I managed 100,000 square foot big box retail stores for 24 years. In the late 90s, I spent three years patrolling Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a city of around 200,000 people at the time. I thought for certain that those experiences and my Bachelor's Degrees in Criminal Justice Administration and Applied Philosophy had prepared me for anything and everything that this position could throw at me. At this point I could regale you with near countless stories of places I've been, things I've done, the personal peril I've been placed in and the horrors I've seen around the globe. Yet, despite these experiences, I was not as well prepared to take on the life of a 911 Telecommunicator as I thought I was. In taking this position, none of Meritorious Service Medals, Army Commendations, or Navy Achievement Medals, none of my public service awards, mentorship awards or any of the nine lives I've saved from suicide through direct intervention prepared me enough for this life.

I mentioned that the cost of failure in this position is death. That is no understatement. To fail to determine the location of an emergency, or to fail to understand an emergency through only a caller's verbal description, to fail to ask the right questions, to fail to notify the right organizations, to fail to send the right people; any of these failures results in someone's death. To fail in this position does not result in the random death of someone far away. Failure means the death of neighbors, friends and possibly even family. Sometimes failure is not a requirement, no matter how expertly we perform, people still die, even when we do everything right. The people that we serve are not faceless strangers in faraway places. The people who call us in their darkest hour are in our communities. They are our friends, neighbors and sometimes even our families.

It is in those darkest hours that people take advantage of that one number to solve their biggest emergencies in life, their life and death moments, their catastrophic moments. Although my life may not have prepared me for this role, my organization's rigorous training has. I am expert and professional in knowing how to help you when your world is being torn apart. I am who you call, anytime day or night, and I will get you the help you need. I am a 911 Telecommunicator and I am so much more than a secretary. I am the link between you and the resolution of your worst day. I am the first responder to your emergency.

By current classification in the Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association(PERA), I fall into the Coordinated Plan. This plan applies to all general employees who meet statutory membership requirements and are not eligible for another retirement plan. This puts all of the people in my profession in with other statewide employees who work Monday through Friday during normal business hours, and with those who never have to deal in life-altering emergencies. In fact, when those people have a brush with a life altering emergency, they call us. 911 telecommunicators should be afforded increased benefits from the rest of the employees in the Coordinated Plan. The stressors which we are required to be put through on a daily basis cannot be tolerated by just anyone. Many, many people have tried to do this job, only to

ultimately decide that they cannot perform the numerous, instantaneous functions or they cannot endure the high level of stress. This is not to say that other employees in the Coordinated Plan do not incur stress, but I would challenge you to find another position that deals in our level of stress. I assert that there are not many administrative assistants that wake up having nightmares recalling the actual events of their job.

The role of a 911 telecommunicator is a vital part of the emergency services. We are the first responders to every emergency. We are required to be well versed in every aspect of responding to all types of emergencies. We are the link between the caller and the physical responders. We endure stress and trauma akin to our counterparts in the field. We are far closer to them and their job requirements than we are to administrative staff. For these reasons, I implore you to extend additional benefits in the Public Employees Retirement Association to the heroes that truly answer the call, no matter what they are called.

Damon J. Brunow
911 Public Safety Telecommunicator
St. Peter, MN

TESTIMONIAL #11

My name is Seth Justice, I serve my community as a 911 Dispatcher with St. Louis County and I truly love my job. I find it a real privilege and honor to be with my neighbors during their most dire moments of distress, pain, and fear. It is intimate and raw and deeply human.

I'm asking for your consideration and urging your support of enhanced pension benefits and a decrease in the retirement age for 911 Telecommunicators across the state.

We as 911 Dispatchers are the first, first responders. We are with our community members during their greatest moments, minutes, and seconds of need. We provide lifesaving efforts during the initial response to any and every crisis that can exist. Here in St. Louis County, the largest county this side of the Mississippi, response times for those we dispatch can range from 5 minutes to well over an hour. During that time, we are the ones tasked with providing response for the whole gamut of emergencies that exist, oftentimes changing the outcomes of emergencies before our field responders arrive on scene.

Here's a glimpse of just one hour as a Dispatcher:

A woman is calling and she's frantic. She was on the way to the hospital to give birth to her first child but now her contractions are now under a minute and she can't hold it. So she pulled over on the side of the highway and called 911. You get medical response started but they won't be getting there for another 15 minutes and you realize it is now your job to safely deliver that child with her. She already feels the head. You're keeping her calm, deep breaths, "We're pushing!" "Let's go!" "I'm here with you. You are brave and I need you to focus." That baby is coming out and she's screaming. You are now making sure she is safely delivering. And right then the ambulance arrives. And you get to hear the bawling cry. That first breath of life.

And you take that gift because now you need to hang up as another call is coming in.

This call is a young man, 17 or 18 years old. He's saying the house is up in flames. "Are you outside?" Yes. "Is there anyone else inside?" No. You hear a slight hesitation but you move on to your line of questioning. "Where is it spreading? What is the fire threatening? Can you tell me where the closest hydrant is?" Then you come back to that question you heard hesitancy with: "Are you sure no one else is inside?" He again says no but your gut is leaving you with a different feeling and you know that it is also your job as a Dispatcher to be a human lie detector, your job to know the intonation of when a No is really a Yes. You ask him 10 more times "Who else is in the house? I need you to be honest with me." Your coworkers are now looking at you and wondering why you haven't moved on from the question and then he finally tells you after you ask one more time: "There are two kids inside. A 2 and a 3 year old." He was babysitting and they were asleep on the couch. You accept the truth quickly and then move on.

You update the fire rig and tell them they need to step up the response. “What is the best way to the living room? Front door or back door?” The fire department then arrives on scene and it is now your time to disconnect and let them take it from there. And also another call is coming in. You take that next call but you are listening at the same time the fire radio and you hear, “Two kids safely out. Good job Dispatch.”

You take just a second to take that in because you are on the next call already:

This one’s a 10 year old boy. His name is Elijah. He’s crying, stuttering and tripping over his words. “What’s going on, buddy? What happened?” He’s crying because his dad is hitting his mom again. But this time is different because his dad has a knife. You make sure officers are getting started in the direction and then you need to get an address. You can get a block range because of where the phone is located, but Elijah doesn’t have his address memorized yet. He knows his house is yellow and that his red bike is in the front yard. It’s a good start but you want the actual address for your officers so they know exactly where they are going and no time is lost. You rack your brain for a moment. “Elijah, can you find me a piece of mail? Look on the table for me, buddy.” He finds it and for the first time ever he says his address, number by number. You update your squads. And then you still have 2 minutes before they arrive on scene and this isn’t a call you get to hang up on. These are the longest 2 minutes of your life, how do you distract this child, Elijah, from the pain and violence in the room next door? You stay with him and then hear the officers getting to the house. You stay another minute until he’s safely with them and then you let go.

You’ve got tears running down your face, but you've only got a moment to wipe them away and compose yourself before doing what you do best, finding the courage to answer the call.

I’ve got a whole rolodex of these:

A man giving CPR to his friend after a snowmobile accident. You’re providing clear instructions and motivation although your gut is telling you the entire time that it’s an exercise in futility, still you're leading him in compressions, “One-Two-Three-Four-Five-Six-Seven-Eight-Nine-Ten. Come on Dennis, you’ve got to find the strength! I need you to keep those compressions going until my field responders get to you!” The patient doesn’t make it. But Dennis calls into 911 a week later to thank you for being with him during the most horrendous second of his life.

Or a woman double your age who has a gun to her head and you are talking her down from the edge of suicide. Now you’re in a deeply human conversation about the meaning of life. You’re in a deeply human conversation about knowing that those who love you still love you when they don’t say it. And how to find a gift in the solitude when that solitude of life feels more like the wait of loneliness. How to find hope in this world when none appears present in front of you. You talk her down and she has the gun off her temple before officers arrive on scene.

Or a college student who just found her boyfriend unconscious from an overdose and you're helping her deliver NARCAN for the first time.

Or a grandchild, a young man who sounds pretty similar to you in age, who is with his grandmother on her deathbed. She has a Do Not Resuscitate and he knows these are the final moments. And it is your job to simply be with him and tell him to just hold her hand and be with her. While in the background you're listening to another human's final breaths of life.

These are things you can never erase from your memory and I could keep going, but I think you get my point.

I started my career as a Dispatcher 5 years ago. I got my degree in Philosophy and was then looking to where the helpers were. Where could I provide the greatest impact in the shortest amount of time on this earth? I was planning to become a firefighter, but I then spent a day in dispatch and it changed my life. I started calling Dispatchers "The Conductors of the Chaos" and realized that's where I really belonged. I truly believe Dispatchers are the Better Angels of our society, taking in the immediate real-time traumas of their neighbors in an unseen and often thankless profession. Instead of a limited number of incidents to respond to, they are the ones that take it all in, every emergency you could imagine and worse.

I began my career with the City of Minneapolis. I was there during the pandemic when our society was at a tipping point and then when George Floyd was killed. Mr. Floyd was a friend of my friend's mom and he was killed a half hour before my night shift started. I was there for my community in the immediate aftermath, a city on fire and then crumbling from the inside out. Pretty soon there weren't enough officers to respond to every incident, or officers stopped responding to certain neighborhoods. But that doesn't stop folks from calling 911 in their desperate moment of need. Hundreds of calls not responded to. It was us as Dispatchers who still had the task to stay on with our neighbors during the incidents that would change their lives, and an entire city, forever.

As Dispatchers, we are tasked with taking in the immediate chaos of our society, providing calm and hope to those in distress, and then taking a quick breath and doing it again.

They say only 1 percent of the population can do the job but only 10 percent stick with it. I have seen many new classes come and go, folks who thought that they could handle the job and then quickly realized they couldn't carry the burden that came with it. You have to understand the deep sacrifice of this work so you can figure out how to sustain yourself through it.

911 itself is a pretty strange phenomena. We are at 50 years of 911 existing here in Minnesota. Looking at the timeline of our humanity, 50 years is quite a short amount of time. A short

amount of time for us as a society to have a small, selective group of individuals take on the immediate pains and traumas of a whole community. It is an incredibly heavy burden and I for one don't believe that any human is truly set up to handle that. We rely on these select few to carry this weight so others can live in more bliss - and those taking on this task deserve the dignity and compensation worthy of the task being asked of them.

The calls I just gave you as an example of are within one hour of time, one hour within a 10, usually 12, sometimes 14 or 16 hour shift. And that takes a toll. I have seen that toll in my coworkers who cope by drinking or abusing medications, self harm or isolation. The divorce rate in our profession is incredibly high. As well as the likelihood of depression, PTSD, etc. Statistically, 911 Dispatchers are six times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population and three times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than law enforcement officers or firefighters. That is due to the cumulative and repetitive vicarious trauma that is the nature of this discipline of first response that we are in.

Dispatchers are incredibly courageous in the way they show up to confront the unknown each day. But no human can be the bravest every day. No human can be the strongest every moment. However, these heroic men and women put aside their fear and uncertainty to be with their neighbors during their greatest moments of need.

We understand that it is only by supporting our neighbors through their darkest moments that they then get to later shine at their brightest. And we diligently take on those moments of darkness so the light can later come.

The hardest part for me is when I see the emptiness in my coworkers eyes - the physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion from the toll of this work day in and day out.

Police, Fire, EMS, and Dispatch. Dispatch is the fourth first responder, some would argue the most critical component of first response. I believe the reason we are often overlooked is because we are mostly unseen, and that is on purpose. We are the invisible glue that holds it all together. But just because we are invisible does not mean that we don't deserve fairness in the dignity of our sacrifice.

I believe that sacrifice is worthy and I hope you do too. I have answered 911 calls until my ears have bled and until I have had tears running down my face. But I have not questioned the worthiness of the sacrifice, the sacrifice we place on a few for the betterment of the whole.

Seth Justice Loeffler-Kemp
911 Dispatcher
St. Louis County

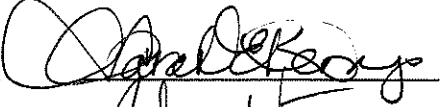
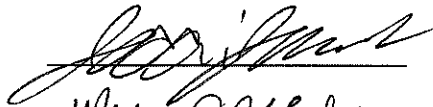
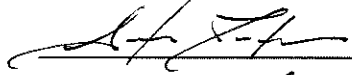
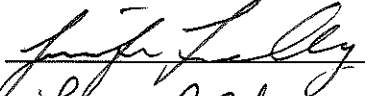

To whom it may concern:

We, the undersigned of the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office 911 Division, and also PERA members, are urging the Minnesota Legislature to support reclassification of our duties to first responder status and make certain our benefits are commensurate with that status.

As the "first" first responders in virtually all emergencies we are often just as impacted emotionally, physically, and mentally by the effects of secondary trauma and stress. Being remote from an incident does not dampen the terrified screams we hear. It does not reduce the post-traumatic stress reverberating weeks afterwards. Nor does it ease the outcome in which our decisions were central. We also understand that the physical effects of aging are going to prevent the more quick response times we had earlier in our careers. We've seen our partners struggle to keep up after 30 or 40 years of service. When seconds and accuracy count we want our communities to be safe above all else.

A change of our retirement benefits to PERA-Correctional functionally makes the most sense. There are Correctional Officer/Telecommunicator positions across the state, we collectively bargain and negotiate with Correctional Units, and in many jurisdictions the positions are considered equals - except for retirement benefits.

As some of the most essential employees, under the state's purview, we humbly ask that we are classified and treated with the same respect and equal consideration of benefits as those we serve alongside.

<u>Sarah Kemp</u>		<u>23 years</u>
<u>Adam Vih</u>	<u>Adam Vih</u>	<u>1.5 years</u>
<u>Jarrid Johnson</u>		<u>1.5 years</u>
<u>McKenzie J.A. Taly</u>	<u>McKenzie Taly</u>	<u>1 years</u>
<u>Kayla Dzek</u>	<u>Kayla Dzek</u>	<u>1.5 years</u>
<u>Nancy MOSACK</u>	<u>Nancy Mosack</u>	<u>1.5 years</u>
<u>SETH JUSTICE</u>		<u>5 YEARS</u>
<u>Jennifer Lundberg</u>		<u>4.5 years</u>
<u>Laura Kukmanich</u>	<u>Laura Kukmanich</u>	<u>22 years</u>
<u>Joyce Hui</u>	<u>Joyce Hui</u>	<u>25 years</u>
<u>Donald Walters</u>		<u>27 years</u>

Katie Christensen

Stephen EK

Jacob D. Macece

Char L Thompson

Tammy Anderson

Thomas Casick

~~Barbara Moore~~

Barbara Moore

Amanda Vollmer

Samantha Elmore

Carmen Kimball

~~Kaycee Carre~~

Kaycee Carre

~~Crystal Daugherty~~

Crystal Daugherty

Christopher Bender

Andrea Haberkunk

Alexander Bodin

Brunt Giesen

Brian Thompson

Christi Mueller

Alicia Abernethy

Krysten Selhorst

Katie Christensen

~~Stephen EK~~

Jacob D. Macece

Char L Thompson

Tammy Anderson

Tom Casick

Alysa Baniak

Alicia

Amanda Vollmer

Samantha Elmore

Carmen Kimball

Kaycee Carre

Crystal Daugherty

Christopher Bender

Andrea Haberkunk

Alexander Bodin

Brian Giesen

Brian Thompson

Christi Mueller

Alicia Abernethy

Krysten Selhorst

1 year

5.5 years

12.5 years

3.5 years

7.5 years

22 years

10 years

19 years

7 yrs

8 Months

18 years

10 years

16 years

10 years

5.5 years

2 years

8 Months

16 years

18 years

18 years

15 years

3.5 years

Doug Anderson
Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association
60 Empire Drive
St. Paul, MN 55103

Re: Position Statement Supporting Enhanced PERA Benefits for 911 Dispatchers

Dear Mr. Anderson,

As the first point of care for any and all emergencies, 911 Dispatchers, or Public Safety Telecommunicators, protect and save lives every day. These professionals are experts in their discipline of emergency response, and are trained and certified to provide life-saving functions well before field responders arrive on scene. 911 Dispatchers are truly the first, first responders.

The work performed by these professionals - such as emergency medical instruction like CPR and childbirth, crisis de-escalation, dealing with active shooters, locating missing persons, getting civilians out of burning buildings, talking citizens down from the edge of suicide, and ensuring the safety of law enforcement personnel and firefighters - is inherently protective.

911 Public Safety Telecommunicators serve 24 hours a day, seven days a week just the same as firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency medical services workers making the same sacrifice in their personal lives to provide emergency response for their neighbors.

Research has shown that 911 Dispatchers are six times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the general population and three times more likely to suffer from PTSD than peace officers and firefighters. The State of Minnesota has recognized this job trauma exposure and has included them in PTSD legislation along with police, fire, and medical personnel although the state has yet to declare them as first responders.¹


After a serious incident, responding officers, firefighters, and EMTs are given time off to debrief, or given time to go back home. Dispatchers are not afforded that opportunity. They continue moving to the next emergency, oftentimes managing multiple at once, and are not given an opportunity to process incredibly traumatic events. They do this again and again with courage but are unseen and often go unthanked for their honorable impact and sacrifice.

Supporting these professionals is the right thing to do, and it will help to address the recruitment and retention issues that plague 911 centers around the state. It is time we acknowledge their service and the worthiness of their sacrifice.

¹ MN Stat § 176.011 (2018)

I fully support the proposal to move Public Safety Telecommunicators into a pension plan through PERA that affords earlier retirement, as well as increasing the retirement benefit formula for these heroic men and women who provide pivotal life-saving care to their communities. That being said, it is important that counties and cities maintain current pension contribution rates for our Public Safety Telecommunicators; we appreciate that our partners willing to look at options to ensure that this change protects the sustainability of the pension plan.

John Wohlwend

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Wohlwend". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke and a vertical line on the right side.

3-6-24



March 7, 2024

Members of the PERA Board.

On behalf of the Association of Minnesota Counties and Minnesota Inter-County Association, we write to provide feedback on two proposals being considered at the Legislature: one to increase the PERA correctional annuity multiplier (via increasing employer/employee contribution amounts) and another to create a new early retirement benefit for dispatchers/911 telecommunicators.

County governments understand our workforce is our greatest asset when it comes to administering critical public services to our community and on behalf of the state. To compete effectively with often higher paying private sector opportunities, county governments offer competitive pension benefits.

The pension benefit structure is one component of total compensation. While an important tool for attracting and retaining workforce, pension benefits are not the only tool, and may not be the most important tool for recruitment and retention. In recent years, county employers have invested in our employees and recognize their dedicated service such as: achieving historic collective bargaining agreements; increasing a variety of hourly and overtime rates; and implementing creative approaches to performance, recruitment, and retention bonuses. Counties are spending significant taxpayer resources to invest in their workforce—to this point, and employee salary increases ranked as the top overall impact to levies for 2024 budget year. Moreover these benefit enhancements come on top of new state-mandated programs that will also create additional employee benefits.

The compensation and benefit package steps counties have taken and are planning to take to recruit and retain workers is essential context when evaluating proposals for expanded pension benefits. Within that context, and the reality of limited local resources, we urge that these and other pension benefits consider the following principles:

- 1) Any plan enhancements should not compromise the funding status of the existing plan. Since 2010, county employers been paying a 1% higher contribution rate to reduce unfunded liability for PERA-General. That objective has not yet been met, and employers (taxpayers) are still paying the 1% higher rate.
- 2) Increases to employee-requested retirement benefits should be equitable across all generations of employees and pension members.
- 3) There is employer and employee consensus on significant pension changes with a fair allocation of contributions between employee and employer. For example, just because there are statutory funding ratios for plans does not limit the Legislature from also adopting different standards for employee-requested supplemental retirement benefits, or that the Legislature should pay for the costs of such benefit enhancements.

At this time, our organizations are not supportive of the proposed plan enhancements without further dialogue on how these proposed changes reflect those three considerations as well as a more robust analysis on potential impacts to taxpayer-funded budgets.

Lastly, we cannot help but notice an increased trend of employee groups requesting additional pension benefits and/or earlier retirement. As the PERA Board and Legislature continue to evaluate these requests, we urge a broader policy discussion of the role of pensions in overall compensation, the policy considerations for granting differential pension benefits across different classes of employees, and the long-term fiscal sustainability for pension funds and local budgets.

Sincerely,



Matt Hilgart
Association of Minnesota Counties



Matthew Massman
Minnesota Inter-County Association