

Legislation Text

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Authorizing the Committees on Labor & Civil Service and Public Safety to hold joint hearings regarding hiring, staffing, and retention challenges for the 911 Unified Call center, and the impact these challenges have on the health and well-being of 911 dispatchers.

WHEREAS, 911 “dispatchers are a linchpin of the nation’s emergency-response infrastructure. Their responses to 911 calls directly impact how quickly police, firefighters and other first responders are sent to help and whether they go to the right place,” according to a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “911 Emergency: Call Centers Can’t Find Workers”; and

WHEREAS, When most Philadelphians call 911, they understandably do not think about the other person at the end of the line - the 911 dispatcher answering their call. They expect, or more likely need, assistance as soon as possible, and the 911 dispatchers are trained to do exactly that; and

WHEREAS, But, the 911 dispatchers are not machines. They are people too, and according to *The Wall Street Journal*, “the job can require workers to make snap judgments on life-or-death situations, often based on incomplete information, for about what they could make working as a manager at a retail store”; and

WHEREAS, Recruiting and hiring 911 dispatchers, effectively staffing 911 call centers, and retaining 911 dispatchers has been a national problem for at least several decades, and it has only gotten worse in recent years’ tight labor markets; and

WHEREAS, A *Philadelphia Inquirer* article published on August 22, 2018 that focused specifically on Montgomery County’s 911 call center challenges echoed the fact that counties and states across the country have “grappled with a dire shortage of 911 call-takers and dispatchers, jobs with long hours, high stress,” and relatively low pay; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia’s 911 Unified Call center is not only competing with other City employers for employees; it is also competing with surrounding counties. In the August 22, 2018 *Inquirer* article, it mentions that the starting salary for Montgomery County 911 dispatchers is \$35,000, and goes up to \$42,000 after training. And even Montgomery County is facing staffing challenges of its own, implementing a “marathon hiring” plan in an attempt to fill vacant positions; and

WHEREAS, As the *Inquirer* reports, “Despite incentives like health insurance, pension enrollment, and partial college tuition reimbursement that aim to keep call-takers and dispatchers as longtime employees, some people simply don't stick it out...The night shift...can be tough for people accustomed to a more conventional working schedule, or for people whose families don't want to accommodate the graveyard shift. And...some of the calls employees receive can be hard on the psyche”; and

WHEREAS, The mental toll the job takes on 911 dispatchers can be extreme. In rural and suburban areas, tedium and long lulls between calls fray the nerves nearly as much as the frantic moments of crisis. In more

populous, urban areas such as Philadelphia, dispatchers can field as many as 300 phone calls per hour; and

WHEREAS, According to *The Wall Street Journal*, “Emergency call-center jobs can be emotionally taxing. Callers are often in distress and sometimes still in the throes of a traumatic event. They can cry, yell at or grow frustrated with 911 center employees trying to gather information to help them dispatch first responders. A 911 center operator may hear gunshots, callers being wounded or killed while they are on the phone, or be the first person to speak with someone who has found a deceased loved one. Some centers offer counseling with local religious leaders or trained therapists, but not all have those services”; and

WHEREAS, In 2006, then Councilman Jim Kenney introduced Resolution # 060745, authorizing City Council’s joint Committees on Public Safety and Legislative Oversight to hold hearings on whether the City should establish a 311 Constituent Contact Center to unburden the current 911 emergency call center and make Philadelphia more responsive to its citizens’ concerns; and

WHEREAS, While the implementation of a 311 system in Philadelphia has ostensibly unburdened the 911 dispatchers from some non-emergency phone calls, the fact of the matter is that 911 dispatchers remain overworked and underpaid; and

WHEREAS, According to a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from June 26, 2018, Frank Halbherr, the AFSCME District Council 33 union representative for City police and fire dispatchers, highlighted the need for increased staffing. According to the article, “Currently there are about 270 police dispatchers, but Halbherr said management has told him the appropriate level of staffing would be 335 dispatchers. On the fire side, there are about 70 dispatchers, and Halbherr said the department also could use more staff. Both sets of dispatchers are on mandatory overtime.” Since June 2018, the number of 911 fire dispatchers has dropped to just 44; and

WHEREAS, According to veteran 911 dispatchers in Philadelphia, “There was a time when mandatory overtime was mainly utilized for inclement weather and/or large holiday events. Such is no longer the case. Staff is rotated on a mandatory list on a daily basis now.” Many of Philadelphia’s 911 dispatchers are working mothers, and being forced to work a mandated overtime shift can be incredibly disruptive for their families; and

WHEREAS, The City is now facing a situation where many of the 911 dispatchers are feeling overworked, exhausted, and unappreciated, to the extent where their physical and mental well-being could potentially negatively impact the cohesion of the unit and the functioning of the call center; and

WHEREAS, While it has not been documented in Philadelphia yet, there are concerns that the understaffing, mandated overtime, and poor retention levels at the 911 call center could lead to a negative impact on the City’s response times in emergencies; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia is struggling with an increasing homicide rate, and it is still in the throes of the opioid crisis. Additionally, Pennsylvania is a “swiftly aging state,” which will mean an increasing number of age- and health-related emergencies in the years to come; and

WHEREAS, The time to assess the hiring, staffing, and retention challenges for the 911 Unified Call center is now, before we reach a crisis. In addition, we must analyze the workplace culture for our 911 dispatchers to ensure we are supporting their health and well-being; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby authorizes the

Committees on Labor & Civil Service and Public Safety to hold joint hearings regarding hiring, staffing, and retention challenges for the 911 Unified Call center, and the impact these challenges have on the health and well-being of 911 dispatchers.