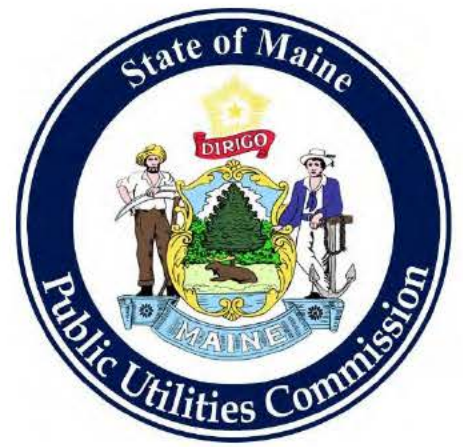


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**Report Pursuant to Public Law 2023,
chapter 609
(9-1-1 Recruitment and Retention
Stakeholder Group)**

Submitted to the Joint Standing Committee on
Energy, Utilities and Technology

February 21, 2025

Maine Public Utilities Commission
18 State House Station,
Augusta, ME 04333

I. Introduction

During the Second Regular Session of the 131st Legislature, [Public Law 2023, chapter 609](#) (Act) was enacted. The Act at section 5 requires the Public Utilities Commission, Emergency Services Communication Bureau (ECSB) to convene a stakeholder group to develop a coordinated 9-1-1 staffing and recruiting effort for all public safety answering points (PSAPs). The Act requires that there is representation from state, county and municipal PSAPs on the stakeholder group. Lastly, the Act requires that the ECSB submit a report to the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology (Committee) by February 21, 2025, that includes any recommendations, including suggested legislation. The Committee is authorized to report out a bill related to the report to the 132nd Legislature in 2025.

Beginning in July 2024, staff at the ESCB began reaching out to potential stakeholders to gauge interest in participating in the process. Once membership was determined, the first meeting was scheduled for July 23, 2024 (list of stakeholder group (Group) members can be found in Appendix A). To the extent possible, meetings were held in person, but some were held remotely. In total, there have been eight meetings with the last meeting occurring on February 19, 2025.

The Group discussions focused on the following possible mechanisms to increase the recruitment and retention of employees:

- Creating a better understanding of the role an emergency communications specialist (specialist) plays in the area of public safety as this position is often viewed as administrative in nature, but in reality, the position is an important part of the first responder team;
- Creating a model job description that better captures the necessary duties, skills and knowledge needed for a specialist that can be used by all PSAPs but could be modified to meet local needs;
- Exploring educational opportunities for those interested in pursuing a career as a specialist, either through the offering of courses at high schools or the development of a degree program in the community college system; and
- Providing PSAPs with more assistance at the State level by having pre-employment testing technology available to any interested PSAP in order to determine whether a candidate possesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to become a successful specialist.

The ESCB is not making any recommendations that require legislation at this time. The ESCB is exploring the issuance of a request for proposals to procure pre-employment screening technology, is continuing discussions with the community college system relating to a degree or certificate program for specialists and will continue to hold Group meetings. If there are any new

developments as a result of future Group meetings, the ESCB will provide an update to the Committee.

II. Elevating the Perception of the Emergency Communications Specialist Position

A common theme that emerged over the course of the Group meetings was that the public and decision-makers do not truly understand what specialists do, and how paramount this position is to public safety. For many years, this position has been categorized as an administrative role that simply requires answering and directing phone calls. While answering and directing calls is part of the job, there is much more complexity to this position.

Emergency communications specialists are the “first,” first responders as they are the critical link between a caller in need and the first responders who are dispatched to the caller’s aid.

Specialists work in a high-stress environment where they are called on to be calm while making split second decisions that in some cases represent life and death decisions. Over time, this can have significant impacts on mental health, putting specialists at an increased risk of experiencing issues such as sleep disturbances, post-traumatic stress disorder, compassion fatigue and job burnout.

Extensive training is required to be a specialist. A specialist must complete a three-week in-person training course hosted by the ESCB. In addition to the mandatory three-week course, there are significant on the job training requirements. As noted in the February 29, 2024, ESCB report,¹ trainees spend an average of 187 hours in call-taking protocol/dispatch training, as well as an average of 520 hours completing on-the-job training with another specialist.

The position requires working nights, weekends and holidays and poses a challenge to striking a favorable work-life balance. In recent years, the position has changed greatly due to the increasing dependence on technology, as well as the introduction of emergency medical dispatch protocols and emergency fire protocols for screening 9-1-1 calls. The duties of a 911 telecommunicator (specialist) are more multifaceted due to Next Generation 911 (NG911) because the determination of the response to a 911 call often involves integration of different types of multimedia transmissions - such as text messages, streaming video and photos directly from the public.² As there is a consistent shortage of staff at many PSAPs, overtime is often required, further stressing existing staff.

The classification of this position as clerical impacts the recruitment and retention of staff. For example, people who are interested in first responder positions may not consider a specialist position as an option if the impression is that the job is simply an office, clerical, and administrative support occupation. Conversely, applicants may apply for a specialist position without fully understanding the complexities of the job. If decision-makers at the local level also view the job as administrative in nature, the salary for the position may not reflect what the job entails, which also limits the pool of candidates for open positions and may lead to attrition of existing employees. A February 2023 survey jointly conducted by the International Academies of

¹ [Report Pursuant to Public Law 2023, chapter 186 Public Safety Answering Point Oversight and Staffing](#)

² [911 Telecommunicator Reclassification: Status and Considerations for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, August 22, 2024.

Emergency Dispatch and the National Association of State 911 Administrators noted that 911 telecommunicators cited pay increases and better benefits as the top two retention incentives.³ “According to May 2023 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the mean annual wage for protective service occupations (first responders) is \$57,710, while the mean annual wage for office and administrative support occupations (emergency communications specialists) is \$47,940.”⁴

Several options exist to overcome this barrier, including, but not limited to:

- Reclassification of emergency communications specialists at the State and federal level from an administrative occupation to a protective services (first responder) occupation;⁵
- The creation and statewide adoption of a model job description (see Section III);
- Coordinated public education and outreach efforts conducted at the state and local level (Section IV); and
- The expansion of educational programs to attract new candidates (see Section V).

III. Model Job Description

One option to assist with better highlighting the importance of specialists is by better describing what is required of the position. The Group reviewed job descriptions for specialist positions from around the State in an attempt to create a model job description that could be provided to PSAPs who could then tailor the description to fit local needs. The Group also looked at “Guidelines for Developing a Public Safety Telecommunicator Job Description,” which was the result of efforts to create a toolkit undertaken by a working group consisting of 911 professionals convened by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s National 911 Program. This toolkit “provides a framework for reviewing, updating, or creating a public safety telecommunicator job description to accurately reflect the roles and responsibilities of the position.”⁶ This undertaking was driven in part by ongoing efforts to reclassify public safety telecommunicators from the Office and Administrative Support Occupation to a Protective Services Occupation, which is the same classification of first responders under the BLS Standard Occupational Classification system. The creation of a job description that more accurately reflects the nature of the position; the physical and minimum requirements; required skills,

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ One way in which the State has recognized emergency communications specialists as equal to first responders is found at [39-A M.R.S. § 201\(3-A\)\(B\)](#). This law is part of the provisions governing entitlement to receive compensation and services under the Maine Workers' Compensation Act of 1992, and specifies that there is a rebuttable presumption that the condition of post-traumatic stress disorder arose out of and in the course of a worker's employment if that worker is a E-9-1-1 dispatcher (also includes law enforcement officer, corrections officer, firefighter or emergency medical services person) diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder that resulted from work stress, as long as certain specified conditions are met. This provision is set to repeal on October 1, 2025; however, the Labor Committee recently unanimously voted OTP-AM on [LD 82](#), which would make this provision permanent and includes an emergency preamble.

⁶ “[Developing a Public Safety Telecommunicator Job Description](#),” National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s, National 911 Program, May 2022

knowledge and abilities; and necessary certifications not only conveys to the public the true nature of the job but can assist with the reclassification push at the federal level.

Extensive progress has been made on finalizing the model job description. Once the Group completes this work, the draft will be reviewed by one of the participating PSAP's human resources contact to ensure the description is compliant with any legal requirements and that it accurately reflects the job and its classification. Since all PSAPs are subject to local control, use of the model job description will be voluntary. The goal is for there to be widespread adoption across the State to have consistency in how this position is conveyed to potential employees, the public and decision-makers.

IV. Public Outreach

The Group briefly discussed at several meetings public outreach efforts. Locally, some PSAPs conduct community outreach activities to educate the public on what PSAPs are and what specialists do. However, due to staffing constraints many of the PSAPs do not have the resources to undertake these efforts.

The Group also considered the idea of a public outreach campaign conducted at the State level to both educate the public on the proper use of 9-1-1 and to bring more awareness to the important role that specialists play in emergency response. The ESCB's website does contain various resources related to 9-1-1 including: a frequently asked questions page; information on texting to 9-1-1, teletypewriter (TTY), wireless phone and voice over Internet protocols; a 9-1-1 kids' page; and 9-1-1 educational information for parents and teachers. Additionally, the ESCB has issued public service announcements in recent years on texting to 9-1-1 and had made these public service announcements available to PSAPs to post on their local websites.

In future meetings the Group will further explore this topic. Further thought will need to be given to where efforts should be directed and how to better coordinate efforts both at the State and local level as well as between PSAPs. The Group will also need to consider the resources needed to successfully launch such a campaign.

V. Expanding Educational Opportunities

At the November 13, 2024, meeting, the Group received a presentation from Angie Turberville regarding efforts in North Carolina to establish an education and training program relating to 911 communications and operations at Richmond Community College, as well recruitment efforts that included public service announcements. North Carolina's 911 Board, in coordination with Richmond Community College, expedited the establishment of a two-year associate's degree program that includes 40-hour certification and three certificates: 911 communications and operation; human resources management; and public administration. In just a little over one-year from its inception, North Carolina's Richmond Community College has had over 60 students enrolled in their program.

At prior meetings, the Group discussed expanding existing offerings at high school vocational technical programs to include specific classes for specialists as well as to investigate the feasibility of establishing a degree or certificate program for 911 communications and operations

at Maine's community colleges. The information provided by North Carolina was helpful to the Group in deciding next steps and in outreach efforts undertaken by the ESCB regarding establishing a similar program in Maine.

The ESCB had preliminary conversations with Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) about the establishment of a degree program for specialists. Due to various constraints on resources and concerns about participation levels, initial conversations regarding a degree program were disappointing; however, subsequent conversations in February 2025 have been more favorable regarding the establishment of an online mini certificate program. This would be a positive first step and enrollment could be open to everyone Statewide. This potentially could include high school students who could also enroll in an online certificate program and be ahead of the curve in pursuing employment in this field upon graduation. The ESCB will continue to engage with SMCC on a certificate program and will reach out to partners to find possible instructors to teach the necessary coursework for such a program. Providing educational opportunities for individuals to pursue can assist in expanding the pool of candidates to fill these positions statewide.

VI. Pre-Employment Testing

At the first meeting on July 23, 2024, staff from the ESCB assessed the interest from the Group regarding employment pre-screening software. A few PSAPs currently use this software in their hiring process, but the ESCB was interested to see if there was value in the ESCB contracting for this service, which could then be voluntarily utilized by PSAPs. At the August 27, 2024, meeting the Group received a presentation from Kim Ward from the Biddle Consulting Group regarding CritiCall, which is software used to test specialist job applicants in job-related skills, including, but not limited to data entry, multi-tasking, decision making, and position locating. This software does not require the test-taker to have prior experience in emergency telecommunications but rather assesses whether applicants possess the skills and abilities necessary for success in this field.

This software could potentially assist in addressing staffing issues, because it could avoid the expenditure of time and money on potential candidates that are not likely to succeed in this position. There have been instances where applicants have withdrawn from the recruitment process after taking the test because they realize they do not possess the necessary skills to be successful in the position. The recruiter, especially those with years of experience in hiring specialists, can look at the result and make determinations regarding a candidate's potential to succeed in this role.

The ESCB is currently in the process of exploring the issuance of a request for proposals for software, like that offered by CritiCall. If the ESCB takes on the cost of this technology, this could allow PSAPs to redirect resources used for employment pre-screening to other endeavors. Although use of this software would be voluntary, the retention rate of PSAPs using the tool versus those who opt out could be compared to measure its effectiveness.

VII. Conclusion

Recruitment and retention challenges for specialists are not unique to Maine. Data from the February 2023 survey referenced in Section I of this report indicated that more than 50% of PSAPs were reported to be facing a staffing crisis.⁷ However, there are steps that can be taken locally to address this issue. The stakeholder group process also highlighted the need for the continued coordination of efforts and consistency of messaging as a means to address the staffing crisis. There is no single solution to this problem, but the Group has made progress in identifying various strategies to address this issue on several fronts. The ESCB is committed to continuing this stakeholder process to identify additional strategies and will provide the Committee with any necessary updates in the future.

⁷ [911 Telecommunicator Reclassification: Status and Considerations for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, August 22, 2024.

Appendix A

Stakeholder Group Membership

Stakeholder Group Membership

- Brad Timberlake, Director of Communications, Franklin County Regional Communications Center
- Chris Lavoie, Director, Penobscot Regional Communication Center
- Brodie Hinkley, Director, Bureau of Emergency Communications, Department of Public Safety
- Joseph Thornton, Emergency Communications Manager, Scarborough Public Safety
- Michael Labbe, Operations Manager, Bureau of Emergency Communications, Department of Public Safety
- Melinda Fairbrother-Dyer, Director, Cumberland County Regional Communications
- Nik Piskopanis, Lieutenant, York Police Department
- Scott Ruf, Director, Portland Regional Communications Center
- Tammy Barker, Director, Somerset Regional Communications Center
- Tara Doe, Director, Lincoln County Communications Center
- William Tower, Director, Sanford Regional Communications Center

Staff

- Maria Jacques, Director, ESCB
- Cory Golob, Deputy Director, ESCB
- Kyle Ellis, Training Manager, ESCB
- Deirdre Schneider, Legislative Liaison