April 28, 2020

The Honorable Adam Gray, Chair
Assembly Governmental Organization Committee
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB1945 (Salas) – Emergency services: first responders. (AFFIRM)

Dear Assembly Member Gray,

The California Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association (CALNENA) and the California chapters of the Association of Public-Safety Communications (APCO) are pleased that Assembly Bill 1945, has been referred to the Assembly Governmental Organization for Consideration. This bill would, for purposes of the California Emergency Services Act, define and provide the title of “first responder” as an employee of the state or a local public agency who provides emergency response services, including a peace officer, firefighter, paramedic, emergency medical technician, public safety dispatcher, public safety telecommunicator, emergency response communication employee, rescue service personnel, or emergency manager. We respectfully request that you vote “YES” in support of the reclassification of 9-1-1 Professionals.

AB 1945’s intent is to be recognize all members of the emergency response system. This includes the women and men who answer the call of those who are in need of emergency services; the 9-1-1 Dispatcher. Dispatchers provide lifesaving medical instructions for callers, including CPR instructions for persons who are in cardiac arrest, abdominal thrust instructions for choking victims, childbirth instructions, and much more. These critical instructions ensure that the chain of survival starts almost immediately and increases the likelihood of survival for patients significantly while emergency medical personnel are responding. Dispatchers provide counsel to callers during their worst hours, whether it be a suicidal caller, a young child whose parent has collapsed, or a panicked person who is trapped in a burning structure or a sinking vehicle with no way out. Dispatchers are also trained to gather critical safety information from callers in a professional manner, whether it is from an assault victim, someone who has been injured in a vehicle accident, or a person being held against their will. They input the information into a sophisticated Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system and promptly dispatch assistance to those in need. Without 9-1-1 Dispatchers, there would be no emergency response system.

9-1-1 Dispatchers regularly work 8-, 10-, and 12-hour shifts across the state. In some cases, they are working 18- and 24-hour days to protect our communities. During the current climate of the Covid-19 shelter-in-place decrees, Public Safety Dispatchers have been deemed ‘essential personnel’ by local, state, and federal agencies and told they must report work. Imagine what would happen if all dispatchers did not report to work? Who would be answering questions from the public and public officials during this critical time? Who would be asking life-safety questions of callers, determining whether or not Police, Fire, and EMS personnel should be donning Personal Protective Equipment?
Dispatchers have continued to report to work, coming to Dispatch Centers where close quarters are the norm and social distancing is often impossible. Yet, they continue to answer the call and serve the people of California faithfully in this time of great need.

Public Safety Dispatchers also respond in the field during critical incidents, be it with a Police SWAT team as a Tactical Dispatcher or with Firefighters as a member of an Incident Dispatch Team (IDT) supporting responses to wildfires. In this capacity, they are working side-by-side with field personnel, sharing the risk to contribute to a mission’s success. Sometimes, this requires team members to live in the field for periods of one week, two weeks, or even longer. Dispatchers throughout the state also participate in the TERT program (Telecommunicators Emergency Response Taskforce). A member of the CALNENA board has twice reported for duty to the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office, along with dispatchers from around the state, to support efforts to keep 9-1-1 and administrative calls answered during the wildfires of 2017 and 2019. Dispatchers from the Sacramento Regional Fire and EMS Communications Center deployed to Las Vegas to assist the Las Vegas Fire and Rescue Dispatch Center following the 2017 Mandalay Bay mass shooting. Dispatchers are deploying into danger zones to safeguard the lives of police officers, firefighters, EMS personnel, and the public.

Research from several medical and academic researchers has found that Public Safety Dispatchers suffer increased levels of Post-Traumatic Stress from the volatile nature of the work they perform. Due to the sedentary nature of the position, one also sees increased levels of obesity, heart disease as well as depression, suicidal thoughts, and alcohol and substance abuse. Providing 9-1-1 Dispatchers the classification of first responder would allow them to receive increased mental health benefits from employers that are badly needed to address these critical issues.

In Colorado, Indiana, and Texas, similar bills have passed, recognizing 9-1-1 Dispatchers as first responders. Nationally, Representative Norma Torres from California’s 35th Congressional District, herself a veteran dispatcher of the California Highway Patrol, has introduced the 911 Saves Act in the US House of Representatives to provide dispatchers nationwide with the recognition they deserve as First Responders. Recognition is badly overdue for this seldom seen, but invaluable group of dedicated first responders nationwide. They toil away day after day, week after week, rain or shine, working in cramped quarters with little fanfare ensuring the public always have someone to answer their call every minute of every day of the year. Classification of this life-saving occupation as “Office and Administrative Support” does come close to capturing the 9-1-1 Dispatcher’s rightful place in the chain of survival.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to vote “YES” to AB 1945.

Sincerely,

The CALNENA Executive Board.