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LD 2121

To the members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government:

Good afternoon,

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony in support of LD 2121, “ An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions.”

I support LD 2121 because it will help address the understaffing of our regional response centers and the recruitment and retention of new dispatchers. The fact that dispatchers are also chronically underpaid contributes to the two aforementioned problems and this bill would address this as well.

My name is Evan Kleene and I am a member of IAFF Local 740. I have been a professional firefighter and paramedic in the City of Portland for the past 10 years. During this time I have witnessed the dedication and professionalism that our dispatchers bring to their jobs each and every day. Dispatchers are often unseen and greatly underappreciated, in my opinion. Their role is not public facing so they are easily forgotten. A dispatcher is the first person in public safety that a caller will interact with. Imagine trying to glean important, possibly life saving information out of someone who is hysterical while at the same time following rigorous protocols to get the right response sent to that crisis. Furthermore, my safety while working in the field as a firefighter and paramedic often depends on the experience and skill of these professionals. Often, we are given information while responding to a call about a potentially violent situation and we are able to act accordingly to stay safe. I know our dispatchers take the safety of our firefighters very seriously and that is a great comfort.

This past year, I was on shift when the tones went off for an active shooter event taking place at Portland High School. Thankfully, this ended up being a hoax but for the first 10-15 minutes it seemed to everyone involved that this was the real thing. I remember my heart pounding in my chest; my body was experiencing a huge adrenaline surge. I have to guess our members in dispatch were experiencing something similar but you would have never guessed. They were fantastic that day. They were calm and collected and relayed all the necessary information to the incoming crews. Their discipline and professionalism helped keep the scene organized and emotions level that day.

Later, you will see written testimony submitted by some of our dispatchers. Unfortunately, they weren't able to testify today and I am here instead. Since I am not a dispatcher myself, I wanted to include some pieces of the written testimonies from our dispatchers.

Chris Carter wrote:

“ I have worked as a dispatcher for several years and have been a supervisor for a couple more. My department has not been fully staffed in what is rumored to be 22 years. When I was hired in 2017 we were 7 people short and we recently hit 20 people short staffed. The fact that this shortage has gone on for so long has caused lifelong mental injuries to most if not all of my employees. They work a minimum of 4-12 hour shifts a week and most work 4-16 hour shifts a week of forced overtime. This leaves 8 hours to commute, decompress and sleep, let alone any personal or family responsibilities.”

Katherine Nowicki wrote:

“In the past 2 years I've seen “minimum staffing standards” disappear, and obscenely dangerous work conditions become acceptable. When there aren't enough people to staff 9-1-1 centers, calls go unanswered. People who need help reach no one. Officers and firefighters find themselves in danger with no one able to hear their radio traffic when they end up in a dangerous situation, or when the phone lines are so

overwhelmed that we can properly process that call to obtain scene safety information.

Add on top of that the increased forced overtime work hours and lack of sleep. In the past 1.5 years my coworkers and I have averaged 64 work hours in 4 days.

Can you function daily on 4 hours of sleep? Can you drive safely, can you make quick, life saving or like taking decisions?

That is what your 9-1-1 dispatchers have to do every day. How do you convince a new person to sign on to that kind of life? And I don't even know how people with families or kids can put up with it."

In closing, any legislation that will help address these issues at our regional communications centers is, in my opinion, a positive step forward. These problems have a profound effect on the safety of our first responders and the public.

I urge this committee to support LD 2121 and to move this piece of legislation forward. Thank you for your time and consideration.