

Testimony of James Curry

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Department of Public Safety

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Subcommittee on Communications and Technology

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Members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. It is an honor and a privilege to take part in this hearing and be a part of this great Nation's legislative process.

I am the Division Head for the Hunterdon County Communications Center in New Jersey - the first county-wide 9-1-1 system to operate in that State. Prior to my current position, I was a police officer for 27 years and retired at the rank of Captain. I have spent my entire professional career in public emergency service without regret.

Like many counties in New Jersey, Hunterdon County is a mix of suburban and rural communities with many bucolic hamlets and villages. It is dotted with preserved farmland, numerous acres of parkland, and 2 recreational reservoirs. Interstate 78, a major highway and artery for the Port of Newark and Elizabeth divides the County in half – North and South.

The Communications Center is the sole provider of emergency communications for each municipal police department, fire department, and EMS agency in the County. All totaled, we dispatch for about 60 organizations. Daily, we average a little over one hundred 9-1-1 calls or about 38,000 a year. This is carried out by 25 dedicated full-time Public Safety Telecommunicators commonly referred to as dispatchers.

These men and women are never seen, always heard, and seldom recognized. They work nights, weekends, and holidays and like our first responders – they can't stay home because the weather is bad. Day in and day out they speak to folks who are having the worst day of their lives. For some of those callers, the dispatcher is the last human voice they will hear. If you ask the dispatchers why they keep doing the job, most will answer because they enjoy it – they enjoy making a difference.

I live and work in the State of New Jersey. It is a fantastic State. Beaches, mountains, entertainment venues, New York City and Philadelphia – all within a short drive from most anywhere in the State. It's marine ports, colleges and universities, and businesses also make it a great place to live and work. New Jersey is a major hub of global economy. Unfortunately, but deservedly, it is also known as a heavily taxed State. We in New Jersey have come to enjoy top shelf services – especially the emergency service we receive. After all, you get what you pay for...well, maybe not always.

I was requested to appear today before this committee to discuss H.R. 6424, the 9-1-1 Fee Integrity Act, because, in my State when you pay certain fees on your phone bills called 9-1-1 fees – it doesn't finance what one might expect. According to the New Jersey Association of Counties & New Jersey Wireless Association, the State collects approximately \$120 million dollars annually in consumer surcharges as 9-1-1 System and Emergency Response fees and deposits into a trust fund. However, according to the FCC, since 2006 only 11% of the \$1.3 billion collected has been spent on eligible expenses. None of the money has been used to fund those eligible expenses at the local 9-1-1 level.

To provide an example, last year we completed an upgrade to our 9-1-1 phone system. It wasn't voluntary, the old system was no longer supported. At a cost of \$600,000 the project was paid for using capital improvement funds – in other words tax payer money. Those taxpayers may have thought they subsidized it when they paid their phone bill, but actually - they paid for it twice.

Operating a 9-1-1 center is expensive. In 2016 our overall budget exceeded two and a quarter million dollars. This year, our operating budget was \$310,000. The cost to maintain our 9-1-1 system alone will devour well over one third of that. The remainder will be spent on radio equipment, tower and generator maintenance, site security, and a host of other essential expenses.

We look forward to the day when Next Generation 9-1-1 is realized in New Jersey. It will enable the public to transmit text, images, video and data to our Center. A frequent saying by one of our Technicians, Matt Tamburro is, "this isn't like what you see on television," and it isn't. The reality is, dispatchers try to find a caller's location by manual entries and interrogation. We don't know what the associated costs will be for us for Next Generation 9-1-1 and I dodge the constant barrage of vendors daily, *willing* to sell us their products that will get us through until the arrival of Next Generation 9-1-1. Those wares come with a hefty price tag. Even in just a small 9-1-1 center like ours, the cost can exceed \$35,000 annually.

I could ramble on about the 9-1-1 funding needs of the Hunterdon County Communications Center, but I would prefer to conclude with the importance of 9-1-1. When a caller requests the police, they understand that officer may be on another call. When that caller dialed 9-1-1 they expect it to be answered immediately, and by a well- trained professional. The police may work shorthanded for a shift, but the 9-1-1 seat must be occupied.

This month we remembered the tragic events of 9/11 and just a few miles to our South the effects of a major hurricane continues to wreak havoc on tens of thousands of people's lives. When citizens are faced with a situation beyond their own capabilities they will dial 9-1-1. Those 3 digits are the same for everyone and it does not discriminate. Perhaps we can do without electricity for a short while, but we must have a robust 9-1-1 lifeline infrastructure. Likewise, the dispatchers need the tools to accomplish their mission of helping others and saving lives.

I want to end my statement by publicly thanking the Hunterdon County dispatchers, technicians and administrative staff – you do make a difference every day. Moreover, I wish to thank this Committee for your time and devotion to public service, not only concerning this issue, but for all matters that have, and will be decided on in the future.

Thank you.