September 20th, 2016


To the SOCPC:

On behalf of the National Emergency Number Association, I am writing to provide data in support of the proposed reclassification of public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers. Currently, these public safety professionals are classified under SOC Major Group 43-0000, “Office and Administrative Support Occupations.” SOCPC Docket 1-0199, however, consolidates several requests to reclassify these professions under SOC Major Group 33-0000, “Protective Service Occupations.”

NENA recognizes that the SOCPC’s initial review of the reclassification requests in the consolidated docket resulted in a recommendation against reclassification, stating that “the work performed is that of a dispatcher, not a first responder,” and that the Committee’s recommendation was based on limited, largely assertive information. However, NENA respectfully disagrees with the Committee’s recommendation, and urges the Committee to reconsider its justifications in light of the substantive data presented below.

Consistent with Classification Principle 2, NENA’s comments focus primarily on the nature of the work performed by public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers, along with the training required to perform it. Because the Committee specifically cited the work “of a dispatcher,” our comments are generally addressed to the differences between non-public-safety or “commercial” dispatchers and public safety telecommunicators or dispatchers. However, each of the work or training differences outlined below is equally applicable as between a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher and any other occupation classified in Major Group 43-0000.

I. The work of Public Safety Telecommunicators and Dispatchers is materially different from that of commercial call center workers and dispatchers.

Many prior comments have described the centrality and importance of telecommunicators and dispatchers to the modern public safety operating environment. As such, they will not be repeated here. As is relevant to the SOC classification principles, however, NENA wishes to emphasize several material differences in the work performed by public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers, and commercial logistic

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1 With more than 10,000 active individual members, the National Emergency Number Association improves 9-1-1 through research, standards development, training, education, outreach, and advocacy.
dispatchers. Based on the Committee’s initial recommendation, we highlight four areas where current public safety data contradicts the Committee’s justifications for recommending against reclassification.

i. Many public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers are required to provide life-saving medical advice and instructions to callers as a matter of routine.

Historically, the Committee’s view that telecommunicators and dispatchers “are precluded from administering actual care, ‘talking’ someone through procedures, or providing advice” would have been correct. Over the last 20 years, however, advances in medical knowledge and 9-1-1 operations practice have led to an overwhelming reversal of that policy. By the early 1990s, for example, more than 94% of EMS-operated dispatch agencies and more than 70% of law-enforcement-operated agencies were estimated to utilize Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) protocols. According to a recent call for data from NENA’s members, those figures have only continued to grow. For example, statutes in Maine and North Dakota require EMD usage by 100% of telecommunicators and dispatchers, and 95% of the 106 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) in Colorado use EMD protocols by choice. NENA believes these adoption rates to be consistent with the general level of EMD adoption nation-wide. Indeed, this job function is recognized by the Bureau’s own Occupational Outlook Handbook.

EMD protocols require telecommunicators and dispatchers to interrogate callers for specific, actionable medical information, and to supply the caller with medical instructions before emergency medical service personnel arrive on-scene. Telecommunicators and dispatchers operating under EMD protocols routinely talk callers through critical procedures as simple as airway clearance and the Heimlich Maneuver, and as complex as CPR and child birth. Advice and instructions can even extend to the use of prescription drugs: In the case of Naloxone, a drug prescribed to illicit drug users that can prevent an overdose from becoming fatal, some dispatchers are permitted or required to advise callers on when the drug should, or should not, be used. Likewise, telecommunicators and dispatchers routinely talk callers through the use of

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medical devices such as Automated External Defibrillators, used to restore normal heart rhythm during a cardiac arrest or arrhythmia.

Critically, for purposes of Classification Principle 2, none of these work functions are performed by commercial dispatchers.

ii. Public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers engage in significant response activities outside of 9-1-1 centers.

At first blush, it would seem reasonable to assume that public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers work only "in a separate area from first responders," such as the operations floor of a 9-1-1 center. The modern reality, however, is quite different.

In order to manage complex, specialized, or long-duration incidents such as hostage situations, mass-casualty bombings, or wildland fires, dispatchers today often work "in the field." "Incident," "tactical," "Special Weapons and Tactics" (SWAT), and "Child Abduction Response Team" (CART) dispatchers work directly alongside the fire, hostage rescue, law enforcement, and abductee recovery teams they support, at or near the scene of an incident.9 In many cases, this mode of operation requires dispatchers to be issued, and to use, personal protective equipment such as a bullet-resistant vest or flame-resistant coat. Additionally, field operations like these require the use of mobile and virtualized call taking and radio equipment that can be operated from the hood of a truck or the deck of a boat or even from an aerial platform like a helicopter or fixed-wing plane.

Similarly, many public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers are trained to respond to disasters as part of the National Joint Telecommunicator Emergency Response Teams Initiative or "TERT."10 TERT teams are trained to operate 9-1-1 services in disaster-stricken areas with minimal or no normal infrastructure left in service.11 Deployed teams may live alongside other responders in public safety encampments, relieve local telecommunicators and dispatchers whose homes and lives are affected by the disaster, and are required to be self-sufficient for food and water. These teams must often augment or establish operations of 9-1-1 service where the existing 9-1-1 center has been damaged or destroyed. These TERT responses are very much "in the field," and expose responding telecommunicators and dispatchers to field risks that are similar or identical to those faced by law enforcement, fire, and EMS personnel in the time period immediately following a natural disaster.

Telecommunicator and dispatcher field operations are not limited to specialized or exceptional responses like those described above. In many jurisdictions, for example, telecommunicators and dispatchers are required to periodically participate in field operations with team members from the agencies they dispatch. These “ride-alongs” are required to ensure that telecommunicators and dispatchers are current in their understanding of how operations policies and protocols used in the call taking and dispatch-

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10 http://www.njti-tert.org/about.php

11 TERT training is provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency at the following website: https://emilms.fema.gov/IS144/index.htm.
ing functions impact operations in the field. These ride-alongs expose telecommu-
nicators and dispatchers to many of the same risks experienced by the units they accom-
pany, and take them far beyond the four walls of the operations floor. Moreover, these
risks are different than the training risks experienced by commercial dispatchers who
may engage in operational activities within their own disciplines. For example, aircraft
and truck dispatchers generally do not face risks of assault, burns, or exposure to dis-
eases while riding-along with their drivers and pilots. Each of those risks, however,
may be experienced by a telecommunicator or dispatcher who is required to ride-along
with a police, fire, or EMS unit.

Whether in training or operations, 9-1-1 professionals routinely work alongside
other first responders in the field. These engagements are frequent, complex, and ex-
pose telecommunicators and dispatchers to significant risks of harm. Both these areas
of operation and these risks are distinct from those experienced by commercial dis-
patchers, and distinguish telecommunicators and dispatchers as members of a protec-
tive service occupation, rather than an office administrative and support occupation.

iii. Public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers operate within chains-of-command that
are part of, interrelated with, or parallel to those of the law enforcement, fire, and EMS
agencies to which they provide service.

Historically, dispatching (and, later, call taking) functions were initially assigned to
personnel within a police or fire agency. This occurred because those agencies built-up
the dispatching function internally when call boxes were initially deployed around
cities. In many jurisdictions, that structure persists today: 9-1-1 professionals routinely
report to a deputy police chief, fire chief, or emergency medicine director. Although
it is an imperfect proxy for chain-of-command, the FCC’s Master PSAP Registry con-
tains 3,790 PSAP listings that contain the word “police,” and 526 that contain the word “fire.”
For some fraction of those centers, then, it is reasonable to infer that telecommunicators and dispatchers employed in those centers report through law en-
forcement or fire chains of command. Admittedly, this is changing: It is becoming
more common for 9-1-1 to be explicitly recognized as a distinct discipline. However,
even where it is wholly separate, 9-1-1 is universally still regarded as a public safety
discipline, with oversight by commissioners, deputy managers, or committees of local
legislative bodies who have general responsibility for public safety services. The BLS
recognizes this in the Occupational Outlook Handbook, which states that “[a]bout 81
percent of dispatchers worked for local governments in 2014, with the majority em-
ployed by law enforcement agencies and fire departments.” Consequently, it would
be inaccurate to describe telecommunicators and dispatchers as having meaningfully
distinguishable supervisory chains in most cases.

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13 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers Work Environ-
ment, OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK (Dec. 17, 2015) (available at:
http://www.bls.gov/ohioffice-and-administrative-support/police-fire-and-ambu-
lance dispatchers.htm#tab-3).
iv. Commercial dispatchers are not subject to direct contact with individuals experiencing an emergency, or the resulting stress.

If there is a single differentiator between the work of commercial and public safety dispatchers that makes clear the distinction between the two professions, it is the fraction of working time spent on logistical tasks. Commercial dispatchers spend virtually all of their time on logistical tasks, such as evaluating routes, weather, equipment capabilities, and crew scheduling to achieve one of a few routine outcomes such as moving a container from one place to another or completing a scheduled air route. They spend little or no time dealing directly with the public, and zero time dealing with traumatic events. They are not required, for example, to continue providing assistance to an officer who is shot, to talk a family member through securing the scene of a suicide, or to end a call without knowing the outcome of their assistance.

Unlike commercial dispatchers, public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers have constant direct contact with callers experiencing stressful and even traumatic events. For example, it is not uncommon for public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers to hear an officer’s screams as they are assaulted, to hear the shot when a caller commits suicide, or to calm a frantic mother while coaching her to staunch the massive bleeding of an injured child. These frequent traumatic contacts require a different skill set, a different mindset, and a fundamentally different stress management regime than that required to dispatch commercial transportation vehicles.

To cope with the stress of repeated exposure to traumatic situations, public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers routinely receive stress management training. They also participate in Critical Incident Stress Management reviews following a difficult call. These reviews are a mandatory part of the job, during which a 9-1-1 professional is de-briefed and may be required to discuss the episode with a mental health professional. Such de-briefs are often conducted as follow-up to field response incidents like tactical, SWAT, or CART dispatching deployments. There is no analogue for such processes in the commercial world.¹⁴

This represents a material difference in the work performed, and in the conditions under which it is performed. Moreover, this is a key similarity between the work of a law enforcement, fire, or EMS worker and a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher. As such NENA believes that the difference in stress profiles between commercial and public safety dispatching mitigates in favor of reclassification.

II. The skills, education, and training required to work as a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher are materially different from that required to work as a commercial dispatcher.

Classification Principle 2 cites skills, education, and training as differentiators that may be considered in making an occupational classification. In the case of public safety

¹⁴ Several studies have shown that this unique stress environment has unique mental and physical health impacts on public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers. E.g., Lilly, M.M., et al., *Predictors of obesity and physical health complaints among 9-1-1 telecommunicators*, SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK (2015) (available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/j.87.2015.09.003) and Meischke, H., et al., *An Exploration of sources, symptoms, and buffers of occupational stress in 9-1-1 emergency call centers*, ANNAALS OF EMERGENCY DISPATCH AND RESPONSE (2015).
telecommunicators and dispatchers, the skills, education, and training required to work in these occupations are radically different from the clerical or logistical skills required to work in other Major Group 43-0000 occupations.

Each state sets requirements for the minimum training and education required to work as a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher. There does, however, exist a national minimum training requirements list, assembled by the Department of Transportation’s National 9-1-1 Office in conjunction with many public safety stakeholders.\(^{15}\) In addition to these extensive requirements, many states require public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers to complete courses of study prescribed by statute,\(^{16}\) or by a public safety accrediting body such as a Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training or “POST.”\(^{17}\) In California, for example, the minimum classroom training that must be completed before a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher may begin simulated or “sit-along” training in an actual 9-1-1 center is 120 hours. This classroom training is frequently followed by extensive on-the-job training. Anne Arundel County, Maryland, for example, requires 176 hours of initial training, followed by 144-240 hours of on-the-job training, followed by a supervised work period of 96 hours totaling 8 to 14 weeks to reach only the first level of “9-1-1 call taker” certification. After that, the county requires a further 22 weeks of training, education, evaluation, and supervised work before a candidate can operate independently as a full-fledged public safety dispatcher. These extensive training requirements are not unique: Indeed, some areas require more. They are, however, representative of the extent to which specialized training and supervised work are required to bring a prospective public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher to a basic level of proficiency in these occupations.

Because the training and education required to work as a public safety telecommunicator or dispatcher are so much greater than those required to work as a commercial dispatcher or a general office administrative worker, NENA believes that public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers should be reclassified with other protective services occupations.

III. Reclassification would reduce, rather than create, confusion about the work performed by public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers.

NENA respectfully disagrees with the Committee’s conclusion that “moving the occupation to the Protective Services major group…and separating them from the dispatchers would be confusing.” To the extent that potential for confusion is a recognized classification principle, NENA believes that the current classification is responsible for any confusion that might exist. This is particularly so in light of the sharply distinct work processes carried out by public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers described above. In short, continuing to classify these protective service occupations


\(^{16}\) E.g., Texas Occupations Code § 1701.405.

\(^{17}\) E.g., California POST requirements available at: https://www.post.ca.gov/public-safety-dispatchers-basic-course.aspx.
with non-public-safety dispatchers will only perpetuate the kinds of misunderstandings about the work performed by these occupations evidenced by the justifications given for the Committee’s initial recommendation.

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NENA believes that the data presented here clearly justify the reclassification of public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers as Protective Service Occupations, and encourages the Committee to reconsider its initial recommendation against reclassification. Doing so will improve the utility of the SOC in accurately describing the American workforce, and the critical role that public safety telecommunicators and dispatchers play within it.

Should you have any questions or require further data in support of these comments, please contact me as below, and I will be happy to assist.

Sincerely,

Telford E. Forgety, III, “Trey”
Director of Government Affairs