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JAY T. ARMBRISTER
SHERIFF

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UNDERSHERIFF

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is very simply my notice of full and unwavering support of the 911 As First Responders Act. As it stands now, the federal government classifies 911 dispatchers at “clerical workers.” This is offensive at best and I’m embarrassed I didn’t know this until this legislation was brought to me. Had I known this, I would have brought this fight to the people years ago.

Let me begin with a brief history lesson on me, my relationship with our dispatchers, and why I feel so strongly about this. When I was 22, I began working with the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office as a jailer. During that time, I learned what the dispatchers next door did every day and night by watching them, talking to them, but mainly listening to the radio. They were impressive in the way they kept cool and multi-tasked under some serious pressure. Then, I promoted to Deputy and began career in law enforcement.

I learned early on that the dispatchers on the other end of my radio were without a doubt my first and most important line of help. Yes, I counted on the other officers and deputies to assist me, but I was completely at the mercy of the dispatcher on the other end of the radio to hear me and get me the help I needed. Many times, being a Sheriff’s Deputy, I was working alone in rural areas and many miles from any help. I made it a point from then on to show all our dispatchers the respect they deserved and treat them as equals. (You catch that? I said EQUALS...) And I’m proud to say to this day I carry a fantastic relationship with the dispatchers I grew up with and worked alongside into my current position.

I say all this to get to my personal story. There was one dispatcher in particular I seemed to work with almost exclusively. I worked night shift for many years and so did she. She was amazing in her ability to hear, speak, and type at the same time and she just knew exactly what I was going to ask for before I asked and she would have it ready for me. She was simply amazing and her name was Edna. When my wife and I began having our babies, as they grew up, they learned early what their dad did. They would see me in my uniform and we would play the “what’s that?” game. That’s my handcuffs, that’s my pepper spray, that’s my gun, that’s my badge... the usual. When they would point to my radio and ask, “what’s that?”, I’d say, “that’s where I talk to Edna.” And as my little girls got bigger, I’d begin to ask them what each thing was and when I’d point to my radio, they would say, “that’s where you talk to Edna.” On a funny side note, my daughters and I saw Edna one day at a store and I explained this was THE Edna, they were so happy to hear her voice and see her. I honestly think they didn’t know she was a real human!

Now fast-forward to August of 2005. I responded to the Boardwalk Apartment Complex fire here in Lawrence where one person lost their life and many others were injured. I was one of the first on scene and I ran to the rear of the building where I found people jumping from third floor windows because the front of their apartment was fully engulfed in flames.

Without getting too deep in the details, I needed help. I had folks who needed life-saving help that I could not provide. And on that night in particular, I was using my radio to talk to Edna. I kept telling her I needed medics at the rear of the building and she kept saying she was working on it. Finally, while tending to a victim whom I believed may die, I kind of yelled/cried into my radio, "EDNA...I NEED HELP BACK HERE...THESE PEOPLE ARE DYING!" When she keyed up her radio and began speaking, I immediately heard the tears in her voice when she said, "I'm trying Jay." In my nearly 23 years in Law Enforcement, this is the only time I have ever referred to a dispatcher by name over the air and this is the only time I have ever been called by my name by a dispatcher over the air.

And after the fire was brought under control and all victims were moved to safety, I had to seek treatment myself for smoke inhalation. And when I was released from the hospital, I went straight to the station to see Edna and the other dispatchers. When I walked in and she saw me, I'll never forget her eyes. I told her exactly what I saw and heard out there and she thanked me for sharing. She also saw the blood on my uniform and in my hair (not my own) as well as the smell of my uniform. This made the call they had just put out and handled real to them. She and the other dispatchers thanked me for coming in because it helped them process the information and frankly, the trauma they had just received in having dealt with the call and the 911 calls. And from then on, I made it a point to try and go see the dispatchers after a traumatic call so they could have more information to help them process what they had heard.

Now, for my present-day perspective, I have an even deeper respect and desire to help these dispatchers. I have found myself walking my own path to recovery from PTSD. And through that process and path back into the light, I learned that those dispatchers on the other end of the phone and radio deal with the same traumas we, as first responders, deal with every day. And, I'll take it one step further and say they have a tougher time with it because when that call is over, they have to move on to the next call that we all know is waiting for them. We, as first responders, have time to decompress and view all aspects of the case and we can begin our own trauma processing. Dispatchers do not get the same grace and many times they never know the outcome of any given call unless we provide them that information. This creates a huge gap in their healing due to their lack of closure and it needs to be fixed. I for one am working to rectify this by including dispatchers in our post-event critical incident debriefing as well as answering any questions they may have.

So, in closing, I am passionate about this and anything we as a State can do to afford 911 dispatchers any and all benefits we give other first responders, it's the very LEAST we can do and I fully supportive of it.

Sheriff Jay T. Armbrister

Douglas County Sheriff's Office
Lawrence, KS