

August 22, 2024

## 911 Telecommunicator Reclassification: Status and Considerations for Congress

911 telecommunicators (also called 911 call takers or 911 dispatchers) have been referred to as the “*first*” *first responders* (i.e., they are often the initial responders to an emergency). 911 telecommunicators are not federally classified as first responders under the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system. Instead, the SOC classifies 911 telecommunicators under office, clerical, and administrative support occupations. Many in the 911 stakeholder community (e.g., technology providers, public safety officials, 911 professionals, national 911 associations) disagree with this classification. For example, in an Alaska Public Media [article](#), a former 911 telecommunicator stated,

Yes, it’s answering phones, but it’s so not clerical ... We were essentially non-licensed therapists. We were non-licensed medical professionals. We were doing CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] on the phone.

The duties of a 911 telecommunicator are set to become even more multifaceted with the transition to Next Generation 911 (NG911), an internet protocol (IP)-based system. For example, determining the appropriate response to a 911 call is soon to involve integration of different types of multimedia transmissions—such as text messages, streaming video, and photos—directly from the public.

Legislation on reclassification has been introduced in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. One bill would require “911 telecommunicator” to be [categorized as](#) a protective service occupation—the same as “first responder”—under the SOC system (S. 3556). Another bill would direct the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to consider the reclassification of “911 telecommunicator” (H.R. 6319) as a protective service occupation under the SOC.

This In Focus provides an overview of the classification of 911 telecommunicators, the potential for reclassification, and considerations for Congress.

### How Are 911 Telecommunicators Classified?

The SOC system [classifies workers](#) into occupational categories using data collected on job duties. 911 telecommunicators [are classified](#) with office and administrative support occupations—which include, for example, receptionists, bill and account collectors, and customer service representatives. Many in the 911 stakeholder community believe this is not an accurate description of the role of 911 telecommunicators and [have advocated](#) for reclassification as a protective service

occupation. The BLS [describes](#) the protective service occupations group as “workers who provide public safety.”

The SOC system is revised periodically through an interagency SOC Policy Committee, which makes recommendations to OMB. The last SOC revision occurred in 2018. Revising the SOC is typically a multiyear process that begins well in advance of revisions. For example, the 2018 revision process [kicked off](#) in 2014. Efforts were made by the 911 stakeholder community to aid in the reclassification of 911 telecommunicators in the 2018 SOC periodic revision cycle. However, [according to](#) 911.gov, the BLS did not recommend—and OMB did not find enough evidence for—reclassification based on job descriptions pulled from a variety of public safety answering points (PSAPs, also called 911 centers).

On June 12, 2024, the BLS posted a [notice of solicitation](#) for the potential 2028 SOC revision. Among other topics, the BLS asked for public comments on “whether to consider changes to, or consolidation of, selected 2018 SOC detailed occupations, including specifically public safety telecommunicators.” Comments were due by August 12, 2024.

### What Would Reclassification Do?

In 2024, the president and chief executive officer of the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) reportedly [noted that](#) reclassification at the federal level “wouldn’t automatically reclassify dispatchers at the state level or guarantee them higher pay, but it would give local governments the opportunity to reevaluate how their dispatchers are categorized and compensated.” Examples of the potential impacts of reclassification are provided below.

911 staffing shortages are an issue that could be addressed by reclassification. Data from a February 2023 [survey](#) jointly conducted by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch and the National Association of State 911 Administrators indicated that more than 50% of PSAPs were reported to be facing a staffing crisis. The survey noted that “employees [i.e., 911 telecommunicators] cited pay increases and better benefits as the top two retention incentives.” According to May 2023 data from the BLS, the mean annual wage for protective service occupations is [\\$57,710](#), while the mean annual wage for office and administrative support occupations is [\\$47,940](#).

According to media reports, in some states, 911 telecommunicators were [not included](#) in state bonuses that were made available to first responders who served during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Reclassification may provide 911 telecommunicators with

benefits available to first responders, such as [access to mental health services](#) or expanded [retirement options](#).

Further, reclassification may create new opportunities for PSAPs to be eligible for federal and state emergency communications-related grants available to first responders.

911 is typically funded at the state and local levels, through fees [levied on](#) phone services. Depending on the jurisdiction, reclassification [could necessitate](#) pay increases for 911 telecommunicators, which may impact local government finances. Localities may also oppose reclassification for other reasons. For example, in the Hawaii State Legislature, [House Bill 1398](#) would have allowed 911 telecommunicators to create their own bargaining unit. Although there was support for this bill from public safety professionals, there also was opposition. The Hawaii Office of Collective Bargaining [found](#) in 2023 that 911 dispatchers were already properly categorized. Additionally, the City and County of Honolulu [was concerned](#) about the increased costs and complexities of “establishing, negotiating, arbitrating, and managing yet another bargaining unit and contract.”

## How Can Reclassification Occur?

Besides reclassification of 911 telecommunicators through the periodic SOC revision cycle (discussed above), reclassification also can occur through legislation at the state level or federal level.

### State Legislation

According to an April 2024 [letter](#) from the Chairwoman of the Federal Communications Commission to the Director of OMB, over 20 states have enacted or are considering legislation to reclassify 911 telecommunicators. Reclassification efforts vary from state to state, depending on priorities or legislative climate. For instance, while some state legislation officially reclassifies 911 telecommunicators as first responders (e.g., [California](#), [Indiana](#), [Colorado](#)), other states (while not officially reclassifying 911 telecommunicators as first responders) enable 911 telecommunicators to receive first responder retirement and or workers’ compensation benefits (e.g., [Minnesota](#), [Nevada](#)).

While these state-led efforts may inspire other states to follow suit, it has been asserted that some states may maintain their current status until reclassification at the federal level occurs. [According to](#) a Virginia 911 dispatch manager seeking change at the federal level, “if we can get out of the clerical and get into the protective service ... that opens so many doors, because the federal government then says, ‘yes, they are recognized as a protector and servant’ and then the states will follow.”

### Federal Legislation

Bills have been introduced in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress related to reclassification of 911 telecommunicators. These include the Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services Act of 2023 (911 SAVES Act of 2023; H.R. 6319) and Enhancing First Response Act (S. 3556). These bills would require OMB to categorize “911 telecommunicator” as a

protective service occupation under the SOC within 30 days of enactment.

In July 2024, an amended version of H.R. 6319 was ordered to be reported by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, which changed the bill from directing OMB to reclassify 911 telecommunicators to instead asking OMB to *consider* reclassifying 911 telecommunicators. If 911 telecommunicators are not reclassified, the OMB Director would be required to submit an explanation to Congress.

## Considerations for Congress

If Congress decides to take action on reclassification of 911 telecommunicators, it could advance H.R. 6319; in any event, OMB is already expected to consider the classification change of 911 telecommunicators during the potential 2028 SOC revision. Alternatively, Congress could advance S. 3556, which would require reclassification by OMB. According to media reports, some Members may be hesitant to [sidestep](#) OMB and BLS processes.

Congress may consider holding hearings on state reclassification efforts—to examine their successes and challenges and to consider possible approaches to adopt at the federal level.

If Congress does not wish to take a legislative route, Members could consider writing to OMB to encourage the reclassification of 911 telecommunicators, as some Members did [in 2016](#).

Congress could choose not to act on reclassification, allowing OMB or states to continue to address the matter. If Congress chooses this option, reclassification by OMB could take years or may not happen. If reclassification does not occur in the potential 2028 SOC revision, the next opportunity through an SOC revision would be approximately 10 years after the potential 2029 revision (i.e., 2038).

In May 2022, the [National 911 Program](#), within the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), published a [toolkit](#) to help 911 centers “address the changes the BLS needs to see” for reclassification. An option for Congress could be to direct the National 911 Program—which has extensive 911 expertise and strong connections to the 911 stakeholder community—to continue to assist 911 centers for the 2028 potential SOC revision or to advise OMB on classification. A consideration under this option would be that much of the National 911 Program’s previous work has [shifted](#) as its authorities [expired](#) in 2022. Congress may consider addressing the National 911 Program’s authority if it wants NHTSA to maintain a federal connection to the 911 stakeholder community and help shape reclassification efforts.

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**Colby Leigh Pechtoll**, Specialist in Telecommunications Policy

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