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Public Safety Telecommunicator Reclassification: Status and Considerations for Congress

Public safety telecommunicators (e.g., 911 operators and 911 dispatchers) have been referred to as the “*first*” *first responders*, as they are often the initial responders to an emergency. “Public safety telecommunicators” is not classified as a Protective Service Occupation (i.e., workers who provide public safety) under the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system, established by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and used across the federal statistical system (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics, or BLS). Instead, the SOC classifies public safety telecommunicators under Office and Administrative Support Occupations. Some in the 911 stakeholder community disagree with this classification and argue that reclassification as a Protective Service Occupation would provide recognition for telecommunicators’ role in emergency response. For example, in an Alaska Public Media article, a former public safety 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 public safety telecommunicator are set to become even more multifaceted with the transition to Next Generation 911 (NG911), an internet protocol (IP)-based system. With NG911, determining the appropriate response to a 911 call is to include integration of different types of multimedia transmissions—such as text messages, streaming video, and photos—directly from the public.

Some Members of Congress argue that “improving our nation’s public safety system begins with recognizing the indispensable role telecommunicators play in changing the conversation around the nature of their work.” The past several Congresses have considered legislation on reclassification of public safety telecommunicators under the SOC system. In the 119th Congress, some Members have introduced three bills addressing reclassification: H.R. 637, S. 725, and H.R. 540.

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

How Are Public Safety Telecommunicators Classified?

The SOC system classifies workers into occupational categories using data collected on job duties and is generally used for statistical purposes. According to the 2018 SOC User Guide, “occupations are classified based on

work performed and, in some cases, on the skills, education and/or training needed to perform the work.” Public safety telecommunicators are classified with Office and Administrative Support Occupations—which include, for example, receptionists, bill and account collectors, and customer service representatives. Some in the 911 stakeholder community say this is not an accurate description of the role and have advocated for reclassification as a Protective Service Occupation. The term *first responder* does not appear in the SOC system (and there is no single federal definition of *first responder*); 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 public safety 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. For example, OMB argued that “moving the occupation to the Protective Services major group is not appropriate and separating them from the other dispatchers would be confusing” and that “the work performed is that of a dispatcher, not a first responder ... most dispatchers are precluded from administering actual care, ‘talking’ someone through procedures, or providing advice.”

On June 12, 2024, the BLS posted a notice of solicitation of comments for a 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. In response, some public safety advocacy groups, such as the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO), filed comments and considerations for potential reclassification.

What Would SOC Reclassification Do?

APCO has asserted that “the ... impacts of fixing the SOC [at the federal level] would be appropriate recognition for [911] professionals and making the SOC a more accurate statistical resource.” APCO further stated, “in theory, [911] professionals could use an updated SOC to argue for subsequent changes at the state/local levels.” For instance, a Virginia 911 dispatch manager seeking change at the

federal level argued, “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.” In contrast, some media reports state there is “no evidence that changing the SOC will result in changes at the state/local level.” Further, whereas state reclassifications might impact benefits or pay, according to a policy essay by Representative Norma Torres, the SOC reclassification would have no direct impact on wages or employee benefits for public safety telecommunicators at the state and local levels.

How Could Reclassification Occur?

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

State Legislation

Efforts related to reclassification vary from state to state, depending on priorities or legislative climate. According to an October 2024 report by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 25 states have enacted or adopted resolutions to reclassify public safety telecommunicators as first responders or under other public safety occupations (e.g., California, Indiana, Colorado). Other states (while not officially reclassifying public safety telecommunicators as first responders) enable them, for example, to receive first responder workers’ compensation benefits (e.g., Minnesota, Nevada). While these state-led reclassification efforts may inspire other states to follow suit, other states may be hesitant to reclassify because of potential financial impacts.

Federal Legislation

Legislation has been introduced in the 119th Congress, including the Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services Act of 2025 (911 SAVES Act; H.R. 637) and the Enhancing First Response Act (S. 725). Both bills would require OMB to categorize “public safety telecommunicators” as a Protective Service Occupation under the SOC within 30 days of enactment. Another bill, the Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services Act of 2025 (911 SAVES Act of 2025; H.R. 540), would require OMB to consider establishing a separate code for public safety telecommunicators as a subset of Protective Service Occupations as part of the first revision process of the SOC system that occurs after enactment. If a separate code is not established, OMB would be required to submit an explanation report to Congress. Although the language of H.R. 540 differs from that of H.R. 637 and S. 725, the bills are intended to achieve common goals. Similar versions of these bills were introduced in previous Congresses.

Considerations for Congress

If Congress decides to mandate reclassification of public safety telecommunicators, it could advance H.R. 637 or S. 725. While some support for mandating reclassification exists, according to media reports, some Members may be hesitant to sidestep OMB and BLS processes. Further, some policymakers have argued that “mandating a change to a statistical code would not affect these workers’ wages,

benefits, or other resources—but it would disrupt data series continuity; require significant additional work for government agencies, researchers, employers, and others; and intervene in an official, routine government data-collection and statistical process.” Alternatively, Congress could advance H.R. 540, which would require *consideration* by OMB. In any event, OMB is expected to consider the classification change of public safety telecommunicators during the 2028 SOC revision process.

In August 2024, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that implementing the Supporting Accurate Views of Emergency Services Act of 2024 (911 SAVES Act of 2024; H.R. 6319, 118th Congress)—which would have required OMB to categorize “public safety telecommunicators” as a Protective Service Occupation under the SOC system—would not significantly affect federal spending.

Outside of legislation, some Members supporting reclassification may also consider writing to OMB to encourage the reclassification of public safety telecommunicators, as some did in 2016. Congress may consider holding hearings on state reclassification efforts—for example, to examine their successes and challenges or to consider possible approaches to adopt reclassification at the federal level. Congress also could choose not to act on reclassification, allowing OMB or states to continue to address the matter. If OMB does not reclassify the position in the potential 2028 SOC revision, the next scheduled SOC revision is approximately 10 years later (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 during the potential 2028 SOC revision or to advise OMB on classification. A consideration under this option is that NHTSA (along with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration) co-led the 911 Implementation Coordination Office (ICO), which served as the lead federal body for coordination of efforts related to NG911 implementation. As the ICO’s statutory authority expired in October 2022, much of the National 911 Program’s previous work has shifted from a focus on the nationwide advancement of NG911 to a more narrow focus on ensuring NG911 has a positive impact on highway safety. Congress could consider addressing the ICO’s authority if it wants NHTSA to maintain a federal connection to the 911 stakeholder community and help shape reclassification efforts.

While reclassification may provide recognition for public safety telecommunicators, some stakeholders also seek federal funding for the nationwide transition of 911 centers to NG911 to further bolster the capabilities of the public safety telecommunicator workforce.

Colby Leigh Pechtoll, Specialist in Telecommunications Policy

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