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Chairwoman Erickson, and Members of the Senate Commerce Committee,

My name is Emily Nichols and I am the current President for the Kansas Association of Public Safety Telecommunicators. I am also the Director of Emergency Communications for Dickinson County. I know first-hand how PTSD effects our First Responders. In the past mental health issues have been a stigma that no one wants to be associated with and this leaves many law enforcement, EMS, Fire and Public Safety Telecommunicators struggling on their own. Their repeated exposure to traumatic events and stress does affect their mental health. Dealing with the trauma from hearing, seeing, and living these events can leave first responders afraid to talk about their issues and feelings which then leads many down a path of self-destruction or suicide.

911 supports PTSD legislation, but we are neutral because Public Safety Telecommunicators are not included in this bill. We would support this bill whole-heartedly if Public Safety Telecommunicators were amended into SB 491

In 2021, the rate of PTSD in first responders was as high as 30% and the PTSD and depression rates for first responders in Kansas was 5 times higher than the national average. The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders reported there are more first responder deaths by suicide than in the line of duty each year. This bill could help change thousands of lives. Getting the mental health help they need is imperative. It is hard when there is no physical injury that can just heal. PTSD takes a lot of time and work to heal and if they do not have the proper tools and guidance, we will continue to lose those who are here to help Kansas.

As a Public Safety Telecommunicator, I have suffered along with all my fellow first responders. Many people do not realize how much 911 goes through as well. I want to support this with all my being however; it needs to be amended to include Public Safety Telecommunicators. The State of Kansas now recognizes Public Safety Telecommunicators as first responders because of SB40 and they are just as effected as Law enforcement, Fire, and EMS to the trauma of their careers.

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Public Safety Telecommunicators are the first to get the call. We get all the information we can to help “paint a picture” for responders. This way the responders get an idea of what they are about to get into. However, Public Safety Telecommunicators are also sending the responders, dealing with their radio traffic, handling other calls for service and 911 calls coming in at the same time. Most First Responders deal with one call at a time but, Public Safety Telecommunicator deal with several. We get off one phone call and answer the next. We rarely get any closer from the calls we deal with. We understand that we are not the “boots on the ground”, but we are the first-first responders. We are the ears and the only help until physical help arrives.

The active shooter in the Excel plant in Harvey County took a tremendous toll on two of Don Gruver’s Public Safety Telecommunicators. They were experienced and had worked for Harvey County for many years but it was too much for them and they left. We see this all over the state and country. For most Public Safety Answering Points, if they can get a person out of training they may last 1.8 years. This is down from 2.8 from 2019. If they can make it past the 1.8 years, many do not last past 5 years. Many cite PTSD as the reason for leaving.

I have been a Public Safety Telecommunicator for 20 years and I can tell you it has not been easy. I have delivered babies and listened to parents beg their children to breathe. I have heard many people take their last breath. I had to deal with a mother who “accidentally” killed her four children by setting them on fire and then was ostracized for going to the critical incident stress debriefing because I only answered the phone. The things I heard that night nearly ruined me. I still have a hard time dealing with certain calls because they are a trigger. The need is there for Public Safety Telecommunicators. We are first responders and are just asking to be treated as such.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

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