

TESTIMONY before the Committee on Labor and Housing
Regarding LD 1319

“An Act To Prohibit Employer Disciplinary Action against Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Persons Responding to an Emergency”

NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST

April 3, 2019

Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and distinguished members of the Committee on Labor and Housing: thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Travis Kennedy. I’m the Director of Public Affairs for Cumberland County government, and I’m here to speak on behalf of the County regarding LD 1319.

Cumberland County is taking a position of “Neither For Nor Against.” As partners in the chain of emergency response we fully understand the value of the bill, and know first hand how important it is that first responders are able to focus entirely on the business of saving lives during an emergency and not the impact on their means of earning a living. It is our hope that the Committee will consider a minor amendment to remove an unintended consequence that could impede, rather than improve, the process of emergency response in the bill as written.

Our County is home to the Cumberland County Regional Communications Center (RCC) providing emergency and non-emergency dispatch service for many public safety agencies within Cumberland County; and we serve as the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) for 19 communities.

We're proud to report that eight employees out of our thirty-eight total at the RCC are also volunteer firefighters in their home communities. These folks are dedicating their professional AND personal time to protecting the public. And their experience and skill-set in the field adds value to their work in the RCC, and vice versa.

But our concern with the bill as written is that it would prioritize one step in the emergency response process over another. RCC employees leaving or arriving late for shifts because they were responding to one emergency puts people experiencing another emergency at greater risk, by leaving the RCC short-staffed and over-burdened.

Citizens call for emergency response in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe, and oftentimes while the emergency is still happening and lives may be at stake. The caller may be having the worst day of their life, and is commonly still in crisis or shock while the call is happening. The dispatcher must be calm and capable of focusing on that call for as long as it takes.

Dispatch jobs are extremely stressful. Every time the phone rings, the person answering it knows that how they handle the call could very well make the difference between whether somebody lives or dies. As a consequence, these positions can be difficult to fill and experience regular turnover. These challenges are only compounded when other desks in the RCC sit empty, and the staff has to spread themselves thinner in order to

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cover the workload. The real impact is on the “end user” - Maine people in crisis.

For these reasons, we ask that the Committee amend the bill to carve out emergency responders who are already working in an essential public safety or emergency response role. We don't want to inadvertently weaken one step in the emergency response process in order to support another.

Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration of this very important issue. Our Director of the Regional Communications Center couldn't be here today, so my ability to answer specific questions is somewhat limited; but I'd be happy to bring any questions that you may have back to the RCC for follow-up.