



## COBB COUNTY DEPARTMENT of EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

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Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
Notice of Public Safety Oversight Roundtable  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004

Esteemed or Honorable Councilmember Allen,

This letter serves as testament in the public oversight roundtable on 9-1-1 Operations at Office of Unified Communications. My name is Melissa Alterio, Executive Director of Cobb County Department of Emergency Communications in Metro Atlanta, GA. I am a 32-year veteran of 9-1-1 emergency communications, and in that 32 years I have witnessed firsthand the changes within the industry regarding a myriad of issues - staffing, retention, technology, stress / burnout, and various other transformations.

The age of 9-1-1 has changed significantly from years ago where the initial call to an *operator* for assistance without any enhanced data information and therefore elicited a generic response. We are now considered the hub of the public safety, the first of the first responders. The initial information we receive, questions we ask, the decisions we make, and the high-level protocols we must follow have a significant impact on the response and outcome of a critical incident. Our Emergency Communications Officers (ECOs) now triage calls, provide instructions, review often detailed data from many databases, use sophisticated technology, confirm mapping and location, control emotional callers all while simultaneously entering the information into a computer-aided dispatch system for a response – information that affects response in the field and upon which they depend when making operational and tactical decisions. ECOs are expected to rapidly switch-task these duties, ensure the safety of our callers and responders, and provide comprehensive and exceptional level of service. They strive to be their best every day. Yet we are each human and often take for granted the emotional toll of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma have on the 9-1-1 professional. With the



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extreme staffing shortages occurring in public safety across the country, stress and burnout are being seen at an alarming rate. While striving to be the best, as humans, mistakes are sometimes made. With that comes inquiries, critiques, lessons learned and yes – when properly investigated and substantiated, sometimes disciplinary action depending on the intent and severity. Few can do the job of an ECO, yet this is a profession that is not yet recognized as a public safety protected class by the federal government. The public’s expectations are high when they call 9-1-1 during their worst crisis, and telecommunicators meet or exceed those expectations to the best of their ability. It is, therefore, my professional and learned opinion a mockery of the critical work that we do, that the government does not yet consider it viable and prudent to acknowledge the 9-1-1 professionals as a first responder.

In my tenure as an experienced 9-1-1 professional, there are few agencies that model the skill level, innovation, leadership model and reputation and reputation for other Emergency Communications Center’s (ECCs) to follow. Office of Unified Communications (OUC) is certainly one of those agencies. I have been following OUC since 2016 when Karima Holmes was appointed their Director. Director Holmes is viewed as a progressive, innovative, purpose driven leader, by most everyone in our industry, exemplifying a servant and transformational leadership style. I quickly realized that Director Holmes ability as a Director was one that I desired to emulate. She is a collaborative, thought-provoking, driven individual who consistently strives to engage her knowledge and skillset to coach and mentor others and improve the 9-1-1 industry.

Due to the ever-changing landscape in 9-1-1, professionals serving in a leadership capacity in the emergency communications discipline must be versatile, knowledgeable, open-minded, and understanding. The ideal public safety leader is a proven leader, with a track record reflecting an ability to work collaboratively with public safety partners, the community, and most importantly, the team members answering the call every day. Director Holmes has proven herself time and time again to be such a leader. She has become a nationally recognized beacon in all these areas, serving on a variety of committees and workgroups; being a champion for her team members; succeeding in any academic setting; and most recently serving as Board Members for the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) and 911der Women, Inc. I am honored and proud to not only consider Director Holmes a colleague and mentor, but also a friend.

The complexities of the 9-1-1 systems are profound. We absorb a significant amount of opposition by those who simply misunderstand the delicate intricacies of the amount and type of service we provide



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and the technological advancements that have emerged. With the lack of national and consistent standardization in 9-1-1, emerging technology progression presents itself in many jurisdictions that do not have the proper equipment or financial standing to match the developing trends. Yet the 9-1-1 professional is expected to perform without any hindrances and provide the highest standard of care.

These challenges are not unique to OUC. They occur nationwide in small, medium, and large sized ECCs. Uneducated or uninformed scrutiny and misaligned agendas by select few individuals only serve to obstruct our mission to serve the public and provide our 9-1-1 professionals with a supported and fairly evaluated environment to do so.

Acting Director Holmes and the Office of Unified Communications has my continued and unwavering support and admiration. I implore this judicial public safety oversight committee to consider this a statement of record from a 32-year 9-1-1 veteran and industry subject matter expert.

Respectfully,

X

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Melissa Alterio  
Executive Director

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