

Sen. Stillman, Rep. Dargan, Senators Daily and Guglielmo, Representatives Jutila and Perillo and other members of the Public Safety and Security Committee:

My name is Jeffrey Otto. I am President of Quinebaug Valley Emergency Communications, one of Connecticut's seven Regional 911 Communications Centers. I am testifying today on behalf of RECCA, the Regional Emergency Communications Centers Association of Connecticut.

As is the case for 911 dispatchers throughout the state and country, RECCA dispatchers are the first to contact citizens in their jurisdictions who report or suffer from the effects of emergencies. They are an integral part of the response system we have put in place in Connecticut. We are proud of their dedication to serve the public during times of great stress and are wary of organizational or funding changes that might undermine their effectiveness.

RECCA members provide E-911 call receipt and dispatch services for 81 Towns and Boroughs or 45.5% of Connecticut's towns. Many of our members have been in existence for over thirty-five years and the continuation of their successful operations provides prima facie evidence that regionalization serves as both an effective and economical means of providing these critical services. This is especially the case for small towns that do not generate sufficient emergency traffic volume to warrant a dedicated dispatch center. But it also highlights for larger municipalities the beneficial effect of economies of scale that spread fixed costs over a larger taxpayer base than would be the case with a smaller dedicated dispatch center. Fixed cost includes operational and labor costs but also encompasses capital equipment costs required to provide radio and other expensive electronic systems that are shared among the cooperating municipalities in regional centers.

Although some of our centers provide service exclusively to fire and emergency medical services responders, many operate centers that serve local police departments highly effectively. Often small police departments or employees in fire or ambulance dispatch centers threatened by consolidation will assert that consolidated or "civilian" centers cannot provide effective emergency communications services. We believe that nothing could be further from the truth. There are many exceptional centers in Connecticut that refute such arguments.

There is no question that Regional Emergency Communications Centers save taxpayers money and that RECCA strongly advocates this approach to providing emergency communications services. But it is also important to recognize that Regional Centers, subsidized dispatch centers in cities of greater than 40,000 population, multi-town dispatch centers serving two municipalities, equipment replacement, investments in critical new technologies that no individual 911 center could afford on their own and other important services overseen by OSET are made possible because of Connecticut's unique blend of local funding and incentives provided by the State. When the Legislature passed P.A. 95-318 it recognized that an integrated system of statutes, regulations, financial incentives and an off-budget revenue source would be necessary to create one of the leading E-911 systems in the nation.

The revenues that fund all facets of the operation of Connecticut's 911 system flow from monthly charges on telephone instruments, including cellular telephones, in our state. Since the beginning only that portion of the \$0.50 monthly surcharge maximum as has been necessary each year to fund the operation of the system has been utilized. But this year the budget necessary to fund the system as it is, unmodified by Raised Bill 312, will completely consume the \$0.50 surcharge. Thus adoption of the current proposal, without a necessary increase in the surcharge to fund the considerable and not completely predictable costs for regional subsidies and consolidation studies authorized by the Raised Bill will completely disrupt the funding of the current system. Moreover the proposed Bill provides insufficient guidance as to how the shortfall in funding should be addressed.

Up to now, in some parts of our state, the considerable savings that would accrue to municipalities, and the net savings that would benefit taxpayers after accounting for incentives provided by current law, have not been sufficient to establish regional centers. In some cases a lack of knowledge of the law or an unwillingness to share

control may be at the base of this problem. Perhaps the current economic difficulties will shed new light on the possibilities. Whether the Public Safety Committee wishes to compel municipalities to regionalize, or whether Connecticut's highly successful model of incentivizing regionalization is selected or enhanced, we urge the Committee to first address the lack of availability of funds to accomplish this objective.

Other state's maximum surcharges run as high as \$3.00/month. Nearby states have a maximum monthly allowable of \$1.00 to \$1.26 . We believe that it is a crucial responsibility of the legislature to assure that the ability of our state to respond to the emergency needs of its citizens not be hampered by an overly conservative surcharge ceiling. Connecticut has demonstrated that its Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications can both conservatively manage its budget and also create one of the most effective statewide 911 systems in the nation. We urge the legislature to withdraw the current proposal and bend its immediate efforts to raising the surcharge maximum to \$1.00 per instrument per month.

In the past, when complex changes in the 911 system and its incentives for improved or altered service were deemed necessary by the legislature, a task force has been created and has been charged with the responsibility of recommending changes to the Public Safety Committee. We would like to suggest to the Committee that this approach be considered again.

On behalf of the dedicated volunteers and employees of RECCA members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter and would be happy to make further comments or answer questions either now or in the future.

Jeffrey B. Otto

860-774-4992
jotto@snet.net