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For Information Contact:

David Wescott DW@PHAdvocates.org (919) 491-5541

Old System, Broken Response

Californians Say 911 System Does Not Meet Current Crises

SACRAMENTO: A statewide poll released today shows that the large majority (88%) of registered California voters want major changes to the way police and other emergency services providers respond to 911 calls.

When asked what reforms they want for 911 services, two-thirds (69%) of voters say they want behavioral health professionals to respond either with (35%) or without (34%) law enforcement to non-life threatening situations, compared to 19% who only want law enforcement to get additional training to respond more effectively.

Only 12% of respondents want 911 services left as they are.

Registered voters think law enforcement is least equipped to respond to calls about mental health crises (67%) and people who are homeless (49%), the situations voters say are most commonly in need of emergency response services.

California's 911 system was established in 1968 to respond to all types of emergencies: police, fire, and medical. Today, Californians make more than 25 million 911 calls annually. Increasingly, the public relies on 911 for immediate assistance in non-life-threatening situations.

"California voters throughout the state and across all demographic groups see today's emergency response system as outdated and in need of a more diverse set of responders," said Dr. Harold Goldstein, Executive Director of Public Health Advocates, which commissioned the poll. *"The system is old and needs updating."*

These findings come amidst growing nationwide concern about harm—sometimes even fatalities—caused by police responding to mental health crises and other non-life threatening situations. Law enforcement leaders in cities such as Los Angeles have begun to call for new response systems that rely less on law enforcement and more on specialized services to address calls about homelessness and mental illness.

"It's been said that when you carry a hammer, every problem starts to look like a nail. Likewise, when you carry a gun and a taser, calls for help can easily start to look life-threatening," said Ryan McClinton, Program Manager for the First Response Transformation Campaign at Public Health Advocates. *"California voters are saying they want emergency response to fit the situation. In many cases, sending behavioral health specialists rather than police or fire fighters can be safer and less expensive."*

"Support for a modernized California emergency response system is overwhelming," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the Berkeley IGS Poll. *"This sentiment is consistent across region, income, age, race, and political party. It suggests an opportunity for bipartisan solutions."*

The Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) Poll of 9,254 registered California voters was conducted in August 2022 in English and Spanish. The Berkeley IGS Poll is a statewide non-partisan survey conducted regularly to understand public opinion on current election and public policy related issues.

Public Health Advocates is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization leading efforts to improve the effectiveness of California's first response system. The poll was developed in partnership with researchers at UC Berkeley and UC Davis. Detailed poll results are available at www.phadvocates.org/911.

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