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PRIVILEGE SPEECH OF REP. VARGAS

REP. VARGAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, dear colleagues. Good afternoon.

I distinctly remember watching American movies when I was young and being amazed at how swiftly 911 responded to all kinds of emergencies. The way they dealt with crisis was so impressive, so much so that I wanted to be the one answering the calls and playing hero to a little girl or boy's urgent plea for help. I also used to think how sad it was that we did not have 911 in the Philippines.

Today, thanks to the efforts of the present administration, we now have a dedicated number that serves as the national emergency telephone number. In August of this year, the 9-1-1 emergency hotline was launched nationwide. I take this opportunity to stand before you today to bring to our collective attention the issue of emergency services in the country, particularly on the service of emergency calls.

My interest on this particular issue, Mr. Speaker, dear colleagues, was stirred when news reports revealed that the 911 emergency telephone hotline was reportedly flooded with prank calls on the first month that it was launched. In fact, there were more prank calls than legitimate calls, Mr. Speaker. Moreover, barely a month ago, there was a newspaper story about the lament of the City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council in Davao City regarding the number of prank calls that continue to flood their system. The numbers are indeed alarming and this seriously need our attention, Mr. Speaker. While a number of calls involved requests for ambulance assistance, reports on vehicular accidents, petty harassment, civil disturbances, drag racing, drinking in public places and drug pushing among others, about 68 percent of the calls received were non-emergency in nature. Out of the 43,214 calls received from August to September, only 14,027 were considered valid.

I find this a serious matter that must be brought to the open, Mr. Speaker and dear colleagues, especially during these times when news of disorder and unrest from all over the world plague the TV, radio, newspapers and social media. It is during times like these that every Filipino needs to have a strong sense of security and safety. In other countries, the United States for instance, there is a law against what they call “swatting.” The term “swatting” is derived from the acronym SWAT or Special Weapons and Tactics. This is a group of highly-skilled and well-trained officers of the law like policemen who are assigned to often very dangerous and critical missions.

“Swatting” is defined simply as an act of deceiving emergency service. It is a crime. There have been many documented cases of swatting in different countries. What is interesting to note, however, is that several cases, some even more complicated than others, had been committed by teenagers. They call themselves “Gamers.” Swatting is generally synonymous to prank calls, and I want to bring this issue within the context of the Philippine experience, Mr. Speaker, dear colleagues.

According to newspaper reports, on the first day alone of the activation of the 911 hotline in the Philippines, there were more dropped calls and prank calls than actual emergency calls. According to the PNP, the hotline already received 2,475 phone calls barely even seven hours after activation, but only three percent were legitimate calls. The rest were dropped calls and prank calls. There were even calls asking for lotto numbers. I can imagine how frustrating this must have been for the authorities.

Philippine National Police Chief Ronald Dela Rosa has already appealed repeatedly to the public to stop making test calls because they clog the emergency line. Our PNP and all government agencies that launched 911 only had good intentions when they decided to activate the hotline. I believe it to be timely as many of our people are beginning to become restless with news of crimes all around. The PNP should be lauded. The launch of 911 and its powerful back-end support is a major milestone. The present administration recognized the extreme importance of this service that barely a month after the new administration took over, this service was launched, but we have to address the headlines about the prank calls flooding the hotline.

Mr. Speaker, the 911 hotline is a noble idea and the PNP deserves our praise for pushing it, but we need to spend extra efforts, perhaps more resources, in educating our people

about it and insisting that the Filipinos respect and honor the principle of the 911 hotline. The three-digit telephone number has a very solid and respectable history in the US and, I also believe, in Canada. The 911 hotline has been designated as the universal emergency number that when you dial it, within seconds, you will be led to emergency assistance. Its goal is to provide fast and easy access for help.

There is a lot of literature about the benefits of having one central number to call for emergency situations. There are also a lot of data on why 911 was decided to be the best combination for a quick dial, and still a lot more information on how the 911 emergency hotline has helped many people in need and has saved many lives. The history of the 911 hotline in other countries is long and was with serious legislative work before it arrived to its present status respected by the people, reliable and trusted by the citizenry, and never to be messed around with. Indeed, it is a serious crime to play with the 911 emergency hotline. I have been impressed by how even the little children in the US understand the significance of this hotline and how these children honor this number so much and never play with it.

The initial reaction of our people to the launch of the 911 hotline should not discourage anyone. Instead, it should motivate all of us to ensure that our hotline to safety is protected and not abused. We cannot stop with just the launch of the 911 alone. We need to communicate. The LGUs need to transfer information about this service system from PNP to the communities in the barangays and to the homes. We need to get the importance of 911 to the psyche of every Filipino. We also need to ensure that 911 reaches its maximum potential in bringing protection, safety and security to the Filipino people.

There are a lot of questions still, Mr. Speaker. That is probably why there had been a lot of prank calls in the first place. There is a tremendous amount of interest in wanting to know if this is the real deal. They want to find out if someone with an authoritative voice will really answer at the other end. Is 911 going to be a permanent form of service for the Filipinos? Can it really help the individual Pinoy in dire need? Is it for free? Does it work from outside of Luzon? How fast can help arrive after the initial call? Valid questions indeed, but they do not give Filipino callers the license to misuse this sacred number. Imagine if it were a life or death situation, a girl being raped calling 911 for help but

could not be attended to because the very same police team that could have helped her was deployed to another incident that was merely a prank. We cannot allow this to happen.

So how do we protect this system, Mr. Speaker, dear colleagues? We must help answer the question of our constituents. We have to clearly communicate that 911 can only be utilized if we respect the number and give way to true emergency calls. I believe the best thing to do as a start is to spread the message that, yes, no one can mess with the 911 hotline and to do so will be a crime. Congress has to make it a crime because 911 is a holy number equivalent to our people's safety. Our PNP has already issued their commitment and their appeal, that while PNP will absolutely do everything they can to respond to emergency call effectively, they will not tolerate people who will prevent them from fulfilling their duties successfully. The pranksters should be held accountable and will be dealt with seriously.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our safety and our security is both a right and a responsibility. It will always be a priority. It can never be compromised. Let us be responsible enough in ensuring that this right is never violated or abused because being responsible about 911 is equivalent to protecting each and every Filipino. Lastly, Mr. Speaker, let us not forget that peace and order is not just the responsibility of the government, but of every Filipino. The system protecting our peace and order should be upheld with utmost respect, never taken for granted, never made fun of, and never dishonored.

Thank you very much, and a pleasant afternoon to all.