



**TESTIMONY ON  
SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF EMERGENCY AND  
MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE**

Presented to the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness  
& House Human Services Committees

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On behalf of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP), representing all 67 counties in the commonwealth, we are pleased to be here today to share our comments on supporting the next generation of emergency and mental health response in the commonwealth. Counties in Pennsylvania are responsible for many different services and government functions, including the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system as well as provision of human services, including mental health, on behalf of the commonwealth. In fact, two of the top county government priorities for 2023 call for urgent action on these issues that are being discussed during this hearing, 911 reauthorization and funding and increasing funding to the county mental health base.

### **911 Funding and Reauthorization**

As noted, counties are proud to provide one of the key functions in public safety—the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system. As technologies continue to evolve and funding streams no longer align with current realities, counties need to be able to rely on consistent and sustainable funding to maintain their responsibility as the first line of emergency response. To that end, counties top priority for 2023 is the development of a funding mechanism and formula, well ahead of the January 31, 2024, sunset of the state’s 911 statute, that adequately supports current county needs and also ensures that funding sources and distribution support needs into the future. Further, counties support continued strategic planning and investment for evolving technologies and GIS data to ensure Next Generation 911 (NG911) is properly supported and maintained.

The reauthorization language being drafted represents more than a year of substantive work among CCAP, 911 professionals, PEMA, the communications industry and other stakeholders. Our mutual objectives involve the ability to accommodate all current communication technologies including online platforms, the ability to anticipate and fold in future technologies, efficiency of core elements of the system and improvement in funding.

With the implementation of NG911 and the changing technological landscape, the needs of the current 911 system outweigh the revenue available in the commonwealth’s 911 fund. The commonwealth’s 911 system is funded from revenue collected from the 911 surcharge (a flat-rate fee placed on a phone service bill monthly or at point of sale for a prepaid device), with costs not covered by this funding typically supported by county property tax dollars. In Pennsylvania, the surcharge rate is currently \$1.65 and serves as the dedicated source of funding toward the overall cost of operating and maintaining the 911 system, from personnel to equipment and future technologies to enhance the emergency services process.

To be sure, since Pennsylvania enacted a comprehensive rewrite of the 911 statute in 2015, we have been successful in leveraging the flexibility offered by those changes to reduce the growth of 911 expenditures. However, as technology evolves, costs for equipment and operations increase and Pennsylvania continues to make enhancements to its 911 system, including implementation of NG911, which will allow for text, photo, video and other interconnectivity of 911 systems, additional funding is needed to continue to provide 911 services that are safe,

efficient and keep up with the changing needs of the commonwealth. Currently, counties are funding more than 30% of the system through property tax dollars and without an adequate increase, this percentage will largely increase. For example, even with a surcharge increase to \$2.00, counties would bear 35% of the cost of the system through the property taxes by 2027.

In his FY 2023-2024 budget address, Gov. Shapiro proposed a five-year reauthorization of the 911 statute, with an increase in the 911 surcharge from \$1.65 to \$2.03, but then carving out 2.75% of the revenues, or about six cents of the surcharge, to the Department of Human Services to operate the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline. Counties recognize the importance of efforts to implement a national suicide response and prevention initiative, including a 988 hotline, and take their varied roles in the mental health system very seriously. That said, counties believe funding for 911 and 988 should be entirely separate funding sources so as not to endanger counties' access to critical 911 funding. We are pleased to see that discussions seem to recognize counties' concerns and that future iterations of these proposals would keep funding for these two critical services separate.

Further, while counties appreciate the Governor's attention to the 911 funding need, estimates over the next several years indicate total 911 system need will come to approximately \$590 million by 2027, with primary cost drivers being technology and operations. To this end, counties support an increase in the surcharge that will appropriately support the growing needs of our 911 system now and into the future, to \$2.30 with a \$0.15 annual increase until the next reauthorization in five years. This increase in the surcharge would bring counties' funding responsibilities for the system back to 10 to 15%, similar to levels counties saw immediately after the last surcharge increase in 2015, without having to rely on regular property tax increases to cover a rising county share.

With this proposal, we would create a predictable fee Pennsylvanians can anticipate each month on their phone bill for the specific and dedicated purpose of providing 911 services. Additionally, counties believe the flat annual increase provides certainty and predictability both to counties and to other stakeholders on available funding over the course of the reauthorization while maintaining appropriate funding to meet the growing needs of the system. A five-year reauthorization also allows for time to better understand and determine if a surcharge is still an appropriate funding mechanism as technologies and capabilities evolve.

Counties are also seeking prompt action on the legislative reauthorization of the 911 statute given the quickly approaching sunset date of January 31, 2024. While funding discussions are co-occurring with FY 2023-2024 state budget discussions, counties want to ensure the General Assembly and Administration do not lose sight of the broader reauthorization. The time is now to act on increasing the surcharge to ensure the system is adequately funded and maintained so when someone in this commonwealth calls 911, they are able to talk to a live, highly trained professional often on the front lines of response to those emergency situations.

## **Mental Health Response**

The second topic of today's hearing, the "next generation of mental health response," reflects a much-needed conversation on the future of how we handle mental health, particularly as it pertains to 988 and crisis response. Counties strongly urge the Department of Human Services and PEMA to directly engage county commissioners and their key staff in policy development in order to assure the most effective transition to implementation of the 988 system. Additionally, counties support funding and resources for any additional obligations counties may take on as a result of 988 program roll-out and build-up – but reiterate that such funding must be separate from the 911 fund, or any other effort that would endanger counties' access to 911 funding, other county funding obligations, or counties' ability to respond to crisis and any needed services that may arise from implementation of 988.

But 988 is only a small piece of a much larger conversation surrounding mental health service access in the commonwealth. Any system such as 988 cannot succeed without significant attention directed toward the underlying community-based system that would provide the necessary support to those seeking help through 988. That call is a moment in time and while that moment is critical for those seeking help, the road to ensuring that individual can access the ongoing and sustainable services they need is deteriorating.

As you likely know, counties deliver critical mental health services – such as community residential programs, family-based support, outpatient care and crisis intervention – on behalf of the state. However, after state funding for mental health services has lagged actual need for more than a decade, the community mental health system is crumbling, meaning that access to this critical care is becoming less and less available and accessible to those who need this support. We would be remiss in our duty if we do not consider what happens after an individual takes that important step to seek help by calling 988 – and we would fail that individual by not investing the same attention and resources in the mental health infrastructure that can appropriately support them in the long-term.

Rebuilding this system will not happen overnight. Therefore, counties urge a significant investment of \$150 million in the county mental health base for FY 2023-2024, in addition to the allocation of the \$100 million in federal ARPA dollars for adult mental health, to begin the rebuilding process, with a long-term plan of further increases over the next five to ten years that can develop a strong system to benefit all Pennsylvania. By investing funds in the county mental health base, counties can support a broad-spectrum approach to addressing this crisis as they coordinate care to meet the diverse needs of all of the residents of their communities. Such an approach will call equally important attention to the overall community mental health system as to the 988 system. Without a strong investment, 988 and any additional mental health programs that rely on the foundation of a strong base system will fail, not only financially but will fail the residents of this commonwealth who are in dire need of these services and programs.

Time is of the essence – our decisions today on both of these matters will impact generations to come. We would like to thank you again for the opportunity to submit these comments and would be happy to address any additional questions.