



**TESTIMONY ON
REAUTHORIZATION OF THE 911 LAW**

Presented to the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

By
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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 the reauthorization of Chapter 53 of Title 35, commonly known as the 911 Emergency Telephone Act, or 911 law. Counties selected reauthorization of the statute, along with funding that meets the needs of Pennsylvania's evolving system, the top legislative priority for 2023.

Counties in Pennsylvania are responsible for many different services and government functions, including the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system, on behalf of the commonwealth. 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 total system costs through property tax dollars with different counties holding variable percentages. In Dauphin County, 37.1% of the system costs are supported through their General Fund. Cumberland County noted in a resolution supporting the 911 reauthorization that the surcharge only covers 59% of their 911 costs, leaving 41% to property tax dollars. Without an adequate increase, this percentage will largely increase. For

example, even with a surcharge increase to \$2.00, counties would bear collectively 35% of the cost of the system through the property taxes by 2027.

In Dauphin County, the county has averaged nearly 400,000 calls for service annually since 2020 and there have already been more than 268,000 calls for service in 2023. While funding is remaining stagnant, workloads and calls are increasing, creating more stress on our systems and staff. Dauphin County is also nearing the end of useful life for its computer-aided dispatch system (CAD) which requires \$1.5 million worth of updates in the next two years. With a more technologically advanced system replacing equipment nearing its end of life, not only will significant investments need to continue to be made in the commonwealth for 911, but ongoing maintenance, security and updates will need to continue to ensure our systems are safe, secure and dependable.

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. This proposal culminated into the \$1.97 surcharge with a tie to inflation, outlined in HB 1304, sponsored by Rep. Jarred Solomon, and SB 807, sponsored by Sen. Katie Muth. 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. Without an increase to the surcharge, counties would need to fund any remaining costs through their General Funds. Since the only source of General Fund revenue is property tax dollars, this likely would actualize as an increase in property tax rates for Pennsylvanians.

While funding often becomes a point of contention in legislative matters, it is important to highlight the progress of the 911 system since the passage of Act 12 in 2015. According to cost information gathered by the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), between 2005 and 2015, 911 system costs increased roughly 5.8% per year on average. After Act 12, that expenditure growth was reduced to 3.7% as shown between 2016 and 2021 due to the shift

from a county focus to a regional focus as Next Gen technology continues to be brought online. This allowed for more opportunities for shared systems, technology and other infrastructure. In fact, Pennsylvania is one of 13 states that has fewer PSAPs than counties.

An example of this in action is the Central Susquehanna Regional 911 Center, one of four PSAP consolidations since 2016. In 2016, the Snyder and Union County Commissioners decided to consolidate their separate 911 centers into the Central Susquehanna Regional 911 Center with the goal of achieving a cost-reduction of one-million dollars over the course of 10 years. Pre-consolidation, in 2015 both counties spent over \$3.1 million on their respective 911 budgets and as a result of diligent work, cooperation, planning and time, the 2023 budget for Central Susquehanna Regional was \$3,169,530. This example shows cost savings can be achieved, but it does not happen overnight and cannot be universally applied across all counties and PSAPs as there are different challenges and needs in the commonwealth. It is important to note that not all regionalizations or consolidations look the same. In Pennsylvania, 54 PSAPs are participating in a shared system to find cost and operational efficiencies, so it's not entirely 61 different PSAPs all operating on their own, but finding efficiencies where they make sense. There are some challenges and costs counties have notes are associated with consolidation, including not being able to upgrade technology as often as needed, staffing issues and related costs and expenses including shift adjustments, overtime and the cost of recruitment, training and retention.

Staffing issues cannot be overlooked as telecommunicators provide the backbone of the system. That telecommunicator is a certified, trained call taker that is using systems to identify a caller's location and other pertinent information while conversing with the caller, often offering medical triage advice or critical information to ensure the safety and positive outcome for all involved. Every county has heroic and heartbreaking accounts of the situations these individuals have helped people with, including delivering babies over the phone, aiding grandparents in providing CPR to their granddaughter who fell in a pool, talking someone through a domestic violence situation, all acts of service that occur before a first responder arrives on scene. The value of these employees is paramount and cannot be left out of the narrative for why Pennsylvania needs a system that is adequately resourced. Since staffing is included as part of our system costs, it demonstrates a critical expense in the system that the 911 surcharge supports.

While staffing and operational expenses are major in the 911 system, there are other reasons that system costs are projected to increase over the next few years. While the LBFC report shows a decline in statewide call volume, the report information does not adequately capture the reality of PSAPs where calls are taken. In 2016, there were some anomalies in reported figures, which explains the drastic perceived drop in calls, which in reality is closer to 8.5 million. Additionally, not all calls coming in to PSAPs are traditional calls, rather they are from non-phone devices utilizing internet calling or another automatic dialing system (like a smart watch, tablet or alarm). Often times those calls increase staff workload as there is additional follow-up needed to ensure situations which triggered those calls are resolved appropriately and everyone is safe. Additionally, call volume only represents calls coming in over the 911 system and does not capture any administrative lines, radios or other methods of communication that add

significantly to workload.

Next to the funding increase, timing is the other most pressing issue. While there are limited session days between now and the sunset, counties are urging the Shapiro Administration and the General Assembly to take immediate action on a five-year reauthorization that allows NG911 to be fully implemented across the state and provides counties with the data to better understand the needs of the system moving forward as technologies evolve at a rapid pace. Even a one-year delay at current funding levels would bump counties to funding nearly 38% of the system and grow to 46% by 2027 if the surcharge remains the same. 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.

Time is of the essence – action is needed now to reauthorize the 911 statute and increase 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. We would like to thank you again for the opportunity to submit these comments and would be happy to address any additional questions.