



2022 County Government Priorities Key Talking Points for Counties

BACKGROUND

- Each of these priorities showcases counties' commitment to the core services they provide to improve the well-being of the people and communities of Pennsylvania.
- Counties deliver services in partnership with the state and seek partnership in decision making regarding their programs and responsibilities.
- Collaboration between the state and counties is necessary to arrive at more effective solutions.

Counties should tell their local stories, including examples of relevant impacts to their programs and those they serve, within each of the following priorities as appropriate.

APPROPRIATE FUNDING TO SUPPORT THE CRUMBLING MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Counties, as the providers of community-based mental health services, are seeing demands for mental health services in communities that far exceed state funding levels and without adequate and sustainable funding, counties may not be able to meet the mental health needs of some of our most vulnerable residents.

- Counties provide community-based mental health services such as community residential programs, family-based support, outpatient care and crisis intervention, which are critical to the well-being of our constituents and our communities.
- State funding has lagged far behind needs and caseloads for years, which has negatively affected services while also putting tension on communities and local budgets.
- A targeted, strategic investment of state dollars into county community mental health services is necessary to sustain the existing safety net and bolster the availability of mental health services.
- Counties have kept costs down in part by utilizing the Behavioral HealthChoices program. This program must be preserved to allow counties to coordinate and invest in mental health and drug and alcohol programs and services that meet local needs.
- Counties seek to re-engage the legislature and the administration to gain the necessary funding to support these critical services.

HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE CRISIS

While all industries are facing workforce shortages, county human services are uniquely disadvantaged due to their essential nature and need to serve and protect some of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable. Counties need development of programs and partnerships to ensure this workforce is bolstered and can continue to provide on-the-ground services to those

in need.

- Counties administer human services programs, often on behalf of the state and federal governments, to protect our most vulnerable citizens.
- While it's no secret there are workforce shortages in all industries, human services are unique, as they rely entirely on people to deliver those services – they can't be done by computers or other machines.
- Without our human services workforce, we can't investigate child abuse, or help someone find housing, or provide mental health supports and substance abuse treatment. Counties need a state-county partnership to assure sustainable funding for all human services programs.
- Development of programs and partnerships to streamline human services recruitment efforts and create county employment pipelines can aid in recruitment and retention efforts to best fit the increasing demand for service needs.
- From recruitment to retention, we owe it to our employees and those we serve to continue finding innovative ways and best practices to bolster and support this special workforce area for years to come.

BROADBAND EXPANSION

Adequate and affordable broadband connection is critical to everyday functions of life, and, with a once-in-a-lifetime investment of funding for broadband deployment, counties stand ready to continue aiding in bridging the digital divide through stakeholder partnerships.

- Business, education, health care, emergency services and other key parts of our everyday lives rely on access to broadband, even more so now as the pandemic has changed the way people use the internet.
- Counties have been at the forefront of broadband expansion in the commonwealth. We continue to develop partnerships and creative solutions that work to provide internet connectivity for their residents and must be involved in developing a plan for Pennsylvania.
- Collaboration is critical to expanding broadband – the commonwealth must develop partnerships among federal, state and local government, and the private sector to identify successful approaches and best practices that can remedy this problem.

APPROPRIATE FUNDING AND REFORM FOR THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH SYSTEM

Counties provide a host of services for children and youth that are being impacted by staffing shortage, lack of funding and lack of state support for youth with complex needs, including mental illness and addiction. Counties need support from the state to ensure our youth are protected and can be served adequately.

- Counties provide human services to children that are living in an abusive home, battling mental illness, disabilities and addiction. To better serve these children and families, investments must be made to advance county-based programs and services.
- Counties have actively been advocating for adequate funding from the state to hire the necessary number of caseworkers in order to address increasing caseloads.
- Counties have been facing staffing shortages leading to unsustainable caseload responsibilities. These staffing shortages have a trickledown effect, staff receives an

unsustainable amount of casework and, despite their best-efforts, abuse can be identified too late and the children don't receive the immediate care needed.

- A state-wide plan needs to be implemented to address more complex cases since some cases require more specific treatment and counties simply do not have capacity to be prepared to treat every complex scenario that arises.
- The children and youth system needs better cross collaboration and training to handle more complex cases that involve mental health, addiction and abuse.

PROMOTE ELECTION INTEGRITY

Counties take their responsibility for the fair, efficient and accurate administration of Pennsylvania's elections very seriously, and need clear rules that enable consistent implementation across the commonwealth. Reforms to Pennsylvania's Election Code, made in consultation with counties, are needed to resolve ambiguities and help counties continue to promote the integrity of our elections.

- Counties take their responsibility seriously to assure the integrity and security of the elections process.
- Counties need clear rules to enable consistent implementation across the commonwealth and have identified that reforms to the Pennsylvania Election Code are needed.
- The current law remains ambiguous on matters such as drop boxes, signatures, curing ballots, and other areas related to Act 77 of 2019, which implemented mail-in ballots for all Pennsylvanians for the first time.
- Necessary reforms also include continuing to seek expanded pre-canvassing time and moving back the deadline for mail-in ballot applications to 15 days before an election.
- These two changes alone would resolve a significant portion of the challenges counties experienced implementing mail-in ballots in 2020 and 2021 and would significantly improve the voter experience and the likelihood of more timely results.
- Counties must be at the table during policy discussions so that statutory changes can be implemented clearly and consistently, and to assure appropriate resources and time are available for counties to implement any policy changes.

911 FUNDING AND REAUTHORIZATION

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 become out of line with current realities, counties need reliable, sustainable funding to provide 911 response services that meet the growing demands of Pennsylvania residents and visitors.

- With the current 911 funding formula scheduled to sunset in January 2024, is it critical to ensure that a new funding formula is developed and passed into law before the deadline.
- The new 911 funding formula must adequately support current county needs and must also ensure that funding sources and distribution support our needs into the future, including planning, development and support for the implementation of Next Gen 911.
- Counties are actively working with PEMA, legislative committees, emergency management professionals, the communications industry and other interests on system reform.

- Reforms needed include implementation of new technologies, as well as exploring opportunities for system and funding consolidation, such as regional resource sharing and collaboration which are essential to ensure system and service continuity.
- While 2024 may seem a long way away, we have much work to do to lay the groundwork with the General Assembly to make sure funding for 911 does not lapse and counties and the commonwealth are prepared for future needs.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES FOR ELECTIONS

Changes to election administration in Pennsylvania since Act 77 of 2019 have resulted in significant increases in the costs and resources needed for counties to administer successful elections. The state and counties must work together to provide appropriate support for our elections and anticipate the potential costs to counties related to any future Election Code reforms.

- Significant changes to election administration in Pennsylvania resulting from Act 77 of 2019 have increased the costs and resources needed for counties to administer successful elections.
- Most counties saw their budgets for elections-related costs increase significantly, as additional supplies were needed and staffing and overtime needs grew to address workload requirements.
- These impacts fell squarely on county shoulders, as they are solely responsible for administration of elections at the local level, without any new resources to offset these new requirements.
- The increased workloads and stress of implementing an entirely new law during a highly contentious presidential election and a global pandemic have also led more than a third of Pennsylvania's counties to experience the loss of their election director and other top election staff, resulting in a need to prioritize recruitment and retention and rebuild institutional knowledge.
- Counties and the state must work together as new laws and policies are developed to assure any increased costs and resource needs, including supplies and staffing, as well as adequate time for implementation, are also considered in any elections reforms discussions.