



## **2023 County Government Priorities Key Talking Points for Counties**

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. Consider using the below talking points and county example prompts to highlight why these priorities are important to your county and showcase what positive outcomes would look like for those you serve.

### **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.

### **911 FUNDING AND REAUTHORIZATION**

#### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would ensure all Pennsylvania residents and visitors will continue to have a quick and efficient connection to a 911 operator and services in any situation, regardless of geographic location or time of day.

#### **Talking Points**

- Counties provide one of the key functions in public safety—the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system.
- Since the last major 911 reauthorization, Act 12 of 2015, counties and PEMA have come a long way, building on the infrastructure and upgrades to the system to ensure a standard quality of care across the commonwealth.
- As technology and the needs of counties have evolved over the last decade, additional funding is needed to maintain this critical public safety tool and ensure system efficiencies that will allow for carrying out and building upon the Next Gen 911 (NG911) system.
- NG911 will enhance public safety response by eventually allowing voice, photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to the 911 network.
- Additionally, NG911 will also improve public safety answering points' ability to help manage call overload, natural disasters and transfer of 911 calls based on caller location data.
- Counties are seeking an increase in funding for 911 via an increased surcharge fee and opportunities to explore system efficiencies that account for individualized and regional county needs without costly mandates well ahead of the January 2024 sunset.

## **Tell Your County Story**

- Consider using call data to showcase the magnitude of the service that is provided.  
Ex: Last year, \_\_\_\_\_ County answered over \_\_\_\_#\_\_\_\_ calls to 911.
- What does NG911 mean to your residents? What can they expect when they call 911?
- What do increased investments into the 911 system look like for your county?  
Ex: With implementation of NG911, residents will be able to \_\_\_\_\_.
- While an increase in a surcharge will likely be minimal, don't be afraid to discuss what this will provide for your residents.  
Ex: Currently, you may notice a \$1.65 fee on your cell phone bill (PA State Wireless E911 Surcharge) that goes directly toward 911 service provision. This fee helps the 911 system run efficiently, ensuring equipment is up to date, advancing technology to best provide you emergency service and most importantly, guaranteeing when you call 911 that there is a trained professional there to take your call and assist you.

## **COUNTY INMATES WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**

### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would mean individuals with mental health issues would have access to services and diversion programs to keep them out of jail. Further, those who end up in the correction system could have services to help rehabilitate them and reduce further costly interactions with the criminal justice system.

### **Talking Points**

- Often when individuals are incarcerated, they come to a county jail with behavioral health issues, including mental illness or history of substance abuse.
- Jails are often not equipped to address the needs of people who need mental health treatment, resulting in poor outcomes for those individuals and their communities.
- Counties are seeking partnership of the state to identify alternatives to placing those inmates with mental illness in jails, including better diversion and re-entry options and access to state hospital beds when needed.
- Cooperation with other providers is critical to maintain continuity of care for inmates returned to the county to ensure they have access to behavioral health services that could potentially reduce the chances they end up in jail again.

### **Tell Your County Story**

- If available, consider highlighting the percentage of inmates in your jail with behavioral health issues.
- If available, discuss the increase in inmates with significant behavioral health issues over time (i.e. the past five years).
- Are there any diversion programs your county has in place currently that have aided in reducing recidivism?
- Provide any other relevant statistics and data you may have to make the case for this increased need or the successes of alternative approaches to incarceration for those individuals.
- Don't forget to humanize these individuals. They often times are not violent-repeat offenders, rather those who may have committed a minor crime or were in a situation where

their mental illness resulted in their arrest. Discuss why jail often is not the best place for these folks.

- Consider tying this priority to the need for increased county mental health base funding. If investments are made upfront for mental health services and prevention, how might this reduce burden on the inmate issue?

## **COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH BASE FUNDING INCREASE**

### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would mean anyone in the commonwealth would be able to access appropriate mental health treatment and services where they are without undue burden.

### **Talking Points**

- 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 annual 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.
- Investing in the mental health community base is a critical step in strengthening the existing system so that people can get the care and supports they need, in turn strengthening our communities and supporting the work of our partners.
- Furthermore, this critical investment to county programs will alleviate strains on our partners throughout the system, who are feeling the effects of not only the pandemic-related care needs, but also the compounding results of long-term underfunding of the mental health base in our communities.

### **Tell Your County Story**

- To the extent possible, include local stories that may resonate with your legislators. For example, was there a situation that occurred within your community that could have had a different outcome if there were more available funds? Or is there a success story your community has seen that comes from a program that base funds paid for?
- Talk about the numbers – what does your county's base funding currently go toward?
- If the county were to receive an increase in funding, what programs or services could you stand up or develop? What would the actualized impact of these services be? (i.e., number of residents that could be served, potential savings that could be seen from keeping programming at the community level, predicted decrease stress on another community system/partner)
- If your county continues to receive level funding, what impacts does that have to the services you provide?
- To the extent possible and appropriate, include data that may show the increased need for mental health funding in your community, such as suicide rates, increased caseloads

elsewhere (schools), emergency department crisis caseloads, law enforcement crisis call response rates

- Discuss why this money is critical to addressing other issues within the realm of human services (including the other two priorities on this list directly related to need for sustainable, reliable community-based mental health services).
- Humanize the story – remember, you serve the same constituents. Providing examples or stories for how these programs are impacting the communities you jointly serve is critical. Without providing specific identifiable information, are there stories you can share of how this funding positively impacts the lives of those individuals and communities you serve?

### **ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO HAVE COMPLEX BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES**

When a child is unable to remain in his or her own home due to complications created by complex needs, such as acute substance abuse, mental health and/or developmental disabilities that occur simultaneously, counties have extreme challenges in obtaining a safe place for the child to stay while receiving the right services. Often referred to as “complex cases,” the prevalence of youth in these situations are a growing concern where counties have few, if any, resources for referrals and treatment, leading to youth being held in settings that are not able to meet their unique set of needs.

#### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would mean children with mental health issues are able to have appropriate placements where they can have adequate oversight and proper treatment based on their individual needs.

#### **Talking Points**

- Counties provide human services to children that are living in an abusive home, battling mental illness, disabilities and addiction. When those complex needs occur simultaneously and a child is unable to remain in their home, counties have extreme challenges in obtaining a safe place for the child to stay while receiving the right services.
- Often referred to as “complex cases,” the prevalence of youth in these situations are a growing concern where counties have few, if any, resources for referrals and treatment, leading to youth being held in settings that are not able to meet their unique set of needs.
- To better serve these children and families, investments must be made to advance county-based programs and services.
- With no current one-size-fits-all solution, counties are seeking partnership from the state to develop contracting standards to ensure these children can have an appropriate place to stay that is in the best interest of the youth and county staff without undue burden to county taxpayers.

#### **Tell Your County Story**

- Without disclosing personal details, discuss a scenario (or several) where this has happened. Ex: Last year, \_\_\_\_\_ County had a young boy/girl who had to stay in the halls of the children and youth office/emergency room/hotel for ## of days until a placement was found.

- If available, discuss the provider availability over time to place these complex case individuals.
- If available, provide information about the cost to the county last year/over the past five years (or another appropriate length of time).
- Highlight the good work of your staff in handling these situations while noting the need for sustainable change.  
Ex: Our children and youth staff have gone above and beyond, spending nights overseeing these children until placements could be made, however this isn't sustainable and is reflected in the workforce shortages we are seeing in the county.

## **BROADBAND ACCESS AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would mean every Pennsylvanian would have the ability to adequately, safely and affordably access the internet, regardless of income, geography or individual circumstance.

### **Talking Points**

- 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.
- With historical one-time funding available, 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.
- Counties must be brought to the table in discussions surrounding expansion, access and equity efforts in our communities and stand ready to continue aiding in bridging the digital divide through stakeholder partnerships.

### **Tell Your County Story**

- Provide details about your any expansion, development or access projects your county has been involved in, including number of houses served, costs, partnerships, contributions from the county, etc.
- If you've completed any studies detailing the need across your county, showcase that information, highlighting the magnitude of the issue in your county.
- Provide any information about plans you may have to further bridge the digital divide, including any upcoming efforts to partner with community anchor institutions on digital literacy, cybersecurity and access programs.

## **PROMOTE ELECTION INTEGRITY**

### **The Big Picture**

Achieving this priority would give counties the tools they need to continue to run fair, secure and accurate elections, while restoring public trust in the election system.

### **Talking Points**

- Counties take their responsibility seriously to assure the integrity and security of the elections process.
- Allowing counties to pre-canvass mail-in ballots prior to Election Day is essential to be able to provide timely results as the public expects.
- The mail-in ballot application deadlines must be moved back to 15 days prior to an election to allow enough time for the county to process the application and for the ballot to be mailed from county to voter and back again.
- These two changes alone would resolve a significant portion of the challenges counties experienced implementing mail-in ballots since 2020 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.

### **Tell Your County Story**

- Stick with the facts – how many mail-in ballots (absentee and mail-in) did your county receive in the most recent election?
- Discuss the mechanics of pre-canvassing and what it is (opening, flattening, scanning) vs. isn't (tabulation)
- Consider using this as an opportunity to highlight different voter education outlets and where to find factual information about the voting process and deadlines, including your county website and any places/outlets you post updates about elections.
- Try to avoid the argument of if mail-in ballots are good or bad, rather what logistics are needed for the county to carry out a secure, efficient and timely election with the voting methods and logistical obligations currently in place.