



pennsylvania
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

**Testimony for the Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness
Committee**

September 11, 2023

Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency

Jeffrey Boyle, Executive Deputy Director

Greg Kline, Deputy Director for 911

Good morning Chair Mastriano, Chair Muth and members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, my name is Jeff Boyle, Executive Deputy Director at the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). I have recently transitioned to the role of Executive Deputy after serving six years as the Deputy Director for 911.

I have with me Greg Kline, the new Deputy Director for 911. Greg previously served as Deputy Director/911 Coordinator for the Dauphin County Department of Public Safety. Greg brings over 25 years of public safety experience to the 911 Office including extensive knowledge and experience with 911 system technology and operations. He has also been Chair of the 911 Advisory Board Technical Subcommittee since its inception. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 911 system in Pennsylvania and the Governor's proposal to increase funding for the system.

The ability to call 911 is a vital part of public safety and is the primary method for the public to gain quick access to fire, police, and medical services in an emergency. Pennsylvania's 911 system processes over 15 million requests for service annually to help residents and visitors in their greatest time of need. The heart of our 911 system is comprised of county-based call centers (referred to as Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs) and their highly trained staff of telecommunicators.

In Pennsylvania, each county is responsible for providing 911 service in its jurisdiction. Pennsylvania has 61 county-based 911 centers across the state. Some counties contract directly with another county for 911 service, and others have consolidated 911 operations. 911 is a core service that people may generally assume will always be available when needed. However, the delivery of 911 services requires a combination of personnel, facilities, and complex systems and technology to work together to be available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to ensure that both the public and field responders receive the level of service that is expected and required in emergency situations.

The 911 fee authorized by Act 12 of 2015 is the primary funding source for the critical 911 systems and personnel that provide life-saving services every day in Pennsylvania. In 2019, the General Assembly made minor revisions to the law and extended the sunset date. The law is now scheduled to sunset on January 31, 2024, and if allowed to sunset, there will be a significant impact on 911 service delivery and first responders.

As a part of Governor Shapiro's commitment to strengthen public safety in the Commonwealth, the Administration is seeking to support counties by increasing funding for the 911 system. In Governor Shapiro's first budget address, the Governor called for an elimination of nuisance taxes on wireless services

while adjusting the 911 fee to \$1.97 and extending the sunset date through January 2029. The \$1.97 fee would take effect in January 2024 and may be adjusted annually thereafter based on changes in the Consumer Price Index to keep the fee in line with the cost of operating the 911 system. These initiatives will put more money back in Pennsylvanians' pockets while increasing critical emergency funding for counties' 911 systems.

911 SYSTEMS AMONG STATES

Since its inception, the responsibility of providing 911 service has primarily been considered a local level function in Pennsylvania and across the country. As 911 service expanded to more and more jurisdictions, states have established legislation, funding structures, eligibility rules, and financial reporting requirements for 911 to suit their respective circumstances, with limited federal guidance.

Number of Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs):

Pennsylvania has a consolidated 911 system compared to states of similar size. In many states, there can be multiple PSAPs serving a single jurisdiction, which may result in duplication of personnel and technology costs, as well as increased call transfers and other operational inefficiencies. There are 61 PSAPs in Pennsylvania, while Illinois and Ohio, for example, two states of similar size and population, have 183 and 153 PSAPs respectively. Pennsylvania is one of only thirteen states that operates fewer primary PSAPs than there are counties. Pennsylvania's consolidated approach toward the number of PSAPs allows for the provision of 911 services in an efficient and cost-effective manner without sacrificing the quality of those services for our citizens.

Eligibility Rules for 911 Fees:

PSAPs within each state generally incur the same types of costs related to call delivery, call processing, and dispatch functions to provide 911 service. However, the eligibility rules and the method for funding these 911 costs differ by state. For example, California has 390 PSAPs that incur the same types of costs as Pennsylvania PSAPs for 911 call delivery, processing, and dispatch. Pennsylvania's eligibility rules support activities related to 911 call delivery, processing, and dispatch that align with the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) rules for acceptable uses of 911 fees. However, California's eligibility rules, 911 fee rate, and financial reporting requirements are limited to only a portion of 911 service related to 911 call delivery. A benefit of Pennsylvania's relatively small number of PSAPs is that it has allowed us to establish more inclusive eligibility rules that allow a broader spectrum of 911 costs to be funded by the 911 fee, while limiting the burden on local taxpayers as much as possible.

Financial Reporting Requirements:

Pennsylvania has comprehensive financial reporting requirements that require PSAPs to report all costs related to 911 service in a standardized manner, regardless of funding source. The cost to provide 911 service in Pennsylvania was \$421.3 million in 2022, which includes all costs for 911 service inclusive of all funding sources. In contrast, other states may not have the ability to collect cost information from local jurisdictions, may not have established financial reporting standards, or they may only report costs funded by a 911 fee. If all states had similar financial reporting requirements, it is anticipated the costs reported to the Federal Communications Commission from states of similar size and population as Pennsylvania would far exceed amounts reported for Pennsylvania. For example, New York has established similar financial reporting requirements to Pennsylvania for 911 service. In 2021, the total reported cost to provide 911 service in New York was \$814.9 million with only 50 percent of their PSAPs submitting cost data to the state.

911 FUNDING IN PENNSYLVANIA

Act 12 of 2015 established a \$1.65 monthly fee on communication services such as wireline or wireless telephone service. Communications service providers and retailers collect the fee and forward the collections each quarter to the State Treasurer for deposit in the 911 Fund. Act 12 of 2015 established the following requirements for the distribution of 911 fee collections:

- No less than 83 percent of the surcharge revenue collected quarterly is distributed to PSAPs using a formula-based calculation
- Up to 15 percent shall be used by PEMA for statewide interconnectivity of 911 systems, which includes costs for Next Generation 911 (NG911) and 911 system consolidation or regionalization
- No greater than 2 percent of revenue collections may be retained by PEMA for administration expenses

911 fee collections have averaged \$319 million annually since 2016 and have increased by only 2.5% during this timeframe. The total cost to provide 911 service in 2015 was \$335 million. That cost increased to \$421 million in 2022. 911 system costs not covered by the 911 fee are typically funded by county property tax dollars or other local revenue sources. If the current funding system is maintained, the county contribution will continue to increase in the coming years to meet the challenges of retaining and recruiting personnel, maintaining critical systems and facilities for 24/7 operations, developing geographic information systems (GIS) data to locate and route 911 callers, investing in securing mission critical networks, and much more, while continuing to pursue efficiencies through regionalization and consolidation of 911 systems.

Pennsylvania's 911 system stakeholders continue to work to implement strategies for managing costs while making targeted investments in system improvements, system regionalization and consolidation, and future technologies such as NG911. A strong oversight framework has been implemented that includes simplified administrative processes, standardized eligibility requirements that align with FCC rules for acceptable uses of 911 fees, strong financial reporting requirements, thorough expenditure review and audit processes, and transparent reporting. Since 2016, PEMA has incentivized counties to regionalize or consolidate 911 systems. Four PSAP consolidations have occurred since 2016. Today, 54 PSAPs are participating in a shared/regional sharing project to find cost and operational efficiencies. PEMA has also focused on statewide contracts to achieve known and consistent pricing across the Commonwealth for systems and services. For example, PEMA executed a contract to provide all counties with NG911 call delivery services. The contract negotiated by PEMA will provide each PSAP with robust NG911 call delivery services while the annual costs for these services are fixed and level through 2030. Pennsylvania is beginning to realize the results of these efforts. Before Act 12 of 2015, 911 system costs increased, on average, by 6.4% per year. The annual rate of expenditure growth was reduced to 3.5% between 2016 and 2022 as Pennsylvania 911 systems progressed from a county focus (prior to Act 12 of 2015) to the regional focus we have today.

The Pennsylvania 911 community has been an excellent steward of the funds provided by Act 12 of 2015. PEMA has consistently worked to provide counties as much funding as possible under the current law. PEMA has regularly distributed more than 83% of revenue collections to counties using a formula-based calculation. For example, PEMA distributed 87% of revenue collections in 2022 to all counties through the formula. In addition to formula distributions, PEMA has distributed \$203 million of statewide interconnectivity funding to counties across the Commonwealth since 2016 to support PSAP consolidations, regionalization of systems and technology, GIS data development, and other important initiatives to address aging infrastructure within our PSAPs. PEMA has worked closely with the 911 Advisory Board and county partners to provide as much financial support to counties as possible while still maintaining the ability to fund the largest technical change in decades to Pennsylvania's 911 system with the statewide infrastructure upgrade to a NG911 system.

FUTURE CHALLENGES and OPPORTUNITIES

PEMA, our county partners, the 911 Advisory Board, and 911 system stakeholders have built a collaborative relationship as a result of Act 12 of 2015. Together, we have many notable accomplishments that have established Pennsylvania as a leader in 911 services among states and we continue to implement many 911 system enhancements. For example, Pennsylvania is one of only four states where 100% of its

PSAPs use emergency medical dispatch protocols to provide callers quality service in a consistent manner across the state. Despite measures to control 911 system costs, those costs grew by \$112 million (or 34%) between 2016 and 2021. However, for comparison, the nationwide cost for 911 increased by \$2 billion (or 58%) over that same period. The 911 system will have significant opportunities and challenges in the coming years. Two of those that we would like to highlight today are 911 telecommunicator recruitment and retention, and Pennsylvania's transition to NG911.

911 Telecommunicator Recruitment and Retention:

PSAPs across the country are facing an unprecedented staffing crisis. In Pennsylvania, one in five telecommunicator positions is vacant. Factors contributing to this crisis include strong competition among local industries for a limited pool of available workers. Working in a 911 center can be highly stressful and includes working long hours as well as nights, holidays, and weekends, with the inability to work remotely. Multiple strategies will be required to help address the staffing crisis in 911. These include:

- Public recognition of 911 telecommunicators to support commitment to the 911 profession
- Increasing funding and pay
- Education and awareness about working in the 911 profession
- Sharing systems and leveraging technology to share workload among PSAPs

Next Generation 911

Decades-old legacy 911 systems designed for traditional wireline service are still in use. Changes in consumer communications technology and preferences are rapidly outpacing changes to 911 systems. The legacy equipment in use today is incapable of leveraging the enhanced data associated with common communication tools, such as real-time text, streaming video, and smartphone applications. Challenges exist with location information originating from wireless callers, which now account for approximately 75 percent of all 911 calls. In addition, some populations—such as the deaf-and-hard of-hearing community, non-English speaking individuals, and rural residents—continue to be underserved by today's 911 system due to access issues. These challenges have a direct impact on the ability of our PSAPs to support and service the public.

To increase the capabilities of 911 systems while addressing issues due to age and design, the Commonwealth has begun implementing NG911. NG911 is a necessary transition from Pennsylvania's current, decades old legacy 911 system infrastructure to an internet protocol (IP) based 911 system. A historic milestone was achieved in September 2022 when the first Pennsylvania PSAP was migrated to NG911 service. Since then, 36 of 61 PSAPs have been migrated to the NG911 system with the remainder

to migrate by August 2024. The initial focus of the NG911 project is to modernize the infrastructure used to deliver 911 calls to our PSAPs. NG911 will continue to introduce new costs in areas such as GIS, training, cybersecurity, connectivity, incorporating multimedia communications, and interoperability with services and networks used by first responders to facilitate emergency response.

In closing, the passage of Act 12 of 2015 was a significant accomplishment for Pennsylvania. The 2015 law provided a framework of requirements related to funding, governance, oversight, and planning that led to many notable improvements in Pennsylvania's 911 Program, helped increase the capabilities of our 911 systems, and facilitated Pennsylvania's transition to a NG911 system to address issues with the current 911 system's age and design. With the law moving rapidly toward sunset, it is ripe for extension and improvement. Governor Shapiro's proposal recognizes the importance of supporting the 911 system and continuing the great work that has been completed since 2015. Together, we are prepared to usher Pennsylvania into a new emergency communications era with the continued support of the General Assembly.