

Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
Testimony for a Joint Hearing of the
House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee
and the Human Services Committee

A Study Pursuant to SR 96:
911 Communication Services

Report Comments by Stephen Fickes, LBFC Deputy Executive Director
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Chairmen and members of the standing committees, good morning. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss the "Next Generation of Emergency and Mental Health Response." My name is Steve Fickes and joining me at the table is Matt Thomas. We are staff members of the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, and we are pleased to provide a high-level overview of a study we released last year pursuant to Senate Resolution 96 (SR96).

SR 96 directed the LBFC to review aspects of the commonwealth's 911 communication system, including: how these services are provided; the performance of county public safety answering points (PSAPs); and the system's capacity for the next evolution of 911 services, Next Generation 911 ("Next Gen"). Our report made a total of 17 recommendations to the General Assembly, PEMA, and others regarding the current 911 system and the provisions of the Emergency Services Code set to expire in 2024. In completing our study, we reviewed financial records, call volume metrics, and other county and state data for the period 2016 to 2020. We also interviewed members of PEMA's 911 administrative staff, conducted an extensive survey of county 911 directors, and spoke with numerous stakeholder groups to hear their concerns.

As we found in our study, and as you are hearing today, the commonwealth's 911 system is undergoing transition. Pennsylvania's 911 system will look drastically different in the next five years than it has at any point in the system's history. In fact, the landscape of the commonwealth's 911 system has already changed considerably since our report was released. Nevertheless, our report is a valuable resource for outlining the challenges the system faces during this transition time.

Our report discusses in detail many of the issues PEMA and the county PSAPs faced over the last several years. For example, we found that despite a 15 percent decline in total 911 call volume across the state, telecommunicator workload has not decreased, primarily due to the advancement of automated alarms that send alerts directly to a

PSAP's computer system. At the time of our study, many counties did not have the technology to properly process these alarms, forcing telecommunicators to input the transmitted information into their PSAP's computer system, which we found could take over a minute and a half per call. We also highlighted the growing disparity between 911 Fund revenue and system spending, which increased from seven percent in 2016 to 23 percent in 2020. This trend was likely driven by an increase in county operating and equipment costs after system upgrades were made following the PSAP Inventory Report required by Act 12, as well as stagnation in Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) revenue.

Our report also discusses staffing challenges faced by PSAPs, which we found to be the most pressing issue facing Pennsylvania's 911 system. For example, in our survey of coordinators, over half reported staffing as the most concerning issue for their PSAP, with many reporting vacancy rates above 20 percent. We identified several reasons for this issue, including telecommunicator pay that was below the national average, an inability to effectively recruit candidates, long initial training requirements, staff retention issues, and burnout due to the high demands of the job.

While our report made recommendations for these issues and many other challenges facing the 911 system, we are optimistic that the Next Gen 911 infrastructure will provide a pathway to efficiency and improved service. For example, once the Next Gen 911 infrastructure is deployed, PSAPs will be able to leverage technology to regionally share staff and help combat staffing shortages. The concept of "virtual PSAPs," is not new, but we heard concerns during our study about maintaining county autonomy, which the 911 system has prided itself for decades. However, with a regional approach, we believe that counties can maintain this autonomy while using technology to collaboratively address staffing concerns.

The Next Gen infrastructure will be able to support the integration of new technological tools into the 911 system, such as alarm monitoring devices and the technology to support the real-time transmission of photos, videos, or other media to telecommunicators. While Next Gen technology will assist the duties of telecommunicators, our report identifies the additional strain it could place on the 911 workforce. Specifically, we noted that telecommunicators faced the potential for increased training demands, enhanced call complexity, and detrimental mental health and wellbeing side effects, as the result of exposure to graphic images, videos, and other content. Therefore, beyond the technological infrastructure of the 911 system, we also believe it is critical to emphasize the human infrastructure needs of the 911 program, such as the creation of a 911 personnel wellness subcommittee within the 911 Advisory Board, which we recommended in our report.

Finally, it is important to highlight the impact that Next Gen can have on the budget of the 911 program both now and in the future. In the short term, the transition to Next Gen has, and will continue to increase expenditures for the 911 program, as the infrastructure for both the legacy and new Next Gen system must be supported until the switchover is complete. As a result, the gap between system revenue and costs could continue in the short term. Over the long term, cost savings are anticipated, particularly among the counties, due to the shifting of call delivery costs and the opportunity to leverage technology and cost-sharing agreements.

In conclusion, while our report pursuant to SR 96 provided a retrospective review of issues in the existing 911 system, our report also highlights many of the significant accomplishments since Act 12. Thank you, and we would be happy to answer any questions.