

# 2009 County Government Priorities

## 911 Services

**C**ounties have responsibility for one of the key functions in public safety, the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system. Counties are in the midst of implementation of enhanced systems to locate wireless callers, perhaps the greatest increase in call volume over the last several years and now accounting for more than half of our calls. Counties' new and concurrent challenge is rapidly-expanding Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) and other internet services, which also lack adequate locators and create a new imperative to assure that those in need can place emergency calls to the correct call center, and be assured of correct emergency dispatch. When locator technologies are insufficient, it requires call takers to keep the caller on the phone, and try to get them to describe their location. This takes valuable time, and worse, when the caller cannot communicate, call takers cannot dispatch.

County responsibility for 911 call taking and dispatch derives from the Public Safety and Emergency Telephone Act. The Act set in place planning processes, lines of authority between counties and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), and a funding stream based on telephone subscriber surcharges. Prior to its passage in 1990, 911 was a municipal responsibility and hence fragmented and virtually non-existent in the commonwealth. Within five years of passage, counties had developed 911 systems statewide.

Despite the success of the act, it was not structured in a way that accommodated new developments in technology, including wireless and VoIP tele-

phony and advances in PBX systems, requiring amendments to the law to maintain public safety. As amendments were adopted they were keyed to the individual technology, and consequently the act creates inconsistencies in funding and administration based on the technological platform. A county priority for 2009 is to join work underway within PEMA to rewrite and consolidate the statute. County interests will include clear accommodation of current and future technologies, appropriate delineation of the relative roles of county and local government and PEMA, improvements in locator systems for all technologies, recognition of county costs coupled with concurrent funding reliant primarily on subscriber bases, balanced methodologies for collection and distribution of subscriber-based funding, and assurance that telephone system providers are properly collecting and remitting the subscriber fees that support the development, deployment and operation of these systems.

In the short term, the surcharge on wireless subscribers is set to expire on June 30, 2009, and the Association supports early and permanent renewal, with provision for an appropriate inflator in the fee. The fee level discussion should anticipate work on development of the overall subscriber fee base underway as part of the larger rewrite, acknowledging that most of the fee structure remains at 1990 levels.

**For more information on 911 issues, contact Douglas Hill at (717) 232-7554 x 3115 or [dhill@pacounties.org](mailto:dhill@pacounties.org).**



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