



GRASSROOTS TOOLKIT



COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
Association of Pennsylvania

SUMMER 2020



CCAP SUMMER 2020 GRASSROOTS TOOLKIT

While it is no question that pandemic-related response has dominated the legislative and policy conversation, it is critical to ensure the dialogue is focused on longer-term impacts, including the FY 2020-2021 budget and critical election reforms ahead of the November general election. As what is anticipated to be a summer recess begins, it is a perfect time to continue advocacy conversations and stress the importance of focusing on those issues that matter most not only to counties, but also to Pennsylvania residents.

So while we have secured a temporary five-month budget for the Commonwealth which contains mostly level funding for programs of interest to counties, we anticipate an uphill battle still remains for achieving county priorities and negotiating the remaining seven-month budget during a time that is almost certain to reflect economic downturn. With initial revenue for the state and economic predictions containing dim projections, counties will need to be both careful stewards of the funding they have received for the first portion of the year, and avid advocates for a minimum of level funding for the remaining seven-month budget, likely to be negotiated in the fall.

However, it is important now more than ever to bring counties to the table *before* critical decisions are made on our behalf impacting local communities. Counties have been extremely active in on-the-ground COVID response efforts. We have been on the front lines of health and economic response and mitigation in Pennsylvania communities. We have a unique local perspective and expertise and want to help in statewide efforts in fending off the horrible impacts of this pandemic.

Your input and voice as a locally elected official is critical to inform budget negotiations and important, timely election reforms. Share your powerful stories, bring your undeniable data showing the good work your county has achieved and also the vital need for increased resources. Using the virtual skills you've honed over the last several months, ensure your legislators hear your perspective clearly and often. All are in a time of economic stress and uncertainty, but it is the state's responsibility to be a good partner in providing the necessary resources for local governments to carry out many of their necessary, or in some cases mandated, functions. We must remind leaders at every level that investment and cooperation are in the best interest of all of our constituents throughout the commonwealth.

The Summer 2020 Grassroots Toolkit includes information and talking points on the FY 2020-2021 budget as well as critical election reforms for the November General Election. The toolkit also includes a one-stop guide for additional advocacy materials and information as well as a customizable editorial stressing the important role of counties.

BUDGET

THE ISSUE

On May 29, Gov. Wolf signed into law HB 2387, which provides a temporary budget to fund the commonwealth on a five-month basis until the fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic become clearer. The plan totals \$26 billion in spending, with approximately 42% of most line items based on FY 2019-2020 spending levels. Some human services programs, such as children and youth services, appear to be funded for the full year, along with most education lines and food security lines. A limited number of other lines will receive increases due to increased expenses, such as pensions and debt. Federal allocations were provided for the full year.

The temporary budget provides some continuity to counties over the short-term while the broader impacts of the pandemic and Pennsylvania's disaster response continue to take shape. However, the full fiscal picture remains to be seen and there are no promises of increased funding, or even flat funding from last year's amount, for the remaining seven months of the FY 2020-2021 budget. The IFO has projected that revenues will come in at least \$3.5 billion below the previous fiscal year and with the pandemic still looming those revenues could look come in even lower. Thus, when the General Assembly returns to these negotiations, expected later this fall, the final budget could still present a different overall picture and level funding for the full year is not guaranteed.

Because the budget picture for FY 2020-2021 is incomplete, counties are encouraged to remain cautious in monitoring expenditures in case cuts occur for the remaining budget months. As well, since the Department of Education – one of the largest expenditures in the state's budget – has already been funded for the full year up front, it will be the remainder of the General Fund budget, which includes many line items affecting county programs, that will be impacted by cuts that may be considered in response to pandemic-related revenue losses.

TALKING POINTS

First and foremost, tell your county story! Every county has had a unique experience responding to COVID-19, how they've utilized their CARES Act funds and the need that still exists despite additional federal and state aid.

- Counties are on the front lines of responding to the coronavirus, from public health – nursing homes, 911 – to jails and administration, we have been fighting this pandemic for months.
- The CARES Act, which provided money to counties was appreciated, but the eligible uses for that money are not flexible enough for counties to sufficiently respond to the pandemic.
- CARES Act money cannot be used for lost revenue, which in addition to the public health crisis, is a looming catastrophe in local governments.
- The loss of these services also means lost jobs for the dedicated county employees who have been on the front lines of this fight for months. We need additional aid to keep county employees on the job.

- Even with another federal aid package for local governments, counties still need a way to ensure the social services safety net and those it serves are protected and adequately maintained.
- County voices need to be included in budget discussions in order to ensure we continue to serve and protect the most vulnerable.

ELECTIONS REFORM

THE ISSUE

With the June 2 primary election now behind us, legislators are looking at further reforms to the Election Code in advance of the November general election. During a recent House State Government Committee meeting, chairman Rep. Garth Everett (R-Lycoming) encouraged legislators to work with CCAP and counties on developing recommendations for future amendments.

Counties, with the direction of the CCAP Elections Reform Committee, have identified a list of desired reforms to assist with challenges identified during the June 2 primary election, some related to fine-tuning mail-in voting and some related to protecting public health during the general election.

TALKING POINTS

Timing

- **Any changes to the Election Code must be enacted well in advance of November in order to allow for enough time to properly implement any changes**, particularly if they involve developing new protocols or procedures, retraining poll workers, etc.
- **Any changes to the Election Code must also be developed in partnership with counties.** Given the short window before the general election, counties can help to create language that is clear and easily understood, and identify challenges up front regarding how, or even if, certain changes can be practically and successfully implemented, and the resources needed to do so.

Mail-in ballots

- **Allow counties to begin the pre-canvass process up to three weeks prior to the election.** As expected, it took several days in most counties to fully process all of the mail-in ballots because of the sheer volume and the inability to begin the pre-canvass before 7 a.m. election day. The day of the election, counties are consumed with the critical tasks of implementing a successful in-person election, and are unable or unwilling to add additional tasks such as pre-canvassing on top of a day that is already very long and very busy. Allowing counties to begin the pre-canvass process up to three weeks in advance would offer adequate time to complete necessary tasks such as opening envelopes and flattening ballots so they can be tabulated on election day, and assist in providing accurate and timely results following the election.
- **Adjust the deadline to apply for a mail-in ballot back to 14 or 15 days before an election.** The current seven-day deadline to apply for a mail-in ballot created timing challenges with the postal service, which led to some ballots not being received before the

deadline to submit those ballots, or too close to the deadline to return them to make it logistically possible for them to be returned via mail.

- **Clarify how to handle ballots that do not have a secrecy envelope, or that are returned with marks on them.** In order to assure counties are addressing this issue consistently, the statute must be made clearer so that the language is not open to interpretation.
- **Consider the practical, legal and constitutional implications of requiring barcodes on all ballots.** The current version of HB 2626 appears to require the creation of a tracking system that would assign all ballots – those cast in person as well as absentee and mail-in ballots – a scannable barcode. All absentee and mail-in *envelopes* now have a scannable barcode to assure only one ballot is returned for that voter. If barcodes are placed on all ballots directly, it creates a connection from voter to barcode to ballot which raises questions about how voter anonymity will be preserved. In addition, none of the new voting systems that counties just purchased has either has the technical capability of affixing or recognizing a barcode, or is certified to do so.

Additional considerations

- **Address only those reforms that need to be made for the November election.** Many other reforms have been raised during the current legislative session that would require major changes to Pennsylvania's elections and need adequate time to implement properly. The General Assembly must consult with counties to understand which changes can and cannot be reasonably and successfully implemented in the time available prior to the November election, and revisit those that cannot later.
- **Provide adequate resources for any changes to the elections process.** Although federal funds have been provided to assist in election implementation, those funds do not take into account the impact of any new protocols or requirements that may be enacted, such as additional postage needs.

PRIORITIES

THE ISSUE

While the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and statewide emergency response continues to impact Pennsylvania counties, CCAP has maintained focus on counties' legislative priorities as well as policy issues related to COVID-19. Although the legislative session during the spring and early summer of 2020 has looked much different from ever before, CCAP continues to seek its place at the various decision-making tables and to insert the voice of counties at every opportunity.

The recent enactment of a temporary five-month budget and distribution of \$625 million in federal CARES Funds through a county relief fund block grant are additional reminders of the unprecedented nature of 2020 and the uncertainty of the months ahead. The \$26 billion spending plan provides mostly level funding from FY 2019-2020 for the first few months of the next fiscal year; however, it remains to be seen in the fall, after more is known about the state's revenue collections in FY 2020-2021, how the final seven months of the budget will be handled. There are no guarantees and fighting for increased in mental health funding, adult probation

funding, county property tax reform, rural broadband and EMS solutions will continue to be critical.

An update on counties' progress on these priorities has been posted at www.pacounties.org, accessible by selecting Priorities under the Government Relations tab.

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. Feel free to include specific examples related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued importance of these priorities, especially as we adjust to the "new normal".

TALKING POINTS

- 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 these services in partnership with the state, and seek to re-engage the General Assembly and administration about the broad role counties play on behalf of the commonwealth.
- Collaboration between the state and counties will lead to solutions that better reflect the needs of Pennsylvanians, improve stewardship of taxpayer dollars, reduce cost, increase local flexibility and assure the quality of services counties provide.
- In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the county-state partnership is more critical than ever. Investing in and protecting the jointly-served citizens of the commonwealth needs to be a unified, collaborative effort.

OTHER RESOURCES

[Legislative Action Center](#)

The CCAP Legislative Action Center, located at www.pacounties.org under the Government Relations tab, serves as a hub for different advocacy material links and resources including fact sheets, talking points, sample letters and background information. The Legislative Action Center serves as a reference page to link you out to the General Assembly website. You can find contact information for PA House and Senate members as well as other commonwealth employees.

[Grassroots Toolkit](#)

This toolkit holds a host of good tips and tricks, from strategies for effective communication to human services advocacy advice. It also features a crash course in the Pennsylvania legislative process.

[Guidelines for Organizing Legislative Visits](#)

This quick one-pager helps to guide the process of setting up meetings in the county. These could be a sit-down meeting in an office or a guided tour of a county facility. Organizing meetings is more than just logistics, but also careful consideration and preparation of the goal of the meeting.

Articles on Special Topics

Often articles related to tips, tricks and best practices are featured in the CCAP magazine,

County News. For quick access, they also can be found on the Legislative Action Center. Some topics include legislative engagement, messaging and speaking skills, connecting with media, and how to explain what counties do.

Legislative Bulletin

The bi-weekly *Legislative Bulletin* keeps counties up-to-date on the latest news from the Capitol, including information on recent bill movements, hearings and events. While the bulletin is good reading material to stay in the know, it also is a way to keep members informed of issues going on in Harrisburg. The topics in the bulletin can make for great conversational pivot points with legislators.

Resources and Reports

Ever wonder where you can find repository information on older or ongoing legislative issues? Perhaps you are looking for guidance on a new Act. This newer edition to the CCAP Government Relations website serves as a landing page for issues ranging from transportation and the hotel tax to election reforms, human services information and the EMS Task Force.

Priorities

Each year the CCAP membership selects several issues that rise to the top of the legislative agenda for that year. The Priorities webpage hosts resources including fact sheets, talking points, sample social media posts and even a specialized planning guide that can be used for grassroots activities with legislators.

Budget

The state budget process can be a lot to handle and understand. The CCAP Budget page is an excellent hub of information on the Pennsylvania State budget. You even can register for budget news updates, review spreadsheets or read an analysis of the items critical to counties.

Twitter (@PACountiesGR)

While social media certainly is not for everyone, it is a great way to find and share information quickly and broadly. Consider following CCAP on Twitter (@PACountiesGR) to stay in the know about different county and legislative happenings in real time.

SAMPLE EDITORIAL

Counties Continue Maintaining the Front Lines

Name

Title

County

The COVID-19 era has created unprecedented challenges in governing, changing the operations and measures needed to provide important services to the residents. Yet, _____ County quickly responded and adapted to the ever-changing environment and continues to deliver front line services that form the fabric of our community.

Mental health, child welfare, nursing homes, correctional facilities, information technology, elections and other services are requiring agile flexibility, funding and the dedication of county staff and residents.

MENTION SPECIFIC SUCCESSES.

Counties throughout Pennsylvania are thankful for the work and support of their local, state, and federal partners in continuing to provide critical services to protect the people of the commonwealth. The support of the Governor and General Assembly utilizing County Relief Block Grant CARES Act funds has been instrumental, but counties need more help. Assurances that counties will be fully funded for the remainder of the fiscal year this fall remains a top concern.

_____ County is uniquely positioned to provide real support, identify challenges on the ground, pursue solutions and deliver vital services. Now more than ever, our residents are benefitting from the essential functions performed by counties.

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