



## **CCAP 2021 Priorities Status Report March 2021**

CCAP members identified a total of five priority issues for 2021. Grassroots activity on the priorities began following their adoption at the 2020 Fall Conference. After a formal announcement in January, officers and staff launched efforts to work with the General Assembly and the administration to introduce and advance proposals.

### **Elections: Pre-canvassing and Mail-in Ballot Application Deadlines**

Counties' top priority is election reforms, and based on their experiences in 2020, focus on a renewed call to allow pre-canvassing of mail-in and absentee ballots to begin prior to Election Day, and a call to move the deadline for mail-in ballot applications from seven days prior to an election to 15 days. However, there are many other areas of the Election Code that also need to be clarified.

Immediately following the November 2020 election, CCAP's Elections Reform Committee began reviewing counties' experiences and lessons learned from the front lines, issuing its preliminary report in mid-January with proposed changes to the Election Code that will streamline administrative requirements and provide clarity and consistency across the commonwealth. That report has been shared with the chairs of the House and Senate State Government Committees as well as shared in meetings the Board has held with legislative leadership. In addition, Butler County commissioner CCAP President Kevin Boozel and Executive Director Lisa Schaefer had the opportunity to talk about the report on both PCN's On the Issues and WITF's SmartTalk, while Indiana County commissioner and Elections Reform Committee chair Sherene Hess has also shared perspectives in several statewide media interviews.

Staff have met with the new chair of the House State Government Committee, Rep. Seth Grove, several times on elections issues, and have offered input for testifiers for a series of hearings on elections issues. CCAP also met with the new Senate State Government Committee chair, Sen. Dave Argall, and have helped to re-establish a county work group with that committee to provide critical local input. There is also the possibility that the Senate will create a separate Special Committee on Election Integrity, and we have begun outreach to share the CCAP report with those Senators who may be called upon to participate in that effort.

The new Election Law Advisory Board created under Act 12 of 2020 held its first meeting in late January, with eight county-related representatives. Montgomery County commissioner Ken Lawrence was elected as chair of the Board during that first meeting, with Snyder County commissioner Joe Kantz elected as vice chair. CCAP's Election Reform report has also been shared with the Board for its consideration.

Finally, CCAP is engaging the new Acting Secretary of the Commonwealth, Veronica Degraffenreid, who was appointed following the resignation of Kathy Boockvar in early February. Secretary Degraffenreid will be joining the Elections Reform Committee for its March meeting, and she and Deputy Secretary Jonathan Marks will also be speaking during the opening session of CCAP's Virtual Spring Conference.

### **Broadband Expansion**

Rural broadband continues to be echoed at all levels of government as one of the biggest hurdles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. COVID-19 has further exposed the lack of availability and the need of Pennsylvanians for high speed and reliable internet access for business, education, health care, emergency services and other key parts of our everyday lives, especially as schools and businesses must constantly adapt to changing pandemic conditions. Counties have been at the forefront of broadband expansion in the commonwealth and are continuing to develop partnerships and creative solutions that work to provide internet connectivity for their residents, especially in rural areas and better bandwidth capacity statewide at affordable rates.

CCAP has continued to engage members of the General Assembly and Administration in education and idea sharing of how counties can be partners and innovators in the field in addressing the roadblocks in broadband, and discussing potential next steps and solutions, particularly at the local level through public private partnerships. These interactions have included meetings with new committee chairs that have jurisdiction over these issues and touch-point conversations with legislators who have championed this priority issue in the past.

While there are not many legislative proposals that have been introduced yet this session, stakeholders have come together to discuss next steps, including potential legislative solutions and newly identified partnerships. Additionally, many counties utilized some of the County Relief Block Grant dollars from the federal CARES Act to develop, deploy and expand broadband. Many of these programs are beginning to be implemented early in 2021. CCAP has continued working with the Department of Community and Economic Development and the Department of General Services to create educational, networking and open forum opportunities to allow counties to idea-share best practices and gain a more holistic picture of broadband across the commonwealth. As society remains a more digital, physically distanced world, we anticipate broadband access will continue to remain a key focus of budget and legislative conversations at the state and federal levels.

### **Solutions to the Emergency Medical Services Crisis**

Emergency medical services (EMS) in Pennsylvania are in crisis, affirmed by findings of multiple studies and most prominently in the 2004 SR 60 report, and reaffirmed in the report of the legislature's SR 6 Commission, released in 2018. CCAP membership has been engaged in discussions on ways that counties can help address the issues raised in these reports, including the lack of emergency services in many Pennsylvania communities. As such, CCAP launched its EMS Task Force in 2019 to determine what role counties are positioned to play in assuring reliable provision of this vital public service.

Following the release of the CCAP EMS Task Force recommendations in November 2019, the CCAP EMS Task Force has turned its focus to developing and implementing elements of the report.

The Task Force met in February, primarily discussing proposed legislation to create the statutory authority for county or multi-municipal authorities for EMS delivery with staff for the bill's sponsors, Sen. Lisa Baker (R-Luzerne) and Sen. Tim Kearney (D-Delaware). The Senators have jointly circulated a co-sponsorship memo for the reintroduction of [SB 1274](#) of last session. Task Force co-chairs, Tioga County commissioner Mark Hamilton and Butler County commissioner Kevin Boozel, have been actively meeting with other stakeholders, such as the Ambulance Association of Pennsylvania, to advocate for the legislation, and held a briefing together with legislative staff for the Pennsylvania Emergency Health Services Council (PEHSC) on March 5. The Task Force will continue to work with both the Senate and House to move forward on this legislative concept.

Furthermore, the EMS Task Force is continuing to review the funding needs to support the variety of service models in operation in the commonwealth, and are working to develop a toolbox of resources that can assist counties in bringing stakeholders and resources together to address local issues. CCAP has renewed conversations with DCED's Center for Local Government Services to engage the Center in a pilot project with two sets of counties (Butler/Mercer and Tioga/Lycoming/Sullivan) to evaluate the current status of EMS services, including data gathering and working with local stakeholders, to develop a report and recommendations on potential local solutions to improve the delivery of EMS in those counties. Those reports, expected to be completed by the fall of 2021, will serve as the basis for further development of a broader toolbox.

### **Protect Funding for County Human Services**

Pennsylvania counties deliver crucial human services on behalf of the state and federal government – services that protect our most vulnerable citizens, among them children suffering from abuse, those fighting substance abuse addictions, individuals with mental illness and developmental disabilities, and seniors in need of long-term care.

However, even though mandates and caseloads continue to increase, state funding support has been unable to keep up with demand. Counties continue to deal with the daily challenge of serving the ever-growing needs of their residents, such as the significant increases in workloads to county human service agencies, the toll of the opioid epidemic on families and their children and the lasting, unknown impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pennsylvania's residents and communities. Yet counties must also face the reality of ever-stagnant state funds to support those needs.

Gov. Wolf announced his FY 2021-2022 budget proposal in February, and seeks level funding for many human services lines. One notable increase under the proposal would be for county health departments, as the Governor proposed an additional \$8.2 million for a total of \$33.7 million. It will be vital to monitor the state's commitment to sustaining these programs in light of a

challenging financial situation and ensuring that one-time funds that may again be provided by the federal government to supplement the commonwealth's emergency response will be recognized as such, rather than supplanting the state's investment over the longer term. To that end, CCAP is continuing conversations with legislators, staff and other stakeholders in advancement of this priority. Budget hearings were held by the House and Senate Appropriations committees in late February and early March, where some legislators asked questions regarding the need for mental health funding.

### **Increased Funding for Mental Health Services**

Counties seek a minimum increase of \$28 million in FY 2020-2021 to strengthen the existing safety net of county-provided mental health services, with a commitment to an additional 3% increase in the following budget years for these important community supports. The COVID crisis has stressed counties with increased caseloads while no distinct funding increases have been proposed.

In his FY 2021-2022 budget address in February, Gov. Wolf proposed level funding for the mental health community base line, setting the stage from which counties will work for the next several months. To that end, CCAP is continuing conversations with legislators, staff and other stakeholders in advancement of this priority. Budget hearings were held by the House and Senate Appropriations committees in late February and early March, where some legislators asked questions regarding the need for mental health funding.

There has been little indication to date of where the General Assembly's budget negotiations are heading this spring and budget hearings will continue over an extended period of time. CCAP has been meeting with new legislators and staff, committee chairs and executive directors to educate them on the need for mental health funding, and has provided testimony through PACA MH/DS to further enhance legislator education in advance of budget focused grassroots.