



Pennsylvania's 911 System County Considerations

I. INTRODUCTION

Counties are proud to provide one of the key functions in public safety—the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system. As technologies continue to evolve and funding streams no longer align with current realities, counties need to be able to rely on consistent and sustainable funding to maintain their responsibility as the first line of emergency response. To that end, **counties support passage of an increase in the current surcharge rate of \$1.95 per month to \$2.20 per month, well ahead of the [January 31, 2026, sunset](#) of the current surcharge authorization.** This increase would adequately support current county needs and ensure that funding and distribution support needs into the future. Further, counties support continued strategic planning and investment for evolving technologies and GIS data to ensure NG911 is properly supported and maintained.

The Ask

With the provision that authorizes the 911 surcharge slated to sunset on January 31, 2026, counties are seeking an increase in the 911 surcharge to bolster and support the growing needs of our system into the future. Further, counties support continued strategic planning and investment for evolving technologies and GIS data to ensure NG911 is properly supported and maintained, and opportunities for system and funding consolidation, including regional resource sharing and collaboration, to ensure system and service continuity.

To this end, **counties support an increase in the surcharge to \$2.20 until the next reauthorization** for the following reasons:

- **Counties are already invested.** Counties currently fund nearly 20% of the 911 system through property taxes. In 2024, counties contributed \$80 million toward the cost of PA's 911 system and have averaged more than \$100 million annually since 2020.
- **Reduces reliance on county property taxes.** At the proposed surcharge rate, counties would still contribute around 10% toward the system. This maintains local investment while reducing the reliance on repeated property tax increases to cover the county share.
- **Four-year reauthorization provides stability.** A four-year extension gives time to evaluate whether the surcharge remains the right funding mechanism as technologies, service demands, and capabilities continue to evolve.
- **Minimal cost for maximum protection.** A \$2.20 monthly surcharge equals just \$26.40 annually for one device. For a family of four, the cost is just over \$100 per year—providing peace of mind that help is available in their moments of greatest need.

- **Action is needed now.** Counties face mounting budget pressures to fund essential public safety services like 911. Without timely reauthorization coupled with the \$2.20 monthly surcharge rate, property taxpayers will continue to shoulder an unfair burden to keep 911 services running.

II. COUNTY ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

911 System in Pennsylvania

When an emergency happens, someone picks up their phone and dials 9-1-1. From there, a certified, trained call taker answers the call at one of Pennsylvania's 61 public safety answering points (PSAPs) or call centers.

Those call takers and public safety answering points are often staffed and run directly by individual counties, multi-county agreements, or through development of entities with county oversight. While taking the call, that individual is utilizing a system to identify the caller's location and other pertinent information while conversing with the caller, often offering medical triage advice or other critical information to ensure the safety and outcome for all involved. The call taker identifies the appropriate emergency response entities and provides dispatch to those entities, inducing the relevant information to address the emergency. Those first responders could be municipal, county or state entities, including fire, emergency medical services (EMS), police, HAZMAT, water rescue or anyone equipped to safely and appropriately respond.

PSAP Regionalization/Consolidation

While Pennsylvania has 61 PSAPs, many are not operating entirely on their own but are instead collaborating to improve efficiency. In fact, **54 PSAPs participate in a shared system that helps reduce costs and streamline operations.** However, counties note that consolidation also brings challenges, such as limited ability to upgrade technology as frequently as needed, staffing shortages, and added expenses related to shift adjustments, overtime, and the recruitment, training, and retention of personnel.

Furthermore, **4 PSAP consolidations have occurred since 2016.** This year, at least three counties have either proposed or authorized studying PSAP consolidation in response to growing costs to provide this critical public safety resource. Additionally, a number of counties have contractual agreements in place with neighboring county PSAPs to provide 911 service to those counties.

III. FUNDING

Cost of 911 in Pennsylvania

The 911 fee, reauthorized by [Act 34 of 2023](#), is the primary funding source for the critical 911 systems and personnel that provide life-saving services every day in Pennsylvania. 911 system costs not covered by the 911 fee are typically funded by county property tax dollars or other local revenue sources. As technologies continue to evolve and funding streams no longer align

with current realities, counties need to be able to rely on consistent and sustainable funding to maintain their responsibility as the first line of emergency response.

While Pennsylvania has taken notable measures to control 911 system costs, our **911 system costs grew by nearly \$35 million (or 7%) between 2020 and 2024**. For comparison, **fee collections only increased roughly 4% between 2016 and 2023**. Increased costs in the 911 system costs can be attributed to increased needs for personnel, technology and operations, Next Generation 911 (NG911) implementation and maintenance and other ancillary services.

In a 2025 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) report aimed at analyzing 911 and 988 system efficiencies in Pennsylvania, several graphics and statistics attempt to compare national 911 data, though incomplete information creates misperceptions of Pennsylvania's system. Pennsylvania reports extensive data on 911 costs regardless of funding source, which creates the appearance Pennsylvania has a more expensive system. In reality, Pennsylvania has an extremely efficient and cost-effective system. From 2016-2023, 911 service costs increased 68% nationally whereas Pennsylvania's costs only increased 35%. Additionally, 82% of 911 costs in 2024 were funded by the surcharge in Pennsylvania, including staffing and other eligible expenses, though counties continued to contribute over \$80 million last year and average over \$100 million annually since 2020. In New York, a state similar in eligible expenses to Pennsylvania, their total cost was over \$1.2 billion compared to Pennsylvania's \$445 million. Additionally, **Pennsylvania is one of 13 states in the country who has less PSAPs than counties**. This includes four PSAP consolidations since the passage of Act 12. For scalable reference, **Illinois, a state of similar population, operates 176 PSAPs**.

With the full first phase implementation of NG911 and changing technological landscape, the needs of the current 911 system currently outweigh the revenue available in the commonwealth's 911 fund. Call volume per telecommunicator remains an issue as call demands increase. Not all calls coming into PSAPs are traditional calls, rather they are from non-phone devices utilizing internet, commonly referred to as Internet of Things (IoT) devices, calling or another automatic dialing system (like a smart watch, tablet or alarm). Often times those calls increase staff workload as there is additional follow-up needed to ensure situations which triggered those calls are resolved appropriately and everyone is safe. Additionally, call volume only represents calls coming in over the 911 system and does not capture any administrative lines, radios or other methods of communication that add significantly to workload.

911 Surcharge Fee

A 911 surcharge is a flat-rate fee placed on a phone bill monthly or at point of sale for a prepaid device that provides funding for the operation of 911 emergency telecommunications services in Pennsylvania. The surcharge was authorized as a part of the 911 statute, the Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act (Act 78 of 1990), and has only been increased twice, despite the massive increase in system costs, technological advances and community needs. **In Pennsylvania, the surcharge rate is currently \$1.95 and serves as the dedicated source of funding toward the overall cost of operating and maintaining the 911 system**, from personnel to equipment and future technologies to enhance the emergency services process.

Compared nationally, Pennsylvania has a relatively average fee that is intended to cover a significant majority of 911 operational costs, including staffing. Other states have percentage-based or locally-derived fees, including some as high as \$5.

911 surcharge revenue increased by only 4% from 2016-2023, averaging \$320 million annually. **Counties have collectively contributed over \$100 million annually** from their General Fund revenues, which are derived from property tax dollars. As costs for equipment and operations increase and Pennsylvania continues to make enhancements to the 911 system, including further implementation of NG 911 features such as text, photo, video and other interconnectivity of 911 systems, additional funding is needed to continue to provide 911 services that are safe, efficient and keep up with the changing needs of the commonwealth. To the average Pennsylvanian, more funding for 911 will come as an increase to their monthly surcharge fee on their cellphone. While that may seem burdensome, the dedicated and predictable fee will ensure when someone dials 911, their call is answered by a trained professional who can assist in the immediate emergency at hand while dispatching the proper emergency response. It is important to note that on a phone bill, the 911 surcharge shows up as a government public safety fee but is typically less than the fee collected by the phone service providers to administer collection of the fee.

911 system funding estimates over the next several years indicate total 911 system need will come to approximately \$512 million by 2029, with primary cost drivers being technology and operations. For the surcharge to completely cover those costs, it would need to be raised to approximately \$3.06.

The following table shows surcharge rates commensurate with the projected system cost estimates based on county 911 system plans. Currently, counties are funding over 18% of the system through property tax dollars and without an adequate increase, this percentage will largely increase. For example, maintaining the current surcharge of \$1.95, counties would bear 21% of the cost of the system through property taxes, before considering situations that may arise outside of the county system plans, such as unforeseen capital expenses and cybersecurity maintenance and upgrades. The chart below uses the county request of a surcharge at \$2.20 to demonstrate the ideal scenario compared to the other listed amounts.

	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
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Surcharge	\$1.95	\$2.20	\$2.20	\$2.20	\$2.20
Revenue Generated	\$393M (est.)	\$449.1M	\$454.1M	\$459.1M	\$464.3M
Estimated 911 System Costs	\$460.6M	\$473.1M	\$486.9M	\$500.1M	\$512.1M
County Funding	15.3%	5.4%	7.2%	8.5%	10%
County Funding Maintaining a \$1.95 Surcharge	15.3%	17.2%	18.5%	20%	21%
County Funding with \$2.20 Surcharge	N/A	5.5%	7.2%	8.8%	10%

911 System Cost Drivers

While this overview notes technology and operations as major cost drivers, it is important to note specific elements that increase system costs, regardless of consolidations or regionalization of PSAPs and 911 call taking.

- **Computer-aided dispatch (CAD) systems:** In many counties, CAD systems are nearing the end of useful life, which require significant funding for replacements.
- **Cybersecurity:** Due to the rise in cybersecurity threats, counties are already working together closely to improve security definitions and implement vital cybersecurity initiatives. As our 911 system gets more technologically advanced, it becomes more vulnerable to cyber incidents without adequate safeguards and security, which are costly and require frequent updates and software renewals.
- **Staffing:** Call takers or telecommunicators are certified, trained call takers that are using systems to identify a caller's location and other pertinent information while conversing with the caller, often offering medical triage advice or critical information to ensure the safety and positive outcome for all involved. In 2022, over a third of counties reported operating at a 20% or more vacancy rate for telecommunicators and as those positions are filled, the costs will continue to rise.

As these systems continue to become more technologically advanced, not only will significant investments need to continue to be made in the commonwealth for 911, but ongoing maintenance, security and updates will need to continue to ensure our systems are safe, secure and dependable.

IV. RECENT TITLE 35, CHAPTER 53 UPDATES

The Chapter 53 language being revised and drafted represents more than three years of substantive work among CCAP, 911 professionals, PEMA, the communications industry and other stakeholders. Our mutual objectives involve the ability to accommodate all current communication technologies including online platforms, the ability to anticipate and fold in future technologies, efficiency of core elements of the system and improvement in funding.

911 Funding Formula Language

In current statute, PEMA, in consultation with the state's 911 Advisory Board, is to develop a distribution formula that fairly and proportionately reflects county and regional 911 system needs and must consider and may include factors such as base level costs, population, call volume, and extenuating factors such as topography, population density, and special hazard exposures. By statute, no less than 80% of the 911 fund can be distributed by formula to counties, with at least 30% solely based on population; up to 15% to be used by PEMA for interconnectivity initiatives, three percent equal distribution to PSAPs; and no more than 2% to PEMA for administration. The formula must be reviewed no more than once within a four year period.

As part of the fee reauthorization in 2023, PEMA, in consultation with the 911 Advisory Board Funding Subcommittee, developed a revised formula for distributing funds, comprised of the following components:

- 3% distributed equally to each county (required by statute)
- The remaining funds will be distributed based on:
 - 65% of the average quarterly formula payments from 2021 and 2022
 - 30% on population (required by statute)
 - 2.5% on population density
 - 2.5% on square miles.

This formula was developed to ensure no county saw a funding decrease while permitting the 15% interconnectivity funds to again be fully used for statewide interconnectivity. PEMA works with counties through their 911 system plans to proactively budget the 15% funds with counties in accordance with 911 system plans. Additionally, any unencumbered funds from the statewide interconnectivity funding process are distributed to all counties by formula.

FCC Regulations for NG 911

In July 2024, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted a [new framework](#) to streamline the transition to Next Generation 911 (NG911). This initiative is designed to create detailed rules and guidelines for the nationwide rollout of NG911, with the goal of significantly improving emergency response capabilities throughout the country. Under this new framework, state and local 911 authorities are transitioning from a legacy circuit switched 911 network to Internet Protocol (IP)-based networks.

These new networks will support advanced 911 capabilities, including text, video, and data communication. Additionally, the FCC's new rule requires phone and internet companies to deploy NG911 core services within six to twelve months of receiving a request from a local 911 center. Phone companies are further required to adjust 911 calls for compatibility with NG911 and direct them to new destination points on IP networks facilitated by 911 authorities. This comprehensive approach is set to streamline and modernize emergency communications at the county level.

NG911 Implementation Updates

[Act 147 of 2024](#) made updates to Pennsylvania's 911 statute that will enable the implementation of NG911 system and technologies. Updates included targeted amendments to the Right-to-Know Law for NG911, stricter penalties for misuse of the 911 system, and new requirements for communication providers to report service outages. It further extended the financial audit cycle for Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) from every two years to every three years.

NG911 will continue to introduce new costs in areas such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), training, cybersecurity, and connectivity while preparing PSAPs for FCC Phase 2 readiness, and updating applications to support data, multimedia, and the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) assistive technologies.

With NG911 implemented fully across the commonwealth, along with revised FCC regulations, statutory adjustments to terms and definitions will need to be adjusted. Counties remain dedicated to working with 911 professionals, PEMA, the communications industry and other stakeholders on language that reflects system and industry realities.

V. FUTURE IMPACTS

988 – Mental Health Crisis Hotline

As the providers of community-based mental health services, counties have a vested interest in mental health services in the commonwealth and recognize the importance of help for individuals in mental health crisis.

Counties strongly urge the Department of Human Services and PEMA to directly engage county commissioners and their key staff in policy development in order to ensure the most effective transition to implementation of the 988 system. Additionally, counties support funding and resources for any additional obligations counties may take on as a result of 988 program roll-out and build-up – but reiterate that such funding must be separate from the 911 fund, or any other effort that would endanger counties' access to 911 funding, other county funding obligations, or counties' ability to respond to crisis and any needed services that may arise from implementation of 988.

2025 STUDY ON 911 AND 988 SYSTEM EFFICIENCIES

In June 2025, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) released its [report](#) on the efficiency of Pennsylvania's 911 and 988 systems. Conducted pursuant to Act 34 of 2023, the report examines the performance of the state's 911 communications services and evaluates opportunities to enhance interoperability with the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline.

While Pennsylvania completed its first phase of the Next Generation 911 (NG911) transition in April 2025, challenges remain. Some rural service providers continue to use outdated analog systems, driving up costs and risking service disruptions. The report recommends that the General Assembly, in consultation with PEMA and the 911 Advisory Board, establish a limited, needs-based fund to help small providers complete the NG911 transition. It also highlights growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual Public Safety Answering Points in county call

centers, urging the development of clear standards, audit procedures, and cybersecurity protections for AI, Internet of Things devices (IoT), and remote operations.

The report also addresses longstanding issues with funding and staffing. Despite a recent increase in the 911 service surcharge from \$1.65 to \$1.95, many counties report that funding remains insufficient and telecommunicator shortages continue to hamper operations. Given the technological changes brought by NG911, the report recommends a new feasibility study to determine whether integrating or improving interoperability between Pennsylvania State Police and county dispatch systems is now more viable.

On the 988 side, full integration with the 911 system is not recommended due to the fundamental differences in their roles- 988 focuses on crisis stabilization, while 911 handles emergency response. However, the report stresses the importance of improving interoperability between the two systems. Few calls require transfer between 911 and 988, but stakeholders on both sides have raised concerns about liability and lack of mutual protocols. To address this, the report recommends legislative action to mandate interoperability standards and provide liability protections for 911 staff when calls are transferred.

With the release of the long-awaited LBFC report, counties continue to stress the importance of providing ample funding for the 911 system and appreciate the recognition of a need for additional resources in the report. This report reinforces not only the growth that the Commonwealth's 911 system has experienced over the past few years, but also the need to properly fund and maintain the system as we explore the new horizon of Next Generation 911 (NG911), system sharing, technological innovations and advancements that come with that.