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LEGISLATIVE BULLETIN

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ASSOCIATION OF PENNSYLVANIA
THE VOICE OF PENNSYLVANIA COUNTIES

COUNTY PRIORITIES SPOTLIGHT: PRIORITIES DISCUSSED DURING BUDGET HEARINGS

The House and Senate Appropriations committees have nearly completed budget hearings with the state agencies, gathering details on the Governor's proposed FY 2024-2025 commonwealth budget. Below are highlights related to the 2024 county government priorities.

911 Funding and Reauthorization: During the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency's (PEMA) budget hearing on February 21, the House Appropriations Committee discussed a number of topics related to 911 service delivery in Pennsylvania, including progress on the NextGen911 (NG911) rollout and addressing 911 staffing shortages. Questions also focused on recent efforts by counties to increase the 911 surcharge from \$1.65 to \$2.30, and the need to look ahead to 2026 when the surcharge is again set to sunset. On March 6, House Appropriations Committee members also discussed the interoperability of the 911 and 988 systems during the Department of Human Services (DHS) budget hearing.

County Mental Health Base Funding Increase: Mental health services were the subject of discussion across both chambers in several contexts, not only with DHS and the Department of Health (DOH), but also with the Department of Education, state-related universities and others. Many agencies highlighted the need for increased services, and emphasized the Governor's budget request, which includes \$20 million for county mental health base funding, the most flexible form of community-based funding for service provision and responding to community mental health needs. Coordination between counties and schools was also part of the conversations during the House DHS budget hearings. Gov. Shapiro's budget includes \$100 million annually for mental health services in schools, expanding on the previous one-time allocation of \$100 million in last year's Act 34.

Addressing Inmates with Mental Health Issues: The Senate budget hearing with DHS Secretary Val Arkoosh also recognized the reality that county jails have become de-facto mental health providers and discussed the department's efforts to address a shortage of beds for justice-involved individuals or those with complex behavior health issues. Further, Arkoosh noted that the proposed \$5.8 million to expand a diversion and discharge program for inmates with

behavior health issues would be spent on five regional projects to provide community placements and therefore avoid hospital stays for 150 people.

Vote-by-Mail Reforms: Both the House and Senate committees discussed a myriad of election-related issues during the Department of State’s budget hearings. Secretary of the Commonwealth Al Schmidt fielded questions regarding voter education, recruiting new poll workers, use of mail-in ballot drop boxes, modernizing the Statewide Uniform Registry of Elections (SURE) database, election misinformation, Gov. Shapiro’s new Election Threats Task Force, and Pennsylvania’s April 23 primary falling on the Jewish holiday of Passover. Secretary Schmidt also advocated for additional pre-canvassing time for counties to provide appropriate time to process ballots.

Prevailing Wage/Broadband Access and Development: During hearings with the Department of Labor and Industry, Secretary Nancy Walker discussed concerns raised by senators related to broadband development and Prevailing Wage Act requirements. Specifically, Sec. Walker was pressed about potential challenges in utilizing federal infrastructure funds efficiently due to the Prevailing Wage Act. Sec. Walker also discussed the process for challenging wage rate determinations and the entities that would be eligible to file such challenges with her department, including prospective bidders, labor unions, or employers.

Juvenile Detention Capacity Crisis: During the House DHS hearings, DHS Secretary Val Arkoosh discussed ongoing concerns about placement capacity and announced the creation of 111 new beds across Pennsylvania, including the expansion of existing facilities and the opening of a new treatment unit in Butler County. She also mentioned the preliminary steps to open the Southeast Youth Development Center by July 1, aiming to reduce the statewide waitlist for youth needing secure treatment beds.

CCAP COMPLEX CASE TASK FORCE RELEASES REPORT

CCAP’s Complex Case Work Group recently completed its work and released [recommendations](#) designed to establish practical and immediate strategies to protect our most vulnerable children and youth.

Complex cases are identified as minors in the custody of the county for whom a higher level of care is recommended, but for whom that level of care cannot be located, is unavailable, or simply does not exist—the result of which is minors sleeping in CYS offices and hotels. The outcome of these unmet needs is poor for children and the staff responsible for them, and nationwide, there have been numerous examples of disastrous outcomes when child welfare agencies are forced to house youth in offices and hotels.

CCAP’s recommendations to prevent such outcomes include the development of a state-supported no eject/no reject program that ensures youth have a safe place to stay when there are no other options; more organized and concerted efforts to develop programs to accept challenging behaviors and co-occurring physical and mental health issues, and greater emphasis on improving state, county, and private staffing.

CCAP’s report and recommendations may be viewed [here](#), and include a mapping tool for counties to use to enhance coordination between agencies,

as well as to identify gaps in service areas.

HOUSE COMMITTEE FORWARDS LEGISLATION RELATED TO 911 AND PTSI

On March 4, the House Emergency Management and Veterans Affairs Committee held a voting meeting to consider several pieces of legislation, including **HB 1854**, sponsored by Rep. Jared Solomon (D-Philadelphia). The bill, which provides for additional updates to the state's 911 law required for implementation of the Next Generation 911 (NG911) system in Pennsylvania, was amended in committee with technical updates requested by stakeholders and voted unanimously out of committee. Counties appreciate the committee's attention to this issue as these updates to the 911 law are a part of counties' 2024 priority related to 911 funding and reauthorization.

In addition, the committee reported **House Bill 1632**, sponsored by Rep. Jennifer O'Mara (D-Delaware), which would create a presumption that post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a compensable benefit for workers' compensation purposes for first responders. As drafted, the bill would cover law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS personnel and peace officers, and would apply to sheriffs, deputy sheriffs and potentially other county employees. Counties expressed concern with the bill, seeking additional clarification on covered employees and qualifying events, which are commonly found in other states' PTSI laws. Further, while HB 1632 focuses on PTSI as a workers' compensation benefit, counties pointed to the need for additional county base mental health funding in the commonwealth to ensure all individuals, including first responders, are able to access mental health resources. Counties look forward to continuing discussions with the General Assembly on the legislation to ensure those employees have access to appropriate and available resources.

Both pieces of legislation now move to the House floor for further consideration when the chamber returns to session later in March.

GOVERNOR LAUNCHES ELECTION THREATS TASK FORCE

On February 29, Gov. Shapiro launched the **Pennsylvania Election Threats Task Force** to establish strategic communication and information sharing among public agencies to identify and mitigate threats to Pennsylvania's elections. Spearheaded by Department of State Secretary Al Schmidt, the Task Force is composed of representatives from various state and federal agencies and law enforcement entities; CCAP and county election directors also have a seat at the table. This initiative is one part of a multi-faceted approach by the Administration to provide education and resources for commonwealth voters on the election process in Pennsylvania. For more information on Pennsylvania's elections, including key dates and to register to vote, visit the Department of State's website, vote.pa.gov.

ACT 13 REPORTS DUE APRIL 15

Local Government Unconventional Gas Well Fund Usage Reports required

under Act 13 of 2012 will be due to the PUC by April 15, 2024. All Local Government Unconventional Gas Well Funds received in 2023 must be reported. Details about the usage reports, including all necessary information regarding the online and paper reporting systems, can be found on CCAP's Act 13/Shale Gas Resources [web page](#). Reports can be filed electronically via the [Act 13 Reporting website](#).

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