

### Funding the 911 System in Pennsylvania

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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.

#### What Happens When Someone Dials 911?

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. While taking the call, the 911 operator is simultaneously identifying the caller's location and gathering pertinent situational information which often results in offering medical triage advice or critical information to ensure the safe outcome for all involved. The call taker identifies and dispatches the appropriate emergency response entities, relaying the relevant information to address the emergency. Those first responders could be municipal, county or state entities, including fire, EMS, police, HAZMAT, water rescue, or anyone equipped to safely and appropriately respond.

#### What is a 911 Surcharge and Why is it Necessary?

A 911 surcharge is a flat-rate fee placed on a phone service bill monthly or at point of sale for a prepaid device that provides funding for the operation of 911 emergency telecommunications services in Pennsylvania. 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. This surcharge covers costs that range from personnel to equipment and future technologies that enhance the emergency services process.

Compared nationally, Pennsylvania has a relatively average fee that covers the majority of 911 operational costs. Other states impose percentage-based or locally determined fees – some as high as \$5 – and benefit from dedicated state appropriations. Pennsylvania currently lacks both of these options.

When the 911 surcharge was created in 1990, it was set at \$1.00. Despite increased costs over the past three decades, the surcharge has increased only twice: Act 12 of 2015 increased the surcharge from \$1.00 to \$1.65 and Act 34 of 2023 increased the surcharge from \$1.65 to \$1.95. 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.

#### How Does Pennsylvania's 911 System Financially Compare to Other States?

Pennsylvania reports extensive data on 911 costs regardless of funding source, which creates the appearance Pennsylvania has a more expensive system compared to other states. In reality, Pennsylvania has an extremely efficient and cost-effective system. Pennsylvania’s 911 system expenditures have averaged \$435 million annually between 2020-2024. Furthermore, 911 system costs have grown by more than \$125 million since 2016 as personnel, technology, cybersecurity enhancements, and facility costs have increased, counties have pursued regionalization and consolidation projects, and costs to modernize Pennsylvania’s 911 system to NG911 were introduced to the 911 Fund. Comparatively nationwide, costs for 911 service increased by \$2.4 billion (or 68%) between 2016 and 2022 based on FCC 911 Fee Reports.

911 Fund	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
<b>Total Revenue</b>	\$375,046,250	\$329,108,221	\$323,701,056	\$325,738,118	\$318,291,063
<b>Total Reported Costs</b>	\$455,238,473	\$445,108,843	\$421,290,500	\$441,745,262	\$415,475,853
<b>Deficit</b>	(\$75,192,223)	(\$116,072,251)	(\$97,589,444)	(\$116,007,144)	(\$97,184,790)
<b>% of 911 Funded</b>	82%	74%	77%	74%	77%

**Why Does the 911 System Need More Funding?**

While the \$1.95 911 surcharge increased fund revenues by \$47 million since it took effect on March 1, 2024, counties have collectively contributed over \$100 million annually from their General Fund revenues over the last five years, which are derived from property tax dollars. As costs of equipment and operations counties to rise, and as Pennsylvania advances its NG911 system, additional funding is essential to ensure the continued delivery of safe, reliable, and modern emergency response services across 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 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.

**How is each county’s allocation determined?**

911 revenue distribution to counties is statutorily set in Title 35, Chapter 53. Specifically, PEMA, at the advice of the 911 Advisory Board, assesses and determines the distribution formula, which currently stipulates:

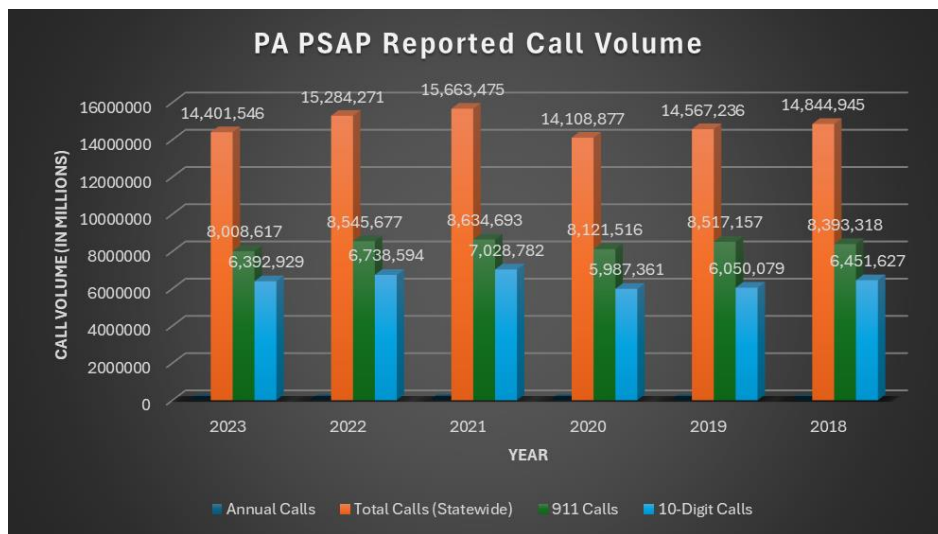
- No less than 83% of the funding goes to counties (3% to be equally distributed and 80% based proportionally on population, population density and square miles)
- Up to 15% shall be used for statewide interconnectivity of 911 systems, which includes costs for NG911 and 911 system consolidation or regionalization
- Up to 2% may be retained by PEMA for costs related to administering the provisions of the statute

The formula was revised when Act 34 of 2023 was passed in order to restore roughly \$13.5 million of annual statewide interconnectivity funds that were used to provide thirty-seven (37)

counties **temporary** financial assistance to offset costs as work continued to address concerns with 911 funding disparities and ensure that no county saw a loss in 911 funding payments.

### **Calls Appear to Be Declining, So Why Are System Costs Increasing?**

Not all calls coming into PSAPs are traditional calls, rather they are from non-phone devices utilizing internet calling or another automatic dialing system, such as 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.



### **What Exactly Is the Ask?**

Counties are seeking an increase of the 911 surcharge rate from \$1.95 to \$2.20 to ensure there is sufficient funding for this essential service provided by counties. 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.

### **What If There Is No Increase to the Surcharge Fee?**

Since the 911 surcharge is the only dedicated source of statewide funding for 911, funding that adequately supports the growing needs of this critical emergency response system will need to be found elsewhere. Without an increase to the surcharge, counties would need to fund any remaining costs through their General Funds. Since the only source of General Fund revenue is property tax dollars, this likely would actualize as an increase in property tax rates for Pennsylvanians. By increasing the surcharge, it creates a predictable fee Pennsylvanians can anticipate each month on their phone bill for the specific and dedicated purpose of providing 911 services.