



Funding the 911 System in Pennsylvania

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 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, 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 \$1.65 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 covers a significant majority of 911 operational costs. Other states have percentage-based or locally-derived fees, including some as high as \$5.

How does Pennsylvania's 911 system financially compare to other states?

In a 2022 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) report aimed at analyzing 911 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 2016-2020, 911 service costs increased 62% nationally whereas Pennsylvania's costs only increased 23%. Additionally, 76% of 911 costs in 2020 were funded by the surcharge in Pennsylvania, including staffing and other eligible expenses, which is significant compared to the 56% national average rate. In New York, a state similar in eligible expenses to Pennsylvania, their total cost was \$1.1 billion compared to Pennsylvania's \$415 million.

Why does the 911 system need more funding?

911 surcharge revenue increased by less than 1% from 2016-2020, coming in at \$318.2 million in 2020. 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 implementation of NextGen 911 (NG911) which will allow for 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 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.

Calls appear to be declining, so why are system costs increasing?

While the LBFC report shows a decline in statewide call volume, the report information does not adequately capture the reality of PSAPs where calls are taken. In 2016, there were some anomalies in reported figures, which explains the drastic perceived drop in calls, which in reality is closer to 8.5 million. Additionally, not all calls coming in to PSAPs are traditional calls, rather they are from non-phone devices utilizing internet 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.

What exactly is the ask?

With 911 statute provisions supporting sunseting in January 31, 2024, counties ask for an increase in the 911 surcharge to bolster and support the growing needs of our system into the future. Additionally, counties request development of a funding formula primarily based on population that adequately supports current county needs and also ensures funding and distribution 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, 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.