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CCAP is the recognized leader for Pennsylvania county government.

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To acquire an article idea submittal form for CCAP's *Pennsylvania County News* please email John Buffone at jbuffone@pacounties.org.

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Every January, CCAP announces its legislative priorities at the State Capitol in Harrisburg. These priorities are selected by CCAP members as the issues with the greatest significance and most potential for positive impact to counties in the coming year. In 2024, Pennsylvania counties have eight legislative priorities, ranging across the vast spectrum of county government. In this edition of County News, we will dig deep into these priorities from a human perspective to show how these issues truly have real world consequences if they are not addressed and addressed soon.

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features



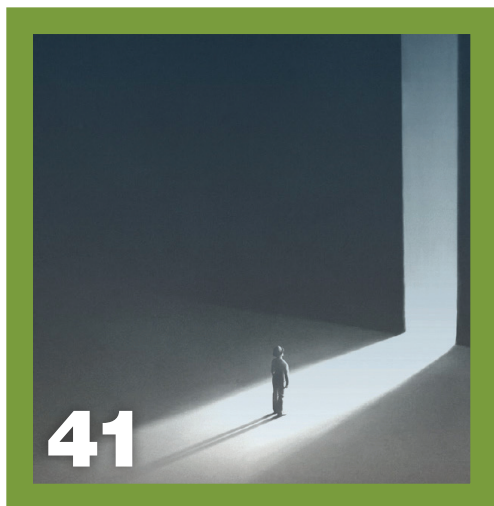
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Mental Health in Jails



Operating at 1960 Levels



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MICHAEL RIVERA

President
County Commissioners
Association of Pennsylvania
Berks County

I am honored to serve with you in 2024 as we continue on our journey as members of CCAP.

Looking toward the future, we must remember that our mission — to advocate as the unifying voice of all Pennsylvania counties and to provide leadership and support for excellence in county government — is not just a statement, it is a call to action.

County commissioners understand the power of unity. Together, we are stronger. Together, we have the power to influence change and make a lasting difference in the lives of those we serve. Just as a rope is composed of many smaller strings, each of us brings our unique strengths and perspectives to the table. At the same time, when we speak as one voice on issues that matter to our counties, our impact is far greater than if we were to act individually. Our unity enables us to shape policies and legislation that positively impact our communities and

"I am committed to fostering a culture of unity, collaboration, leadership, support, and excellence within all of Pennsylvania's county government."

enact meaningful change. We can ensure that our voices are heard and respected in the decision-making process by building strong relationships with the General Assembly and the Administration while advocating tirelessly for our counties' needs.

I am also committed to strengthening CCAP's role as the go-to organization for county-related issues. Through innovative programs, education, valuable resources, and collaborative initiatives, we will continue to support and empower county leaders across Pennsylvania. But our success relies on each and every one of us. I urge you to remain engaged, informed, and proactive in our collective efforts to advance county governance.

Today's political landscape is marked by divisions, lack of respect, and discord. Counties must serve as beacons of unity and cooperation. We may not always see eye to eye on every issue, but we must approach our deliberations with respect and civility. We must be willing to listen with open ears and minds, recognize the value of diverse

perspectives and harness the power of collaboration. Each one of us, in our own ways, brings value to the table.

Let us remember that CCAP is not simply an organization that serves us. It is all of us, working together, to make a difference. We support one another and strive to make our counties better. Together, we form the fabric of our Commonwealth, and our actions and decisions directly impact the daily lives of each one of our constituents.

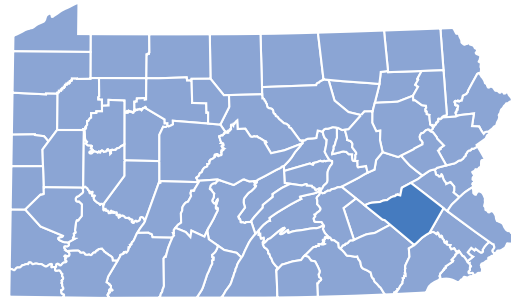
As your President, I am committed to fostering a culture of unity, collaboration, leadership, support, and excellence within all of Pennsylvania's county government. Together, we will continue to be a force for positive change, advancing the interests of Pennsylvania counties and building a brighter future for all. Together, we are stronger, and together, we can achieve remarkable things for our communities.

I look forward to a great 2024. Thank you for your dedication, your passion, and your unwavering commitment to our counties and communities.

GET TO KNOW YOUR NEW CCAP PRESIDENT

Michael Rivera

Berks County



Michael Rivera

President; County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

Serving as commissioner since:

I am in my second term. I started serving in 2020, a few months before the COVID-19 Pandemic.

What inspired you to become a County Commissioner?

Having a desire to serve and a strong sense of civic duty, I have always been actively involved in my community serving on boards, volunteering, and participating in local organizations. When the opportunity to run for County Commissioner arose, I saw it as a natural extension of my community involvement, allowing me to have an even greater and direct impact on the lives of many.

I felt that my professional background, which is banking, entrepreneurship and real estate, along with my education, Master of Business Administration, made me uniquely qualified to serve in this role and address the challenges facing our County.

Tell us a little about your county.

Berks County, with its rich tapestry of history, vibrant communities, and breathtaking landscapes, truly stands out as a gem in southeastern Pennsylvania. With a population of approximately 431,000 residents, it holds the distinction of being the seventh largest county in the state. From the diverse city of Reading, the fourth largest in the Commonwealth, to the serene countryside and sprawling farmland, Berks County offers a diverse array of attractions and opportunities for both residents and visitors alike.

One of the county's greatest assets lies in its abundance of outdoor recreational spaces, including parks, trails, and the scenic Schuylkill River. These natural wonders provide endless opportunities for adventure, relaxation, and connection with nature, enriching the quality of life for all who call Berks County home.

In addition to its natural beauty, Berks County is also a hub of economic activity, with manufacturing, healthcare, and agriculture serving as the cornerstone industries. The county's strong agricultural tradition is reflected in its commitment to land preservation, making it one of the top counties in agricultural land preservation in the state.

Furthermore, Berks County boasts a robust educational landscape, with six institutions of higher education providing opportunities for learning and growth. From colleges to universities, these institutions contribute to the county's intellectual capital and workforce development.

And let's not forget the excitement of America's favorite pastime – baseball! Berks County proudly hosts the Reading Fightin' Phils, a Minor League Baseball team affiliated with the Philadelphia Phillies.

In summary, Berks County offers a dynamic blend of history, culture, and natural beauty, making it an ideal place to live, work, and visit.

What issues have been the most important to you during your time as commissioner?

Berks County government has been active in recent years reinvigorating transportation programming and infrastructure. The Reading Regional Airport is a valuable, yet underutilized, asset within the county. Berks County has taken steps in the last 24 months to align the goals of the airport more directly with the overall goals of the county itself. Additionally, Berks County is working with Montgomery and Chester Counties to revive daily passenger rail service between Reading, Pottstown, Phoenixville, and Philadelphia. Just imagine the economic advances that Berks and regional neighbors could see from all of this transportation development in our county!

Beyond the exciting transportation developments, I work daily to maintain fiscal responsibility and discipline among the many departments in Berks County government. Our Board of Commissioners voted to raise taxes modestly in December for the first time in six years but our work during those years in managing the county budget ensured that the needed increase was well below inflation and adequately funded county programs and services.

Finally, I serve as the Chair of the Berks County Board of Elections and take pride in the county's Office of Election Services and its staff. We have worked hard to ensure that Berks County elections are as secure, accessible, and transparent as possible. Like election boards around the country, we are following the ever-changing election laws and rulings to the very best of our ability in the run up to a consequential presidential election year.

Overall, what are the most important issues PA counties are facing right now?

The most important issues counties are facing right now are the eight items encapsulated in the CCAP 2024 Priorities brought forth by the members last fall. These issues include things such as 911 funding and reauthorization, mental health funding and the juvenile detention capacity crisis.

Added to this is our commitment to administering safe, secure and transparent elections. The 2024 election cycle is sure to bring a lot of attention and potential challenges, but counties are steadfast in their confidence to rise to the occasion, once again.

Why did you get involved with CCAP?

My colleague, Commissioner Christian Leinbach, told me it would be a good idea to get involved in CCAP and to attend the Newly Elected Officials Workshop. I would benefit from education that would help me as a commissioner and that I would meet other, more tenured commissioners and be able to learn from their experiences. Commissioner Leinbach's recommendations all paid great dividends in my development as a developing county commissioner.

Throughout my years with CCAP, I became more and more involved and invested in the organization's important work in Pennsylvania. My inherent drive to serve to my community developed and grew to encompass the entire commonwealth to the point that now I serve proudly as CCAP's President.

What do you hope to accomplish as CCAP President?

I will encourage more county leaders to engage in CCAP, especially our newly elected officials. I will strive to strengthen CCAP's relationship with the General Assembly and Administration and work with them to push forward our 2024 priorities.

Are you involved in any other local government groups or organizations?

I am the vice-chair for the Center for Excellence in Local Government (CELG). CELG is an organization dedicated to supporting and promoting effective local governance in Berks County. It serves as a resource hub for local government officials, providing training, research, technical assistance, and networking opportunities to help enhance the capacity and performance of municipalities across the County.

What message do you want to send to CCAP members?

Today's political landscape is marked by so many divisions. As county leaders, we must act as a symbol of unity and collaboration. Together, we can make great strides for everyone.



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AN UNANSWERED QUESTION:
THE IMPACT OF THE JUVENILE
DETENTION DILEMMA

By the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers

When there are no simple solutions to complicated problems, even knowing what questions to ask can be seen as progress. One such question, considered by many to be an exigent one at this point, is: What are the consequences of not meeting the significant mental health needs of children involved with the child welfare system?

Often, the answer is involvement with the juvenile justice system and the common understanding that the case will be complex.

There is probably no more challenging complex case than one involving an overlap between the child welfare and delinquency systems. Adding to that challenge is the distinction between each agency's mission and objectives, the need for multisystem involvement to address a wide range of needs and the inadequacy of resources to meet those needs.

This article does not propose solutions to the challenge presented by complex cases but does propose the use of story to better understand that challenge. The following two stories are offered for that purpose. (The stories are taken from various complex case reviews and consist of composites of people and events. The initials used to refer to each juvenile were randomly chosen and do not relate to any juveniles involved in actual complex cases.)

CJ's Story

CJ turned 14 a week before she was placed in a group home, her third placement since being removed from her mother's care. She would continue to attend the same school for special needs students, but travel time would increase to an hour and fifteen minutes each way.

Staff at the group home reported to her caseworker that she seemed to be making a good adjustment, but things changed one evening when staff encountered her removing items from a kitchen cabinet outside of permitted hours. When a female staff member attempted to redirect her and blocked access to the cabinet, CJ's combative attitude turned physical, and the staff member suffered multiple facial contusions and a concussion. The group home gave its 30-day notice the next day.

At CJ's detention hearing, the court gave permission for her to be released to an appropriate placement and ordered an evaluation to determine her competency to stand trial. When the competency evaluator determined that she was not competent, the delinquency charges were withdrawn. Despite the withdrawal of charges, CJ would spend 9 weeks in detention while the child welfare system worked to find a placement facility willing to accept her. Facilities which were unwilling to accept CJ cited as their reason her aggressive behavior and mental health diagnoses, including mild intellectual disability.

Since her release, CJ has had physical altercations at both her school and placement facility, with new delinquency charges being filed. She

was determined to be incompetent to stand trial once again.

LR's Story

Like CJ, LR entered the child welfare system when he was 14, and like her, had multiple mental health diagnoses. LR's father was incarcerated and had no contact with him. His mother attempted to meet his needs as she struggled with her own mental health needs and with caring for his siblings. The level of parent-child conflict between LR and his mother, heightened by his unmet mental health needs, eventually resulted in him being removed from her care.

For the next 4 years, LR would return home for periods of time until his behaviors were again beyond his mother's ability to control. He would then move from shelter placements to group homes, with each facility requesting removal due to his disruptive behavior. In one of his placements, he was attacked by another resident and underwent emergency surgery. Again, he returned home until his mother could no longer handle his behaviors.

Despite repeated findings that he was in need of a Residential Treatment Facility (RTF), and the various doctors' prescriptions to facilitate that end, he was rejected by more than 13 RTFs. LR's unmet mental health needs and lack of a stable, nurturing environment became the pattern of his life. His episodes of decompensating behavior were treated in crisis intervention centers as his mother and the professionals in his life looked for more sustained help.

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Eventually, his aggressive behaviors, including threats or assaults against placement facility staff, brought him to the delinquency system. After being found incompetent to stand trial, his delinquency petition was dismissed. A later petition, and a finding of competency after being evaluated once again, resulted in a delinquency adjudication.

The involvement of juvenile probation in LR's case was seen as a lifeline in the eyes of some of his non-probation professional team.

Their assumption, held by many in other child serving systems, was that in cases such as this juvenile probation would recommend commitment to a secure facility where he would finally receive the treatment he was unable to receive in the child welfare system alone. Although sincere, this view failed to grasp the purpose, policies and objectives of the delinquency system which did not support such a recommendation, given the nature of the charges and other relevant factors.¹

LR's supervision by the Juvenile Court has now ended. He is currently involved with the Criminal Justice System.

As stated above, this article asks a question that has no simple answers, but it also takes an abstract question into the realm of painful human experience. The next question is whether that pain resonates with those who have the legislative and fiscal authority to address it. 🍷

¹ Providing caseworkers and others who work with dually involved youth a deeper understanding of the juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania can strengthen their roles and advance the legislative mandate and mission of that system: Balanced and Restorative Justice--protecting the community, holding youth accountable to restore victims, and developing youth competencies that lead to law-abiding and productive citizenship. With the passage of Act 33 in 1995, Pennsylvania's Juvenile Act, 42 Pa. C. S. § 6301 et seq., was amended, and the mission of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system was redefined to include the goals of Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ).

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Collaborating Counties **Blazing a Trail** to Better **Broadband**

As county commissioners, our duty is to the taxpayers

By **Marty Karsteter Qually**
Adams County Commissioner

Last year, Adams and Franklin Counties worked with a consultant, Design 9, to complete a study outlining the challenges and solutions to our lack of high speed internet. The full study is available at, www.adamscountypa.gov. The study outlined seven recommendations, which the county has been investigating over this year and will continue for work towards in the coming years.

The first recommendation was to manage expectations. Sort of a no brainer, as this is sound advice for any government project. That being said, our consultants were right. As the county investigates and confirms the findings of the study we are constantly asked, "when will I get broadband?" In our fast-paced world we often expect that once a problem is identified, so too will a solution. In this case the solutions are multifaceted and expensive. Broadband infrastructure is owned by private companies, is not publicly regulated, and it is expensive. These issues make it important that government be very intentional with the partnerships we form and the projects that we fund. There is no amount of public money that will solve this problem. We must work with for-profit entities and use state and federal grants to get the job done. While many residents have concerns about their broadband speeds and reliability, the county must manage grant funds to serve the most unserved people that we can. Many of us will not see improvements in this first round of work, but as a community we will move forward.

The second recommendation was to evaluate our partnership with Franklin County. Since we had started this study with Franklin County this makes sense. As I mentioned, broadband is not a utility. This means that municipal, county, and state lines are meaningless. County staff and I agreed with this recommendation, but also felt that it didn't go far enough. We should evaluate partnering with every county surrounding us, York, Cumberland, Franklin, Carroll (MD), and Frederick (MD). As the county looks for projects in areas of need that border another county, we will reach out to our neighbors. Since broadband doesn't see boundaries, neither do we. If a project can be expanded with

competition regulates pricing. In the case of broadband many areas, such as Adams County, are experiencing de facto monopolies. In my humble opinion this will continue until the industry is publicly regulated.

The fourth recommendation was for the county to seek every possible grant there is to address broadband. Due to the COVID recovery funds and the infrastructure funds being release by the federal government there are multiple funding sources to address broadband concerns. From COVID we learned that education, healthcare and work are susceptible to the impacts of a pandemic. While we hope to never

Our goal is simple, affordable high speed internet access for every business and household in Adams County. As we develop this plan, we will continue to reach out to anyone to learn more about how to best serve our county.

a neighbor, we will work to find cost effective ways to benefit our region.

The third recommendation was that Adams County cannot be an internet provider. The truth is we are not allowed to be internet providers. We can however work with other entities interesting in challenging the larger internet service providers (ISPs). While smaller providers and private networks are slowly being leveraged out of this space, we need to respect providers of all size and types. Traditionally, in America

experience another pandemic in our lifetimes, the silver lining is that COVID highlighted a serious lack of broadband infrastructure in our rural communities. Thankfully, based upon the latest economic data the recession predicted from this unprecedented expenditure of federal funds, have not materialized. What did happen is that businesses are growing again and they need this infrastructure. In a survey connected to our study, we found that 74% of county

Continued on page 18

businesses expect that employees can work from home and 100% of businesses feel faster internet is critical to their next five years. The county must apply for every grant possible to ensure that residents, students, and businesses are positioned for success. We need expanded modern infrastructure to achieve this.

The fifth recommendation was to use fiber for long term solutions and wireless networks for short term. Fiber optic cable is the best way to transmit the most data, but fiber is expensive. This means that in very rural areas, wireless networks will be necessary. Think about people who live down a quarter mile driveway. No ISP and few individuals can afford the \$5,000+ to run fiber. And why bother, when a small-scale fixed pole wireless system can achieve a similar result. Until we get actual proposals for projects, we do not know how much wireless will factor into the solution. We must keep our options open.

The sixth recommendation is to develop partnerships with internet service providers (ISPs) and wireless internet providers (WISPs). This recommendation is obvious. Since ISPs and WISPs, are the businesses providing the services and county government is forbidden from providing the service, we must partner with them. Not only does it make legal sense, it makes financial sense. Last year the county was prepared to apply for the broadband deployment grant to install fiber in rural communities. At the same time Comcast was also applying for the same funds. Upon reviewing their application and ours, it was obvious that their application was better. Comcast already has subcontractors in place, own existing infrastructure, understand the permitting process, and their application served more unserved residents than the county's application. As county commissioners our duty is to the taxpayers. Of course, we decided

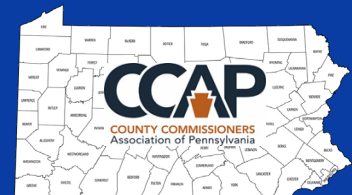
to forego our application in favor of supporting Comcast's. We will continue to work with any ISP or WISP, who is willing to help the county provide broadband to our rural residents and businesses.

Lastly, we need to develop a county wide comprehensive broadband plan. Since the study was completed, the county has been engaged in educating and learning from residents and community groups. Our goal is simple, affordable high speed internet access for every business and household in Adams County. As we develop this plan, we will continue to reach out to anyone to learn more about how to best serve our county. 🍷

If you have any interest in broadband expansion or in assisting the county, do not hesitate to reach out to me, mqually@adamscountypa.gov.



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PENNSYLVANIA'S 911 SYSTEM:

Looking Ahead

Jeffrey Boyle, Executive Deputy Director, PEMA

Greg Kline, Deputy Director for 911, PEMA



Pennsylvania's 911 system is set to receive a significant funding increase with the passage of Act 34 of 2023. This legislation, signed into law by Governor Shapiro, reauthorizes Pennsylvania's 911 fee and increases it from \$1.65 to \$1.95, which is expected to infuse an additional \$47.7 million into the 911 system annually until it sunsets again on January 31, 2026. The fee, which supports 911 operations, is levied on communications services to which a consumer subscribes, such as wireline or wireless telephone service.

2026 will be here before we know it, and the members of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) selected 911 Funding and Reauthorization as a top legislative priority for 2024. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), CCAP, and public safety associations will continue our work to modernize Pennsylvania's 911 legislation to address critical topics outside of funding, such as cybersecurity and Right-to-Know-Law considerations. Also, Act 34 requires the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee – in conjunction with the Joint State Government Commission and the Local Government Commission – to complete a study of the 911 system by December 30, 2024. The study will provide recommendations on a variety of topics related to the 911 system including funding and a comparison of Pennsylvania's 911 system to those in other states.

Since its inception, the responsibility of providing 911 service has primarily been considered a county function in Pennsylvania and across the country. As 911 service expanded to more jurisdictions, states have established legislation, funding structures, eligibility rules, and financial reporting requirements for 911 to suit their respective circumstances, with limited federal guidance. As a result, 911 systems vary greatly across the country. Recognizing these differences helps users understand the context of the data reported in resources such as the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) 911 Fee Reports¹ and highlights some notable successes of Pennsylvania's 911 system.

NUMBER OF PUBLIC SAFETY ANSWERING POINTS (PSAP or 911 Center):

In Pennsylvania, each county is responsible for providing 911 service. Pennsylvania has a consolidated 911 system compared to states of similar size. In contrast, in many states, there can be multiple PSAPs serving a single jurisdiction that may result in duplication of personnel and technology costs, as well as increased call transfers and other operational inefficiencies. There are 61 county-based PSAPs in Pennsylvania. Illinois and Ohio – two states of similar size and population – have 181 and 112 PSAPs respectively. Pennsylvania is one of only thirteen states operating fewer PSAPs than there are counties. Pennsylvania's approach allows for an efficient and cost-effective 911 system without sacrificing quality services that residents of and visitors to our Commonwealth expect.

State	2021 Pop.	PSAPs
Florida	21,828,069	142
New York	19,857,492	150
Pennsylvania	13,012,059	61
Illionios	12,686,649	181
Ohio	11,764,342	112
Georgia	10,788,029	155

ELIGIBILITY RULES FOR 911 FEES:

Each PSAP within a state generally incurs the same types of costs related to call delivery, call processing, and dispatch functions to provide 911 service; however, the eligibility rules and the method for funding these costs differ by state. A benefit of Pennsylvania's relatively small number of PSAPs is more inclusive eligibility rules that allow a broader spectrum of costs to be funded by the 911 fee, while limiting the burden on local taxpayers as much as possible.

FINANCIAL REPORTING REQUIREMENTS:

The FCC annual 911 Fee Reports are a primary source of information about state 911 systems. There are some limitations of the FCC reports; for instance, financial reporting requirements and capabilities vary by state, and some states may only report costs that are funded by a 911 fee. In contrast, Pennsylvania has comprehensive financial reporting requirements that require PSAPs to report all costs for 911 in a standardized manner, regardless of funding source. As a result, Pennsylvania's costs appear higher than many other states.

VARIETY OF 911 FEES:

Act 34 of 2023 authorizes a flat \$1.95 monthly 911 fee in Pennsylvania. Some states have established 911 fee rates higher than Pennsylvania or have joined the growing trend of using a percentage-based model to sustain their current 911 systems and implement Next Generation 911 (NG911). For example, Maryland set a \$2.00 fee and West Virginia authorizes a \$3.47 fee on wireless service. Eighteen states have now established percentage-based fees on prepaid wireless service to reduce the need for legislative action to increase 911 funding – Vermont assesses 2.4% of a consumer's bill rather than a flat fee.

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¹ <https://www.fcc.gov/general/911-fee-reports>

STEWARDSHIP OF 911 FEES:

Pennsylvania counties and PEMA have made extensive efforts to implement strong oversight of 911 fees, emphasize transparency, and control costs while incentivizing consolidation of 911 systems and technology. These efforts are paying off. Prior to 2016, 911 system costs increased by 6% annually, however, the rate of increase has been reduced to 3.5% annually on average between 2016 and 2022. Today there are ten counties in northwest Pennsylvania that share a single 911 phone system, rather than relying on past practice of each county purchasing their own system. Fifty-four counties are currently participating in a variety of projects to share technology, such as phone or radio systems, to cut costs and improve efficiency.

LOOKING AHEAD:

The ability to quickly access 911 is a vital part of the public safety system. It is the critical link between people who need help and the people who are trained to help.

More than half a century after the first 911 call was made, the 911 system is a core service that people may sometimes take for granted. However, the delivery of 911 services requires a combination of personnel, facilities, and complex technology to work together and be available without interruption. Our PSAPs and the dedicated staff who answer the call 24 hours a day are the backbone of the public safety network in Pennsylvania. The Shapiro Administration is committed to supporting their long-term, sustainable growth as we continue to build out cutting-edge Next Generation 911 technology.

The 911 fee is the primary funding source for the critical 911 systems and personnel that provide life-saving services every day in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania's 911 fee is scheduled to sunset on January 31, 2026. Efforts over the next two years to secure funding will be critical to support the upgraded 911 system to ensure that both the public and first responders receive the level of service that is expected and required in emergency situations. ▼



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Operating at 1960 Levels

WHY COUNTIES ARE CALLING FOR A
PREVAILING WAGE THRESHOLD INCREASE



What is the prevailing wage threshold?

Under the Prevailing Wage Act, passed in 1961, publicly funded construction projects in Pennsylvania costing more than \$25,000 are subject to prevailing minimum wage rates and employee benefits for specific localities and classifications. The threshold, which has not been adjusted for inflation or industry changes in more than 60 years, would amount to more than \$250,000 in 2023. Projects that hit the threshold range from lawn maintenance contracts, carpet replacements and broadband projects to construction of prisons, juvenile detention facilities and local courthouses, among many others.

Why does it matter?

Without an increase to the threshold, government entities, including counties, are spending significantly more money on projects that could otherwise be utilized in other areas of their overall budgets. Prevailing wage requirements can increase the cost of many projects, generally by 10 to 15% depending on the region in which the project is being done. But it's not just about the cost of projects – the prevailing wage requirements triggered are hindering local businesses from being able to compete against larger, out-of-state entities. In the post-pandemic era where federal grants are abundant, the unadjusted threshold is creating challenges to expend funds and complete projects.

When asked about impacts other than costs, counties frequently

cite concerns about small business competition as the biggest hurdle to the low threshold amount. Smaller businesses and contractors, that otherwise would be ideal for participating in smaller projects like home rehab projects, do not want to contract for projects or cannot compete with larger entities due to the administrative requirements under the Prevailing Wage Act. Some of those administrative tasks include paperwork, the certified payroll process and general capacity to administer and oversee those tasks, which are often not reimbursable. The threshold as it is currently set limits the number of viable bidders for projects as not all businesses have the time and resources to handle prevailing wage projects. Additionally, Pennsylvania is home to many plain sect owned businesses, who will not participate in prevailing wage projects due to the level of government oversight and involvement. Consequently, Pennsylvanians are not benefiting from the funds provided by state and federal agencies. At the same time, small and local businesses and organizations are frequently overlooked, leading to a disinvestment in Pennsylvania's economy.

Examples of projects that exceed the threshold at \$25,000 that may not at \$250,000

Some projects cited by counties include but are not limited to minor building and office renovations, utility upgrades, carpet and flooring projects, light pole replacement, small bridge

maintenance and rehab projects, guide rail improvements, culvert projects, domestic water tank projects, roof replacements, fencing, window replacements, gutter projects, and demolition projects.

So, what's the ask?

To ensure funding can be spent effectively and efficiently, counties are asking for an increase in the prevailing wage threshold to meet the changes in inflation since the 1960s and to apply an index that will ensure the threshold keeps pace with inflation going forward. To be clear, counties are not seeking changes to Prevailing Wage Act rates, but rather want to ensure the threshold amount meets today's current market realities and can be maximized to the ultimate benefit of the taxpayer in the form of efficient spending and more substantial project delivery.

Project Spotlight: Drug and Alcohol Recovery House Program

Under Act 59 of 2017, the Drug and Alcohol Recovery House Fund was established to provide updates to recovery houses, ensuring individuals recovering from substance use disorder have a safe and supportive, drug and alcohol-free environment, including peer support and other recovery services. A rural county recently identified issues with finding local businesses to complete projects as they do not have the administrative capacity to administer the grant and manage

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the additional processes associated with prevailing wage requirements. This has led to a return in funds to the Department, which are not being utilized to make necessary upgrades to recovery houses that serve some of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable, especially in rural communities.

Project Spotlight: Housing and Whole Home Repair Program

In Clearfield County, 36% of the housing stock was built in 1939 or earlier. The Redevelopment Authority of Clearfield County offers home improvement programs to low-moderate-income owner-occupied housing, with

priority serving senior citizens. Their programs are offered across the county as means of blight prevention. Over the last two years, they have struggle to keep job costs down, due to rise of inflation, and current prevailing wages. These two factors have driven the average prices of home repairs up by 40%.

Recently, the county added the Commonwealth's Whole Home Repair Program, which has a \$50,000 cap per home. This new program places priority on the energy efficiency, habitability and accessibility needs of the home. With that said, 95% of the houses eligible need roofing averaging \$18,000 and electrical work on

averaging \$15,000. Additional needs include and are not limited to windows, doors, insulation, spouting, down spouting, accessible bathrooms, plumbing, porch and furnace repair and/or replacement. With the prevailing wage threshold at \$25,000, and the cost of materials and service increases, the county simply cannot provide all that the housing inspector finds. Additionally, even if there are projects under the threshold, there have been scenarios where a further identified structural issue have taken the project cost over \$25,000 and the original company can no longer provide the repair services once prevailing wage is triggered. ▼

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Affiliate Spotlight

Get to Know: SCHRPP

By Tom Stark
Executive Director



The Society of County Human Resource Professionals of Pennsylvania
An Affiliate of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

The Society of County Human Resource Professionals of Pennsylvania (SCHRPP) was formed in 2010 for the purpose of advancing the profession of human resources in Pennsylvania counties improving the professional development of county human resource (HR) personnel and enhancing the services available to county HR personnel. Today, SCHRPP has evolved into the leading organization for counties and county related entities seeking specialized educational resources and training. Currently, SCHRPP boasts a membership of over 160 individuals from 59 Pennsylvania counties and seven county related entities.

Operating human resources in local government is quite different from the private sector. Collective bargaining agreements, elected officials and 24/7 work environments are just a sampling of the unique areas in county government where HR professionals need specific training. Additionally, county HR professionals are focused on

employee morale and engagement and are spending countless hours on prevention of burnout caused by heavier workloads and reduced staff and hours. Pertinent education and training opportunities are essential to meeting these challenges.

SCHRPP provides its members with regular webinars covering current trends in labor law and related matters, along with three regional discussion forums held in eastern, central, and western Pennsylvania. Additionally, SCHRPP hosts a two-day conference that addresses both legal and non-legal HR topics. Furthermore, all primary members of SCHRPP (HR directors or chief clerks in counties without dedicated HR directors) receive an annual membership to the national Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, www.shrm.org). This membership grants access to a wealth of HR-related resources at the local, statewide, and national level.

A significant advantage of county government HR is the collaborative environment where professionals

can freely exchange ideas and resources. SCHRPP members are able to network on a daily basis using the CCA HR Listserv, which provides an excellent resource to ask questions, share policies, and job descriptions.

SCHRPP membership is exclusive to Pennsylvania county human resource professionals, county related entities, chief clerks and other personnel in counties without a designated human resource staff. Additionally, vendor memberships are available to businesses whose services pertain to the human resources field.

For more information about SCHRPP membership or services, contact Tom Stark, SCHRPP Executive Director, at tstark@pacounties.org.



SCHRPP offers its members the following services and benefits:

- ✔ Free registration for the SCHRPP Annual Conference, held in September of each year. This conference spans two days and covers pertinent legal and non-legal topics relevant to county HR professionals.
- ✔ Free access to six webinars covering hot legal topics, which are presented by SCHRPP's sponsoring legal firms.
- ✔ Three Regional Discussion Forums, offered in Eastern, Western and Central Pennsylvania to accommodate all members' locations.
- ✔ The Primary SCHRPP Member receives paid membership in the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).
- ✔ One free call per month to any of the three sponsoring legal firms for quick legal and labor consultation services. For matters that extend beyond a quick call, members receive up to a 35 percent discount on the firm's hourly billing rate.
- ✔ All-inclusive website for access to industry related resources, sample county policies, news and information, survey data, networking tools, a webinar repository and much more!
- ✔ Mentorship and resources for new county human resource professionals.
- ✔ Voice at CCAP and at the county level as issues arise that could affect county human resources.



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and ultimately to the people and communities of Pennsylvania*

2024 COUNTY GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

911 Funding and Reauthorization

Ensuring swift and efficient 911 access for all residents and visitors in Pennsylvania, regardless of location or time of day.

County Mental Health Base Funding Increase

Accessible and timely mental health treatment and services for all in the Commonwealth, without undue burden.

Addressing Inmates with Mental Health Issues

Providing individuals facing mental health issues with access to services and diversion programs, to prevent incarceration. For those already in the correctional system, provide rehabilitation services to reduce costly interactions with the criminal justice system.

Increasing the Prevailing Wage Threshold

Enhancing county flexibility to allocate limited financial resources across projects and prioritize essential services, easing the burden on taxpayers and government budgets statewide.

Right-to-Know Law Reform

Enabling counties to dedicate time and resources to key services for residents while maintaining integrity and transparency in government.

Vote-By-Mail Reforms

Giving counties needed tools to run fair, secure, and accurate elections, restoring public trust in the election system.

Broadband Access and Development

Ensuring safe and affordable internet access for all Pennsylvanians, regardless of income, geography, or individual circumstances.

Juvenile Detention Capacity Crisis

Providing justice-involved youth with timely community-based services and protection in detention for their safety and that of the community.



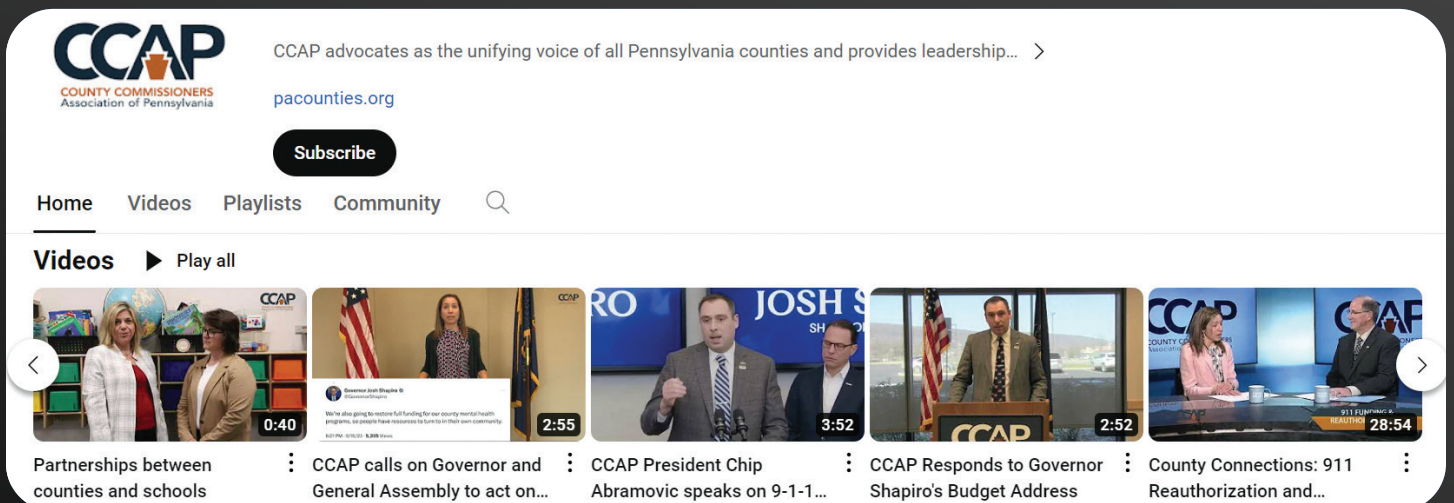
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THE ROAD TO **VOTE-BY-MAIL** REFORM



Thad Hall

Director, Mercer County Elections

The 2024 election will be very busy for county election offices. Analysts expect Pennsylvania to be the most important battleground state in the general election, which means a high stress election that will also stress the capacities of our county election offices.

Fortunately, this election will already be better than 2020 because the legislature continues to appropriate funds for The Election Integrity Grant Program (Act 88 of 2022). These funds are allowing counties to hire additional staff, upgrade equipment, and to provide a higher level of service to their voters. Counties have used these funds to purchase electronic poll books, new mail ballot processing equipment, to hire additional poll workers and mail ballot canvassers, and to upgrade the security of their equipment. These funds are allowing counties to make their election operations evermore secure and effective.

Just as Act 88 improved Pennsylvania elections, the legislature can take some very simple steps to make the election easier for county election offices and to improve public confidence in our elections. First, the legislature should allow mail and absentee ballots to be pre-canvassed before election day. I have experienced the benefits of pre-canvassing first-hand as an election director in Arizona. It allows for all ballot envelopes to be reviewed carefully, without the rush associated with pre-canvassing on Election Day. When ballots can be unfolded prior to Election Day, they scan better

because they have time to flatten. Better scanning means fewer problem ballots that have to be duplicated in order to scan. It also allows for counties to post almost 100% of their results on Election Day, which gives voters confidence in their election results.

Pre-canvassing legislation is also an opportunity for the legislature to improve confidence in the mail balloting process. For example, in Arizona we were required to live stream mail ballot scanning and to have all ballot envelopes reviewed by two-person, bipartisan, pre-canvass teams. These requirements were not difficult to comply with and they created a more transparent process.

The legislature should also address the ongoing questions surrounding mail ballot return, ballot drop boxes, and ballot curing. As they do so, they need to consider who votes by mail. In Mercer County, we have over 1,000 voters who have voted by mail in every election since Act 77 was enacted. The median age of these voters is 76 years old and they live in relatively rural areas. If you look at all mail ballot voters in Mercer County, the median age is a spry 72 years old! As the legislature considers reforms to the mail balloting process, they need to consider who these voters are—older voters who often are voting by mail because they have limited mobility (both physical mobility and access to transportation).

For many counties, allowing drop boxes may be less beneficial than allowing a senior citizen's child or spouse to return their ballot.

Pennsylvania is one of only three states—Alabama and Wisconsin are the other two—that require a person to return their own ballot.

Fortunately, this election will already be better than 2020 because the legislature continues to appropriate funds for The Election Integrity Grant Program (Act 88 of 2022).

One of the most contentious issues around the mail ballot process is ballot curing; allowing voters to correct mistakes made during mail voting. What is important to understand is that the current variations across counties in how they handle ballot curing is going to change over the next several years. The key question is whether these changes come from legislation passed by the legislature or from lawsuits initiated by advocacy groups. Counties are going to be sued in 2024 for either having ballot curing or for not having ballot curing. Having the legislature address these issues in a bipartisan manner would benefit counties greatly. 🍷

SYSTEMATIC FAILURES,
EXPANDING HARMS,
AND RIPPLE EFFECTS:
MENTAL HEALTH IN JAILS



By Melanie Gordon

CCAP Human Services and
Criminal Justice Policy Director

Our mental health system has failed us all. When one individual isn't properly served, the ripples may seem insignificant in the giant pond of a whole society. They dissipate and are gone. As the many years of broken promises for investments to build up community mental health services have compounded, the ripples are now everywhere. The harm is constantly moving through our communities. People in desperate need of help cannot get timely access to adequate services, and in the most dire times can become caught up in the criminal justice system. Jails are the mental health hospitals of last resort across the Commonwealth, and they are overwhelmed.

After 15 years working in county corrections in Pennsylvania, it's become difficult to unpack all the ways in which I've seen the suffering that our broken system has caused. For 11 years of that time, I was also on the steering committee for our county's crisis intervention team. Across the entire spectrum of criminal justice professionals, first responders, and behavioral health professionals, we tried to connect the people in our county to help and their best chance for personal wellness. We worked to keep them out of the criminal justice system. Time after time, we failed. Not because of a lack of effort by genuinely dedicated public servants, but because there was no system to support them. "Diversion" became the key focus of so many efforts, but we still lacked the answer to: divert them to where?"

The mental health needs of individuals confined in our county jails have grown year after year as community services couldn't keep up with demand. Some of the infrastructure was never established following deinstitutionalization; others couldn't meet the demand and wait times became truly unreasonable. Others are inaccessible because of an individuals' lack of funding, insurance, or transportation. Statistics will show that more than half of the people incarcerated in any county's jail have a serious mental illness, but that doesn't fully paint a picture of what it's like to live or work in that environment. It also doesn't show how that number on a page affects all of us, even if you've never been inside a jail.

I am going to share stories that, while anonymous, are real events and not unique. Corrections professionals, people who have experienced incarceration, and the families of both groups could share many similar situations that happen far too frequently and affect their lives right now.

An 18-year-old with ADHD and bi-polar disorder broke into a construction fence (summary trespass) and damaged some of the items (misdemeanor criminal mischief), which started his involvement with the criminal justice system. He was given probation for those offenses after 6 days served in jail. Just over a year later, when he was 20, he was stopped by police in a place that violated his parole, so

he gave them a false identification (another misdemeanor) trying to avoid the revocation. This time, he was sentenced to a year in the county jail. His father had not been a part of his life, and his mother died when he was a child. His grandmother raised him and tried to support him as a teenager when his ADHD and bi-polar caused him to have behavioral difficulties in school. Now, she was financially supporting him through his time in jail and visiting him frequently. His incarceration caused a ripple of harm – to his grandmother. Once again the young man got out of jail. He began dating a young woman, and they had a daughter together. Unfortunately, he wasn't getting treatment for his bi-polar condition and was instead self-medicating with alcohol. When his daughter was under a year old, he was arrested for misdemeanor retail theft. He was incarcerated again. **Ripple.** His girlfriend and daughter were now missing his presence in their lives, as well as his income that the family depended upon. Their relationship deteriorated as he awaited sentencing. His girlfriend decided to end their relationship and began dating another man. I can only imagine the feeling of helplessness that comes from believing you're losing your significant other and access to your child while being stuck in jail. There's no way to work on the issue. You can't drive to your friend's house for a chat, or to grandmas for a hug. Less than five minutes after that unexpected news, the young man

Continued on page 36

tied a sheet around his neck, ran up the stairs to the mezzanine level, tied the sheet to the railing, and jumped. **Ripple.** The officer was on the other side of the housing unit, too far away to intervene as he ran to help. The effects of witnessing that horrific event and being unable to intercede had a negative on the officer's wellbeing and how he interacted with his own loved ones as he dealt with the trauma of that event. **Ripple.** The young man's life was saved by two inmates in the housing unit who were closer than the officer and chose to catch him in his fall.

While the young man survived that suicide attempt, it had lasting impacts on those around him. He would continue to struggle with his mental health, and his court supervision and carceral record made it more difficult to be employed. This has lasting effects on the loved ones in his life. Almost five years after the suicide attempt in jail, he had an involuntary mental health commitment to our local hospital due to being a danger to himself. They were unable to find any mental health inpatient bed able to take him, so he stayed without significant services in the emergency room for the full 72 hour hold before being determined safe to release. **Ripple.** Less than a year later, he would commit an armed robbery and endanger the local community. The eventual incarceration in state prison took him away from his loved ones again.

It's been at least the 17 years of his adult life, and probably well before, where the effects of his mental illness have harmed him, victims

of his crimes, his grandmother, the mother of his child, his child, the correctional staff, and other incarcerated individuals who suffered trauma.

A woman who uses illicit drugs to self-medicate her major depression was committed to the jail while in her second trimester of a pregnancy. Her untreated mental health issue had already caused a ripple to the fetus she was carrying. Because of the nature of her addiction, she needed to take methadone to avoid withdrawal which would endanger the pregnancy. She was immediately referred to a methadone clinic in the area, and officers would transport her each day for her counseling and doses of methadone. For reasons that she would never disclose to correctional staff, she put cotton in her mouth to absorb the methadone and bring it back to the jail, meaning she never actually received her treatment. Staff discovered this, unsure if it was the first time, or if she was consistently missing doses. She was relocated to a different housing area and received doses for two additional days, monitored closely by staff. **Ripple.** On the third day after discovering she diverted medication; she suddenly suffered a miscarriage in her cell.

That potential life was lost. The staff who came to assist and provide treatment were

traumatized by the experience and needed assistance with their own mental health afterward. Unfortunately, the woman's cycle of recovery, untreated mental health, relapse, and incarceration continues to the present. She receives a level of service while incarcerated that isn't sustained when she re-enters the community. **Ripple.** She has been unable to be a parent to her other children, and her sister has become their legal guardian. The relationship with her sister is likely forever broken from these strains.



An individual living with schizophrenia suffered a break. **Ripple.** It resulted in a domestic violence incident with their roommate and actions that they knew would endanger the public. It was only luck that the actions resulted in some property damage and not serious bodily injury or death. As a result, they were incarcerated. They were unwilling to take medication or participate in psychological services. This individual was experiencing delusions and auditory hallucinations. They couldn't be in the general population with other incarcerated individuals because they would act out suddenly, sometimes violently. This unpredictability made it unsafe for others. That meant that the individual was confined in a cell alone for the majority of their day, coming out for showers and individual recreation if they would accept it. It must be incredibly mentally painful to be locked in a small space with nothing to do while having active delusions. However, they would not voluntarily accept any form of treatment. Multiple psychological assessments were conducted, and the law did not allow for forced medication based on the circumstances. The individual was both aware of their rights and criminal responsibility, and demonstrably unable to control their outbursts.

This individual would yell and bang on their cell door, walls, and fixtures for hours at a time. Often, the things they yelled were racially derogatory remarks toward their delusions. The other incarcerated

individuals and staff were subject to these outbursts at any hour of the day and night. Every type of psychological and competency evaluation was conducted, and they passed despite the ongoing serious mental illness. **Ripple.** The rest of the individuals incarcerated in that housing unit were often deprived of a proper night's sleep because of the yelling. Multiple incarcerated individuals reported that the yelling and insults triggered older traumas, deteriorating their mental health as a result. **Ripple.** The staff were subjected to racial slurs and insults routinely, along with the constant noise. In a time where workforce shortages already caused a huge strain on staff with mandatory overtime, this added even more daily stress.

It must be incredibly mentally painful to be locked in a small space with nothing to do while having active delusions.

There was no way to force treatment when the person could pass the assessment, no way to stop the psychological harm they were doing to others, and no place where they could safely be released from jail.

Pennsylvania's county and jail leaders have worked hard to increase the types and amounts of behavioral health treatment offered in jail. The reality is that jail is never the right place for mental health treatment, especially for those suffering a serious mental illness. The setting itself is not a restorative one, stripped of basic freedoms and cut off from every support system a person may have. Even with the most advanced services and treatments available in a jail, individuals may decompensate just for those reasons. Appropriate, accessible, holistic mental health services need to be available in all communities so that individual needs are met before it results in a crisis. Crisis services are needed, but when they respond the right kind of treatment must be available immediately and sustainably. Until we fix the broken mental health system, we're failing individuals in need. We're compounding their traumas until many become justice involved. We're failing their families and loved ones who want to support them. We're failing our first responders, law enforcement, and correctional staff who have become the mental health system of last resort and take that stress and trauma home to their own families and friends. 🍷

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WHAT TO
KNOW ABOUT
THE STATUS OF
**RIGHT
TO KNOW**



Once upon a time, someone requesting a record from a government agency was required to prove that the records being requested were actually public in order for a request to be granted.

Then, in 2008, Governor Rendell reformed the PA Right To Know Law (RTKL) to reverse the burden of proof onto the agency. Now, the agency is required to prove that a record being sought is NOT a public record in order to justify a denial.

At the time, the changes to RTKL must have seemed like common sense and a necessary step toward greater transparency. Today, however, the RTKL is badly in need of additional reform in order to adapt to changes in technology and to commercialization and weaponization by bad faith actors.

When RTKL was last reformed in 2008, most requests and responses were on paper. The law allows duplication fees for paper copies, and the Office of Open Records (OOR) set that fee at 25 cents per page. However, even though Section 1307 of RTKL explains allowable fees and grants the OOR the right to determine them, the OOR has adopted a fee schedule that says agencies CANNOT charge to send records electronically or by email.

Most requests are electronic these days. It is not uncommon for agencies to receive requests for electronically held records amounting to hundreds of pages that require review, collection, and redaction before they can be provided, and the agency can't charge a cent for any of it. Many requesters are now sending bulk electronic requests to agencies across the Commonwealth,

demanding electronic records only, so that they can exploit the records they obtain for commercial purposes. They are profiting off the OOR rule that agencies can't charge for electronic copies. Other requesters are doing it in bad faith in order to cost the agency as much time and money as possible. My agency, Lycoming County, spent over \$52,000 to satisfy records requests in 2023 – an unfortunate new record for us.

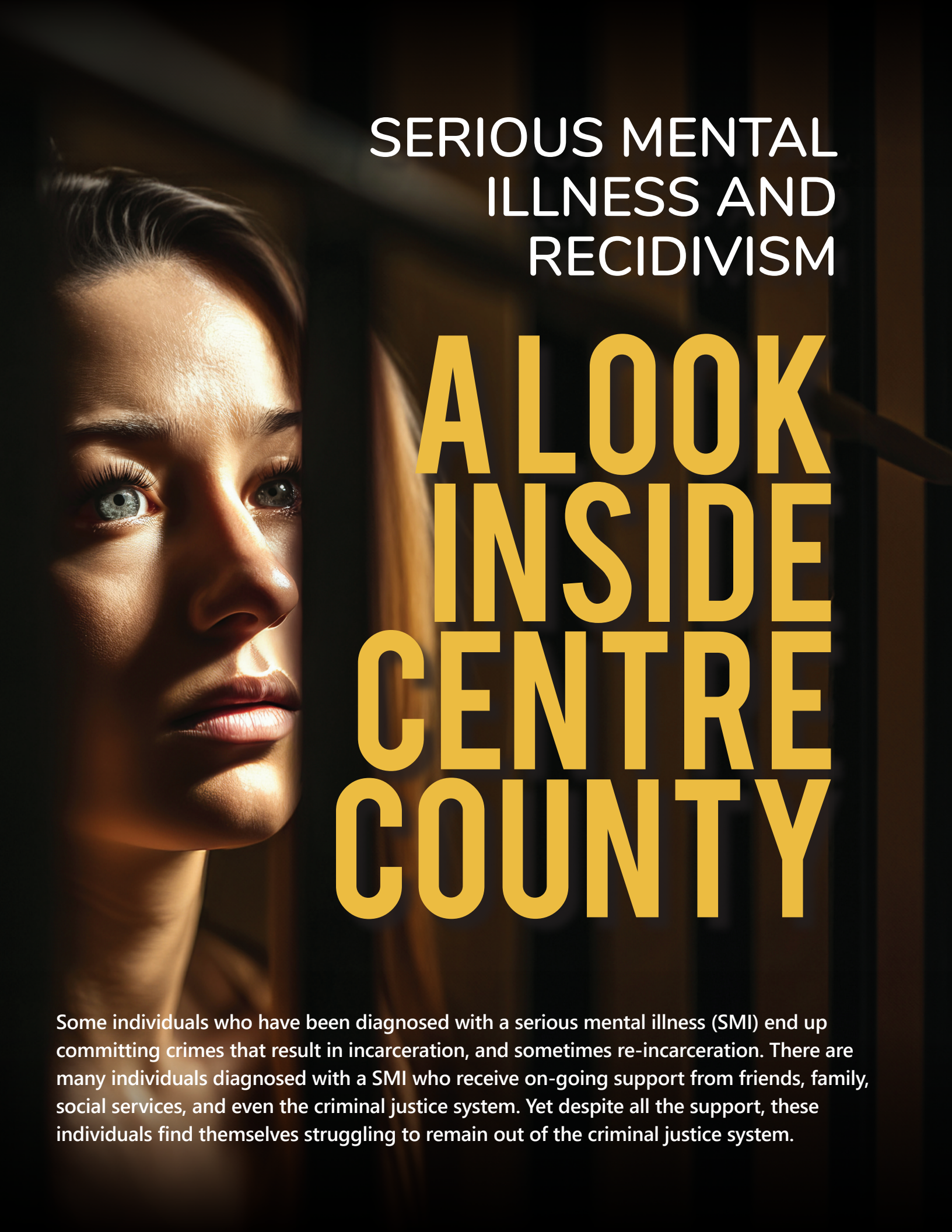
Section 1307 of RTKL must be amended to allow a per-page fee for electronic records, so that public agencies can recover some of the costs to satisfy requests for electronic records. It must be done by statute and not by regulation, because we are now in 2024 and the OOR still hasn't completed the regulations they were required to start developing back in 2008. The most recent draft regulations on the OOR website date back to 2021. A per-page fee for electronic records will also encourage requesters to exercise greater judiciousness with the scope of their records requests.

Additionally, RTKL should be amended to expand the definition of a complex data set to include any paper or electronic records that require manual redaction, so that agencies can recover more of the significant cost to effect review and redaction of exempt information from otherwise public records.

Finally, RTKL should be amended to require requesters to swear or affirm that any information obtained from public records requests shall not be sold or otherwise used for any commercial purpose.

In the absence of reform, there remains an avenue to utilize the RTKL to profit from public agencies' records and severely disrupt county workflows. If the RTKL is not amended to re-center the escalating costs of satisfying records requests onto the small community of frequent and vexatious requesters who are driving the increases, public agencies will eventually have no choice but to pass those costs along to the wider public in the form of tax increases. 📌

Many requesters are now sending bulk electronic requests to agencies across the Commonwealth, demanding electronic records only, so that they can exploit the records they obtain for commercial purposes.



SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS AND RECIDIVISM

A LOOK INSIDE CENTRE COUNTY

Some individuals who have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness (SMI) end up committing crimes that result in incarceration, and sometimes re-incarceration. There are many individuals diagnosed with a SMI who receive on-going support from friends, family, social services, and even the criminal justice system. Yet despite all the support, these individuals find themselves struggling to remain out of the criminal justice system.

The reasons behind why some individuals with a SMI diagnosis recidivate through the criminal justice system are complex and diverse. Some individuals decide to discontinue taking their prescribed psychotropic medications for various reasons. This choice often leads to a decline in their mental health, thus causing them to make poor decisions in the community that can lead to re-arrest. For many individuals with a SMI who are on probation, there are often violations of their probation conditions that involve substance use, or other serious violations, which can result in their reincarceration. There are also times when an individual with a SMI poses a great risk to the community due to their deteriorating mental health. In these instances, law enforcement has no other option than to arrest or re-arrest the individual for the overall safety of the community.

Centre County has recognized that the reasons individuals with a SMI reoffend can vary vastly and be quite complex. Several programs have recently been developed in Centre County to further address these issues, and to assist these individuals in maintaining their mental well-being in hopes of helping them to not re-offend.

One of those programs is the Behavioral Health Diversionary Program, which is run through the District Attorney's office. The objective of this program is to identify individuals with a SMI who are involved with the criminal justice system and redirect them from

traditional criminal justice pathways to mental health treatment systems. By connecting these individuals to community-based treatment services, it is the goal of the program to reduce contact with law enforcement and recidivism. By successfully completing the program, individuals avoid the consequences that lengthy criminal records can have on them when they re-enter society and the workplace. This program has been operating since 2021, and to date, has had at least eight individuals successfully complete the program with no additional charges. Two individuals have been removed from the program for violating conditions of their supervision, and there are currently sixteen individuals in this program.

The second program that just began in Centre County is the Behavioral Health Court. This is a Specialty Treatment Court Program for criminal offenders diagnosed with a SMI who need long-term, highly structured mental health treatment and intensive supervision. Behavioral Health Court is a collaboration between the criminal justice system and the mental health system to address the growing number of individuals diagnosed with a SMI who are involved in the criminal justice system. Behavioral Health Court is a non-adversarial program addressing the specific treatment and ancillary needs of individuals placed in the program, while at the same time holding participants accountable for their actions and assisting them to achieve long-term stability, enhance public safety, and reduce recidivism. Participants can

decide not to be involved at any time. However, if the participant chooses to remove themselves from the program, or is terminated, the traditional court process will resume. Participation in both the Behavioral Health Diversionary Program and Behavioral Health Court is voluntary.

Centre County also has a very robust Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Program which provides intensive training on mental illness for law enforcement officers, correctional officers, probation officers, and other public safety officials. In this 40-hour training, first responders learn about SMI, and have an opportunity to meet with individuals who are diagnosed with a SMI to hear about their life experiences, many involve individuals who had been incarcerated. First responders also have the unique opportunity to visit agencies in the community that can offer services and support to someone with a SMI. This is yet another opportunity to educate first responders on what community resources exist that they can utilize to help divert someone with a SMI away from the criminal justice system and help guide them toward a more treatment-oriented pathway to recovery.

It is hoped that with all the efforts being put forth in Centre County, there will be a reduction in the number of individuals with a SMI who enter the criminal justice system, as well as a reduction in the number of individuals with a SMI who recidivate. 🍷

By **Tina Clymer**, Administrator for Carbon-Monroe-Pike Counties

Real Consequences of an Underfunded Mental Health System



The mental health system has been seriously underfunded for decades. It is common knowledge that prior to the modest, but much appreciated, increase in 2023, there had not been an increase to Mental Health Base Funding for 15 years and there was a 10% cut in 2012. Meanwhile, the cost of living and the cost of doing business has skyrocketed, especially since the pandemic. These factors have left the mental health system, and those who rely on it, devastated.

Why then, you ask, do many counties have surpluses at the end of the fiscal year? This is a multifaceted answer.

- We routinely do not receive our allocation letters until half- or even three- quarters of the way through the fiscal year.
- Without knowing if we are getting funds, we do not create new programs and are conservative with spending on existing programs.
- We often receive one-time funds in our budgets. If we do not know whether funds will be available in subsequent years, we cannot create new programs.
- Some surplus funds can be planned because they are designated to multi-year projects.

Presenting a global picture of the current situation could take pages, so I will focus on one specific issue - mental health housing support services. Some individuals who experience Serious Mental Illness are unable to live in the community without supervised and/or structured settings. Many counties have housing programs

specifically to help these individuals avoid placement in state hospitals, community hospitals, and jails or to transition back to the community from one of these institutional placements. These programs include group settings of 3-8+ people sharing a home with staff in supervised apartments as supported living. The programs have varying levels of staff support from staff checking in daily or weekly to 24/7 staffed settings with clinical treatment provided on site.

These programs are almost always at capacity, underfunded, and with staff who are underpaid. Costs to run these programs have increased exponentially over the past 15 years. Without Mental Health Base Fund increases, counties are unable to increase the budgets for these programs to match their costs. Many providers across the state have closed these programs due to funding and staffing issues.

So, what does that mean to the rest of the world? It means that the people who need this level of support are over-relying on crisis services and not getting treatment for their mental illness, homelessness, couch surfing, hospitalization in community hospitals. Instead they are boarding in emergency departments, getting arrested and even dying. All these things are devastating for the person with mental illness and their family members, but also to the community. These situations increase costs to local resources and insurance, and unnecessarily overburden police and emergency departments.

The wait list for mental health housing services in Carbon, Monroe,

and Pike Counties consists of 101 people. The average wait time is 117 days. Thirty-two of those who are waiting report being homeless. Others are in hospitals, jails, or higher levels of mental health care waiting to be stepped down to less restrictive settings. These numbers are likely under-reported because agencies know the list is so long that they stop referring.

It is easy to overlook numbers and statistics, so let me tell you about two specific people.

JD is a 29-year-old man diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder, Depressive Type. He has a long history of psychiatric hospitalization. In the past, he lived with his mother and stepfather but was impulsive and had delusional thinking that led him to act out against his family and refuse treatment and medication. He engaged in destruction of property in his home. His most recent admission to a Behavioral Health Unit lasted for over a month. Upon discharge, he was deemed to need a level of care with 24/7 staffing and clinical services on site. JD waited for five months for a slot to open in one of only two programs of this kind in our three-county joiner. JD has greatly benefitted from this program and, within four months, was ready to live more independently. JD still needs 24/7 staff to progress in his recovery. He has been waiting for 150 days and counting for something to become available for him. While JD is stuck in this program, which he no longer needs, someone else is in a jail cell waiting for JD's current program to become available so he can move into that program. This gentleman

cannot be released from jail until this space is available to him.

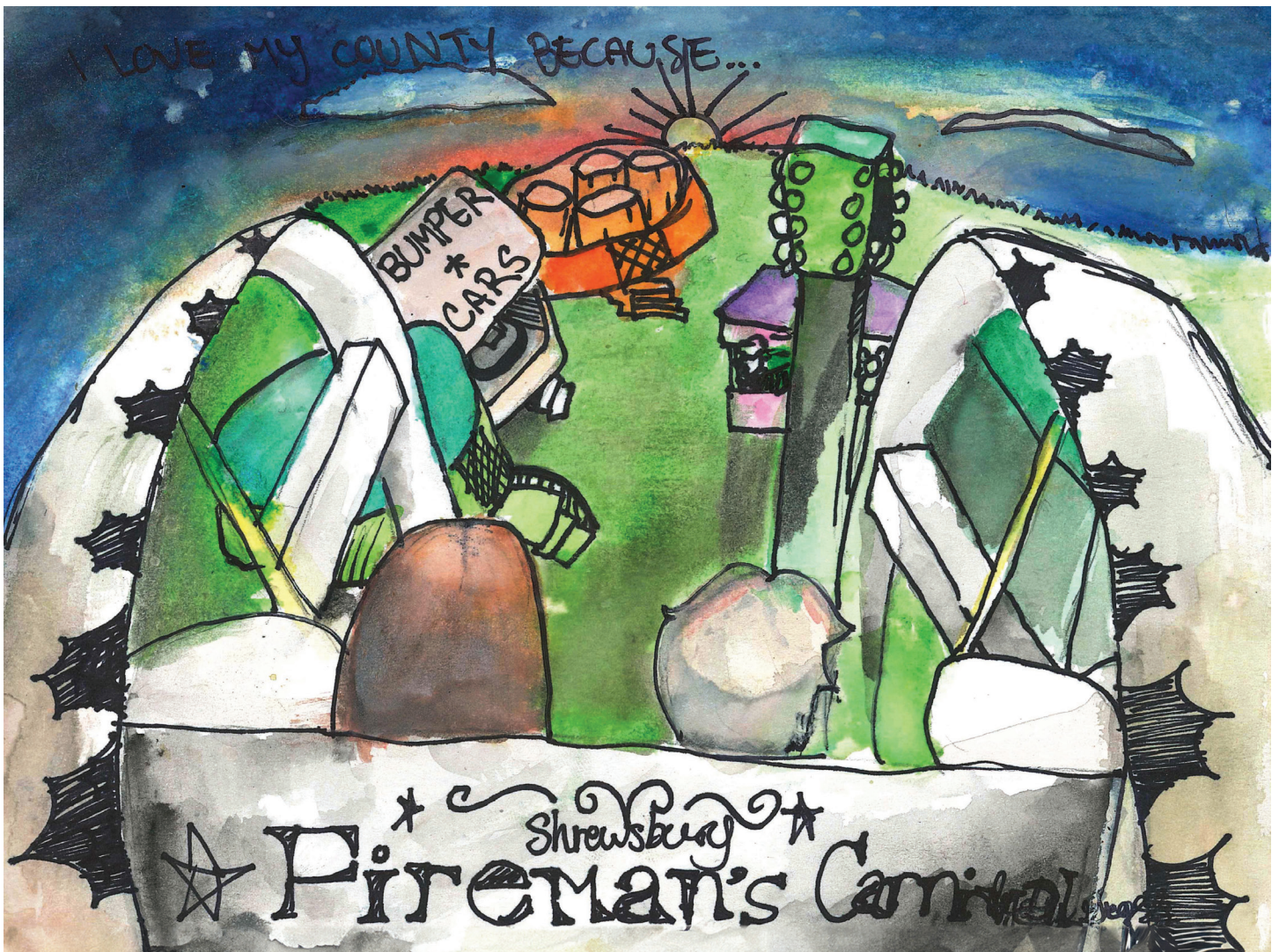
I will also introduce you to Morgan. He is a 51-year-old man who is experiencing homelessness and requires a wheelchair due to bilateral above-knee amputation related to multiple medical issues. In his 20's and 30's, Morgan had a long positive work history. He fell on hard times and developed Major Depressive Disorder with paranoid symptoms. He has had multiple suicide attempts. Most recently, he attempted to end his life by drinking antifreeze. He went to Lehigh Valley Health Network-Pocono's Behavioral Health Unit following this suicide attempt. Morgan languished in the Behavioral Health Unit for 125 days while waiting for a spot to open in the Residential Treatment Program for Adults. He was finally admitted to the program in December 2023. He has been in this program for approximately six weeks and has stabilized medically and psychologically. Morgan will be ready for discharge from this program in just a few weeks, but there is no step-down program available for him at this time.

A substantial increase in Mental Health Base Funds is critical to maintain the housing supports that are currently available but hanging on by a thread. In addition, they are necessary to increase programs in our communities to keep people with serious mental illness from becoming homeless, going to hospitals, going to jail, harming themselves, harming others, or dying.

The names of the individuals mentioned in this story were changed to protect their identity and anonymity. 🍷

NACO'S "I LOVE MY COUNTY BECAUSE..."

ART CONTEST WINNER IS YORK COUNTY STUDENT





Jayden Gross, 4th from left; York County President Commissioner Julie Wheeler, 6th from left; York County Vice President Commissioner Scott Burford far right

The National Association of Counties (NACo) has chosen the artwork of Southern York County middle school student, Jayden Gross, to be featured in the 2024 "I Love My County Because..." NACO calendar.

Gross was honored with a presentation of a Certificate of Achievement and a print of her winning artwork on March 7, 2024 by York County President Commissioner Julie Wheeler, York County Vice President Commissioner J. Scott Burford, and Cultural Alliance of York County President Kelley Gibson.

"It is wonderful to see one of our York County Students be selected for the National Association of Counties 2024 Calendar," Wheeler said. "The future of county government is in the hands of our young students and from looking at the pages of the calendar, the future looks bright. We are grateful for the collaboration with the Cultural Alliance on this project and we congratulate Jayden in her creative accomplishment."

"We are proud of Jayden and the entire art program at Southern York County School District. Jayden's artwork and her initiative to enter this contest exemplify our students' creativity, engagement, and motivation," said

Dr. Robert Bryson, Southern York County School District Superintendent. "Our goal at Southern York County Schools is to provide students with the skills, inspiration, and confidence needed to achieve their potential, and it is inspiring to see what students love about our county."

In summer 2023, students in grades K-12 across the country were invited to create and submit artworks about their counties to raise awareness and inspire conversations about county programs and services. The art contest, co-sponsored by Americans for the Arts—one of the nation's largest arts advocacy and research organizations—aims to spread the word about county roles and responsibilities and raise awareness about county programs and services that impact people's lives every day.

Founded as a United Arts Fund in 1999, the Cultural Alliance's annual campaign currently supports arts organizations and artists that are essential to arts and culture in our community. Over the past 23 years they have invested \$13 million in cash and \$2.5 million in in-kind support for the arts. Through critical operational grants, the Cultural Alliance is the lifeline for arts and culture in York County.

2024 CCAP Spring Conference



Christina Finello, Executive Director, PA Behavioral Health Council



Christopher Gabriel, Gabriel Fera



Kristen Ahrens, Deputy Secretary, PA Department of Human Services, Office of Developmental Programs



Donald Grant, Senior Managing Consultant, PFM Asset Management, LLC



Butler County Commissioner Kim Geyer



Union County Commissioner Preston Boop



Al Schmidt, Secretary of the Commonwealth



From left to right: NACo President Mary Jo McGuire, Berks County Commissioner and CCAP President Michael Rivera, York County Commissioner and CCAP Treasurer Julie Wheeler, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro, Venango County Commissioner and CCAP Board Chair Chip Abramovic, Indiana County Commissioner and CCAP 1st VP Sherene Hess, Snyder County Commissioner and CCAP 2nd VP Joe Kantz



Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro addresses the CCAP membership.



PLGIT Managing Director Brian Sanker (left) and Franklin County's Sam Worley (right).



Dauphin County Commissioner George Hartwick III



Josh Zeyn, Tioga County Chief Assessor at one of the Conference breakout sessions



Dave Kovach, Columbia County Commissioner



Lancaster County Commissioner Alice Yoder



NACo President Mary Jo McGuire



Desiree J. Nguyen, CCAP Managing Director of Insurance Programs



Colonel Christopher L. Paris, State Police Commissioner



Lebanon County Commissioner Jo Ellen Litz



A panel discussion with William Ross, the President of the Municipal Authority Association (left), Michael Gossert, President of the PA School Board Association (middle left), Andrew Boni, President of PSATS (middle right) and Berks County Commissioner and CCAP President Michael Rivera (right)

HOW MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING CAN ALTER A LIFE PATH



By the time he was 46, Jeffrey had literally spent half his life in a cycle of psychiatric hospitalizations, incarcerations, and episodes of chronic homelessness. First hospitalized at the age of 23, Jeffrey was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Like many young adults, he struggled to accept and manage his illness, a struggle complicated by substance use. And, like many young adults, the signs and symptoms of his illness were emerging much earlier resulting in alternative school placement because of his disruptive behavior.

Jeffrey's story highlights the frustrations and missed opportunities of an under-resourced, and all too often, crumbling community mental health infrastructure. It also holds hope, however, for what's possible when there is the right continuum of support at the right time.

It is that continuum of support in the community that not only addresses mental health treatment but understands and addresses the importance that the social determinants of health play in behavioral health. Mental Health Base Funding was established to meet - needs such as housing with embedded and mobile mental health supports, navigation resources that bridge transitions from State-funded institutions like State hospitals and correctional facilities, supported employment/education, and mental health prevention/early identification efforts that divert individuals from these institutions in the first place.

Jeffrey spent 23 years in and out of the State Hospital three times, endured numerous arrests and multiple traumatic incarcerations, was homeless for 13 years across Florida and Pennsylvania, and was most recently deemed "non-restorable" to competency by a State Forensic Center in 2020. After being placed on a housing waiting list while at this Center, he was able to access a Community Residential Rehabilitation Program (CRR). Through the support of a forensic community integration specialist (MH Base-Funded) who could work with him and his hospital center staff to identify, advocate for, and bridge to services in the community, Jeffrey made a successful transition to the CRR (MH Base-Funded) after being wait-listed for two months. He was one of

the "lucky" ones as the average wait in Bucks County for MH housing is about six months (and 3 years if waiting for a highly-intensive level of community residential support) and there are approximately 80 individuals waiting at any given time.

While in the CRR Program, Jeffrey accessed Supported Employment services (MH Base-Funded for many components) to help him identify and obtain a job. He worked to learn other daily living skills and, after a year in the CRR, moved into a lower level of MH supported housing with the same service provider (Supported Housing is also MH Base-Funded). Today, he has a car, a job, and safe housing.

When asked what was/is most important to him, he cites staying out of jail, as he continues to have traumatic memories of that time in incarceration and having a job and a car that allow him to have a roof over his head.

Imagine a system that is sustainably funded and resourced which could have seamlessly intervened in a coordinated and timely manner when Jeffrey was in school and walked with him through his life transitions as occurred in his later life..... it should not take decades for a system to show up for an individual. 🍷



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