

Testimony to the Veteran's Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

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Good Morning,

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak here today.

My name is David Cohick, and I am the Director of Emergency Services for Tioga County. Tioga County PSAP (Public Safety Answering Point) answers calls for Tioga and Potter counties, as well as areas in McKean, Lycoming and Bradford counties. In all, 2550 square miles, an area larger than the State of Delaware.

Since the beginning my employment with Emergency Services 30 years ago, I have seen technology change time and time again. But the purpose remains the same, answering calls for help.

Whether in Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Harrisburg or Wellsboro, the 911 caller expects their emergency call to be answered and to receive the same level of service. Just last week we received a wireless 911 call from a snowmobiler who was visiting the area. His friend he was riding with had hit a tree head on and was laying on the unconscious on the cold ground. His friend called 911, without a clue of his location. Luckily, Phase II technology allowed the dispatcher to pinpoint his location, which turned out to be a misdirected call in the south end of the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon. This information was relayed to the contiguous county for dispatch. While the call was misdirected it proves that that this technology does work and can save lives, and also proves the need for the ability to forward misdirected calls.

Keeping the PSAP up to date with the technology necessary to be able to answer these calls while determining their locations is expensive. Maintenance costs and service charges, fees in addition to the hardware, software and training, are also

expensive. From 7 digit dialing to 911, to E911, to the three phases of wireless, to next generation 911 (NG911), all of these changes have been necessary. We must also remain aware that technology will continue to evolve and 911 must keep pace.

Technology itself in any PSAP is worthless without the trained men and women to answer those calls. Over the past several years Tioga County has lost 27 dispatchers. That represents a 122% turn over. Higher paying jobs in the gas industry account for approximate 80% of that turnover. As a result we have spent over \$300,000 in training alone.

We need to look at the different sources of 911 funding and a better way of dealing with this funding, while distributing funds fairly with the most cost effective outcome. Tioga County receives \$1.50 per land line remitted to the county. \$1.00 per VOIP Line some remitted to the County, some remitted to the state and forwarded to the county. In the past ten years the number of our land lines has seen a 50 percent reduction. While the number of VOIP lines have increased to 2,600 our total land lines are still under 20,000. This represents over \$300,000 in lost revenue.

Regionalization or sharing of services is an avenue to pursue for cost savings. This has been proven in the SW region and northern tier projects. Besides sharing equipment and costs, most counties will be able to rely on another county to act as a backup facility instead of having their own. Let's not forget contiguous counties in surrounding states. 29 counties, (43 percent) in the commonwealth border another state and in some cases two other states. It is just as important for Tioga County and to pass a misdirected call and shared services to Steuben County, NY as it is to Bradford or Lycoming Counties. I am not suggesting that Pennsylvania pay for other states connectivity, merely pointing out the necessity of that connectivity and that the Pennsylvania side of the connection needs to become an eligible expense.

In 1989 Tioga County started receiving 911 calls and dispatching services for Potter County and became the first consolidated county dispatch in the commonwealth. Although this is an option, the decision to consolidate has to

remain with the county government. It should be noted that if counties do consolidate, the non-hosting county still needs funding and staff. The infrastructure and data still have to be in place and local residents still deserve local representation just as legislative offices across the state need local representation.

I feel the legislation should be changed to eliminate the sunset provision. While it is necessary to review the program at a minimum of every five years, if changes need to be made that can be accomplished as necessary and the threat of losing funding without a last minute extension should be eliminated.

Lastly, I think the legislation needs to allow for more flexibility. I currently sit on the 911 Wireless Advisory Board. On several occasions counties had a specific request on their annual application for funding and it was deemed ineligible and not allowed. The county appealed the decision and the appeal was brought in front of the advisory board. Upon review, members of the board clearly agreed with the county as making a practical decision on public safety and cost savings yet the appeal was denied because it did not follow the legislation.

I feel the new legislation should be flexible enough to give the duly appointed board the ability to make funding decisions on issues that cannot yet be predicted, not only during the application process but throughout the year. To illustrate the type of decisions I'm speaking of, imagine it is late July, the funding application process is long over and the state has just begun its new fiscal year. The XYZ County suffers a severe lightning strike and their 911 telephone switch is destroyed. Insurance covers the cost of replacement, however the identical replacement unit is not NG911 compliant. The equipment is in its 4th year and not eligible for an upgrade. It would make practical sense to put in a new 911 switch that is capable of NG911. The board could convene an emergency session, even by conference call, and approve such an upgrade. This goes beyond the eligible expenses but it would be a practical decision. If 12 men and women of a jury can decide the outcome of a defendant's verdict, surely 12 men and women of the board could make a responsible decision on a 911 telephone switch, which would in the long run save money.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and would be happy to answer any questions.