

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

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COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Testimony to the Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to you in regards to needed changes to the E-911 Reauthorization. My name is Rich Fitzgerald and I am the Allegheny County Executive.

I am sorry I am unable to join you today, but thank you for inviting our Emergency Services Chief Alvin Henderson to address you. Our County 911 Center is quite an enterprise, but also offers its challenges in funding. Allegheny County serves 130 municipalities, 197 fire departments, 111 police departments and 51 EMS agencies. We do so with 40 telecommunications officers, 20 call-taking positions and four shift commanders on any given shift. We receive 1.3 million calls a year and serve a population of just over 1.2 million. That number increases, however, each work day as well as any time we host a sporting event, concert or other special event in our community.

Although we have taken significant steps to centralize our systems and regionalize our operations, the cost to the taxpayers of Allegheny County continues to grow and the funds that were expected from 911 have not covered the costs of the service we provide for many, many years. In 2009, the deficit was \$2.2 million. In 2010, it grew to \$4 million. Through efforts on our part, we reduced that deficit in 2011 and 2012 to around \$3.1 million and in 2013 to \$2.7 million. For this past fiscal year, we are projecting that County taxpayers will have had to provide an \$8.51 million subsidy.

In the past two decades, we have combined 46 centers into one. We have done a great job of saving all of these municipalities money and have made the system more effective and efficient for those who have need of the 911 Center. We moved forward with this combined 911 system with no charge to the municipalities. The County assumed this burden based on a funding mechanism being in place, but now with the changes to the systems we rely on for that funding, and with recent changes to the current funding structure, our 911 system is poised for collapse.

Should we continue down this road, we will have very few options available to us – but those include turning the responsibilities of call taking and dispatching back over to the municipalities or beginning to bill the municipalities for the services that we provide. What do we tell our citizens? That they're going to be charged for each call they make utilizing the system?

That's why it is imperative that we make changes to the funding formula, and we recommend several things:

First, there must be an equitable formula that provides a minimum level of funding that is sustainable and known each year. It should be fair for all counties and we need to get away from competing for funds. We have to have reliability and sustainability for the 911 system from the time we receive that first incoming call through when the Center dispatches the appropriate agency to the point in time when the first responder is on the scene.

Second, there should be one funding mechanism for all devices that can contact 911 for response. That's all devices – anytime, anywhere, any place. We can't foresee the future, but written broadly, there is an opportunity to adjust accordingly to encapsulate any future technologies. I know that this is not an option that is supported by the telecommunication companies, but not addressing these uses now means that this legislation will need to be revisited in the near future.

Third, we must eliminate barriers on how funds are utilized. Our 911 Centers must be able to fund the infrastructure that allows us to work and provide this needed service. Each county is different and we should have the ability to make decisions about what is best for our community. We need to have adequate and sufficient funding to meet the citizen's expectations for 911 service.

That doesn't mean that we should be able to buy whatever we want, but it also leads me to our fourth recommendation. Accept the Comprehensive Annual Fiscal Plan that is done annually, rather than requiring a triennial and duplicative audit process. Make the reconciliation process and application process less bureaucratic by updating it.

Thank you for allowing me to submit this testimony. We appreciate the opportunity to continue moving this conversation forward and offer ourselves as resources to you as you move through this process.