

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

February 18, 2015

**Testimony of Gary J. Thomas, Assistant Chief/911 Coordinator
Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee**

Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa and members:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on behalf of Allegheny County. County Executive Rich Fitzgerald extends his apologies that he is unable to attend today, but has submitted testimony for your consideration and reference. I am presenting this testimony on behalf of Chief Alvin Henderson, Jr. of Allegheny County Emergency Services.

First, let me state that our primary focus is to see an increase in revenue to support the continued escalation in costs associated in keeping up with technology. As you are aware, technology is constantly changing and as we continue to chase it to provide needed services to our residents, those expenses far exceed the revenues that are collected under the current funding mechanism. As we are all aware, the funding collected from wirelines and VOIP has continued to decrease over the years. In 2008, Allegheny County received \$8.8 million in revenues as compared to collections in 2014 which only totaled \$7.5 million. Conversely, our expenditures have continued to grow. The cost to operate our system in 2008 totaled \$19.4 million and had increased to \$23.8 million in 2014. While wireless fees help us offset that cost, there are limitations on how such funds can be used and, in the current format, does not allow us to cover the cost of providing this service. Instead, it is Allegheny County taxpayers which are paying to provide a service that benefits all those who live, work or visit our county.

The County Executive has made it clear that something must be done soon as taxpayers will not be able to share this burden for much longer. If the funding of 911 is not addressed, we may have no other option but to return the responsibility for 911 to the municipalities, undoing all of the positive work that we have done thus far, or beginning to bill them for that service. The legislation being discussed recognizes that the Commonwealth and counties must not only maintain current systems, but also invest in future response capabilities based on technologies and citizen expectations. If counties are to retain the requirement to assure that there is 911 service in their jurisdictions, they must also have the resources to meet that requirement.

We are seeking an equitable and fair distribution of the funds collected and we need to eliminate the competition for funds. The consolidation of all revenue streams into a fund that will be channeled through the state and distributed quarterly, primarily on a formula basis, meets that need. Moving away from competitive grants allows for annual budget certainty. This change also serves as an incentive to manage within that budget figure and puts the impetus on the county to manage the services they are responsible for providing within that allocation.

The final legislation should also include an alignment of the PEMA distribution of funds to the fiscal year of the counties for the purpose of budgeting. Currently, Allegheny County will apply for funding in

March, but will not be informed of its allocation until the end of April or mid-May. That time frame means that the County is already midway through its fiscal year, making budgeting very difficult.

Thirdly, the make-up for the 911 Board remains an ongoing conversation, but we believe that the Board should have equal representation across the Commonwealth. This will ensure a balanced board that can work with PEMA as its partner in service delivery, and assures that no one county, or groups of counties, have the ability to control the Board or its decisions. Ultimately, regardless of the final decision on the board make-up, the transparency of the process is absolutely imperative.

Obviously, we support and would advocate for those items contained within the County Executive's testimony that I have not discussed here today. We have been proud to take part in the ongoing conversations in regards to the E-911 rewrite and we are grateful for the opportunity to provide our thoughts on the current draft. I invite any of you to visit and tour the Allegheny County 911 Center. We can talk all we like about the work that our Center does on a daily basis, but seeing is believing and the staff and leadership of the 911 Center are the best of the best. As the County Executive has offered as well, please call on us as a resource for your committee at any time during this process. We look forward to working with you as this legislation is finalized prior to a vote in both Chambers.

ALVIN HENDERSON JR., CHIEF

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