

Testimony on 911

House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

March 18, 2015



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Good afternoon. I am Brian Barno, Vice President of Government Affairs for the Broadband Cable Association of Pennsylvania (BCAP). BCAP thanks you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee on Chapter 53 of Title 35, the Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act.

BCAP appreciates the work this Committee, PEMA, the counties, emergency management professionals, and telecommunication providers have put into this rewrite.

911 services, the ability to gain immediate access to emergency dispatching of police protection or life safety, is a benefit to each and every individual. It is an important, valuable and fundamental function of government.

BCAP's members provide IP-Voice services in the Commonwealth. While we could support a reasonable increase in the 911 fee, the proposed \$2.00 monthly fee is a 100 percent increase which we would oppose.

The expiration of the wireless 911 fee has engendered a wide-ranging debate. There's been an ongoing cry from the counties and public safety officials that they are not bringing in enough revenue. This is despite the fact that Pennsylvania has the third highest 911 collections in the nation (\$184,044,508) and leads the nation in revenue per capita according to statistics compiled by PEMA.

There was initial discussion and proposals tossed around on expanding the funding base to every device that could possibly contact a public safety answering point (PSAP) – not only wireline, IP Voice and wireless, but iPads, Kindles, Nooks, smart watches and maybe even ham radio operators.

I even heard a conversation about needing to identify every restaurant, pizzeria, coffee shop and retail establishment with a Wi-Fi connection to ensure that potential revenue stream was tapped. Under Armour is marketing a “wearable technology” that – in addition to logging pulse rate, calories burned and miles run – could, if a ‘wearer’ was in distress, send a 911 message to a PSAP.

While it’s likely there may never be a “call” from that piece of clothing, in the quest to get in front of the technology, do we draft language to collect 911 fees from Under Armour or retail establishments that sell it? These examples reinforce that it’s incredibly difficult to impose legislation on the fast-changing world of information technology.

We’re told that Next Generation 911 is a huge cost driver. It will allow first responders the ability to see digital photographs and full-motion video of accident sites. That sounds incredible.

Let’s say there’s a traffic accident on a highly travelled area of I-80 or the Pennsylvania Turnpike. In addition to potentially dozens of 911 calls via cell phones, let’s imagine a handful of people sending digital photographs and one person sending a video of the scene. Do we have 911 dispatchers looking at photographs and video and discerning what images are important? A computer scientist friend of mine says there are algorithms that can accept only photographs necessary for a 360 degree visual.

What is truly necessary? What do we need? What will it cost? When we have the Next Generation 911 technology conversation, we have to realize there are still parts of rural Pennsylvania without reliable cell phone service.

In the cable/telecommunications industry, if you took a trip down Nostalgia Lane you'd find dozens of headends and central offices in local communities around the state. Now, all these areas are connected with fiber – eliminating the need for dozens of individual offices. We can trouble-shoot potential outages before they happen – and reroute traffic on redundant fiber paths.

Consolidating facilities is an efficient and effective way to manage a complex telecommunications system. It makes business sense. If anyone suggested we go back to the infrastructure and system we had in 1985, you'd look at them like they had three heads!

It makes economic, managerial and business sense to consolidate facilities when you're dealing with private capital. Do taxpayers deserve anything less?

“If I were to build a PSAP system today from scratch, knowing what we know about network architecture and emergency communications, there would be likely be considerably fewer PSAPs,” said FCC Commissioner Michael O’Rielly at a meeting of the Task Force on Optimal Public Safety Answering Point Architecture in January. “By some estimate, the current structure would be able to operate at optimal efficiency with as few as three [PSAPs] nationwide. Others argue that there should be no more than one [PSAP} per state,” he said.

Pennsylvania’s Legislative Budget and Finance Committee’s 911 study said the high cost per call in the smallest counties suggest the need to further consolidate some PSAPs. As we look at the software and hardware costs of converting to Next Generation 911 over the next five to eight years, we will save money by consolidating into regional PSAPs.

A regional or multiple county PSAP would apply the principles of safety, efficiency and access to best-practice technology. Regional or multi-county PSAPs would reduce capital expenditures for new equipment and repairs, maintenance, and materials costs could be reduced. Consolidated operations would facilitate assessment of overall call volume and staffing needs of the region as a whole and create opportunities to eliminate excess capacity. “The historical concept of ‘stand-alone’ PSAPs contributes challenges such as duplication without redundancy, excessive capacity, higher costs for replacement, support and sustainability, multiple maintenance and management arrangements and the lack of interoperability,” PEMA reported. The agency funded the project encouraging PSAPs to work with other regional PSAPs in a regional shared services assessment – a critical step in the implementation of Next Generation 911.

Any 911 funding formula the General Assembly comes up with needs to seriously incent counties to consolidate PSAPs on a regional basis. As Commissioner O’Rielly said at the public safety task force meeting, “Part of your task is to help determine the number of PSAPs that are necessary to operate an efficient network and do so to the best of your ability, absent political considerations. This function is to create a baseline upon which to measure PSAP modernization as we convert to Next-Generation 911.”

My concern is that this language will just mean ‘more of the same.’ Unless counties have the financial incentive to overcome the “political considerations” Commissioner O’Rielly spoke of, the great plans to upgrade to Next Generation 911 technologies on a regional basis, consolidate PSAPs and maximize efficiencies will just go up on the shelf.

Every several years, the counties come to the General Assembly and tell them they need more money to fund their 911 systems. In an attempt to allow the counties to budget and spend what they think they need to fund their systems, there is a proposal floating around that would authorize counties to impose a Next Generation 911 fee on the residents and businesses in their jurisdiction. BCAP and its members companies fully support this plan. It doesn't attempt to chase technology, puts controls of costs and funding in the hands of the county commissioners and provides for more than adequate funding.

When the original act was passed to help defray the costs of 911 systems, almost every home and business had a telephone line, the fee could have, and in retrospect maybe should have, been added to a different utility but no one at that time had a crystal ball to foresee the technological advances that were yet to come.

BCAP believes the only reason the counties would oppose such a stable funding opportunity is that it would finally bring transparency to the use of tax dollars and separate 911 from the rest of the budgets for police, fire and life safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to share BCAP's perspective. I'll be happy to answer your questions.