

**Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee**

**Testimony of
Montgomery County Commissioner Bruce L. Castor, Jr.
Title 35, PA 911 Emergency Telephone Act
Tuesday, July 30, 2013.**

(1:40 audio sequence of 9-1-1 calls to highlight the nature of the work)

Chairman Barrar, members of committee, I am Montgomery County Commissioner Bruce Castor and on behalf of my fellow Commissioners Josh Shapiro and Leslie Richards, and our more than 800,000 residents, I thank you for holding this hearing today.

Providing emergency response services is about as core a function of government as there is, and as the recording we just played indicates, 9-1-1 is the critical first link between our residents and emergency responders.

Montgomery County just celebrated the 20th anniversary of our 9-1-1 system last month. Amazingly, it has been nearly that long, 16 years, since the 9-1-1 surcharge was last adjusted.

The costs of operating our 9-1-1 system continue to rise while 9-1-1 revenues continue to fall. In the past, the County was able to scrape together funds to pay for needed capital improvements in the system. This year alone, however, we project that we will have a \$3.9 million 9-1-1 operating deficit, money that will have to be made up by our already strained General Fund.

Increasingly, the public is moving away from traditional landlines phones toward wireless services, which currently have a lower surcharge than is on landlines. While revenue generated by wireless service is less than from landlines, the money doesn't return directly to the counties where it is generated. Wireless funds go first to the state, which apportions them out by a formula that does not take into account population density, the 9-1-1 center's call volume, or where the funds are generated.

Additionally, there are restrictions on how much wireless funding can come to counties and how it can be spent. Montgomery County is only permitted to receive a maximum of 70 percent of the cost of the salaries, benefits and training for those employees who work directly in the call center.

The remaining 30 percent of those costs, plus the cost of equipment, maintenance, hardware, software and administration must come either from funds generated by landlines, which have shrunk by 43 percent in just the past two years, or from the county's General Fund.

Montgomery County's Emergency Communications Center handles an average of 2,100 calls daily, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Based on that call volume, a recent staffing study projected that Montgomery County's 9-1-1 system should have staffing of 175 people by the end of next year. We currently have 130. As you heard in the recording, these are people who have difficult jobs. Insufficient staffing leads to increased attrition, which results in additional training costs. It also results in increased overtime and the inability of staff to take the time-off that they need to "recharge" from their stressful work. This, in turn, leads to increased sick time use. That just adds to the burden of those who come in as scheduled and can affect morale.

Mr. Chairman, just last month legislation you sponsored was signed into law that fosters regionalization and cost-sharing measures. We have been working

diligently towards those goals. In the past three years, we have consolidated 12 of 13 remote answering and dispatch points into Montgomery County's Emergency Communications Center and are working on bringing the last one in as well. That represents a savings of \$500,000 annually.

We are consolidating our 32 10-digit phone lines down to six lines, converting our administrative phones to Voice Over Internet, and shifting the monthly airtime charges for Mobile Data Computers to our first responders. We anticipate these changes will save an additional \$600,000 annually.

These are very real and significant savings, but they are not sufficient to overcome the crushing deficit in funding for Montgomery County's 9-1-1 system.

On top of that, Montgomery County is planning for the implementation of Next Generation 9-1-1, which will enable our residents to send text messages, and eventually photos and video, to our emergency communications center using 9-1-1.

NextGen 9-1-1 will greatly improve the quality and speed of emergency response and eventually it will lead to cost savings. However, capital investments will be needed upfront, the first of which will be GIS Point Addressing. We are currently researching what that process will cost.

There really isn't any question of whether Montgomery County will invest in NextGen 9-1-1. We will have to because it will be a necessary element to implementing the Southeast Communications System and the statewide ESInet.

In conclusion, we are asking the Legislature to adopt a bill that will enable counties to set their own 9-1-1 surcharge rates; have those funds go directly to

the counties where they are generated or at the very least, adopt an equitable distribution formula for those funds; and, lift both the cap on wireless funding a county can receive and the restrictions on how that funding can be spent.

On behalf of my fellow Montgomery County Commissioners and all of our residents, I would once again like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of this committee for calling a hearing and inviting us to testify. We look forward to working with the legislature to find long-term solutions to fund this critically important service.