

TESTIMONY FOR THE
PENNSYLVANIA SENATE
COMMUNICATIONS & TECHNOLOGY, LAW &
JUSTICE, AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEES

JUNE 7, 2017



PREPARED BY

BENJAMIN KAFFERLIN
WARREN COUNTY COMMISSIONER
&
TODD LAKE
PUBLIC SAFETY DIRECTOR

Good morning Chairmen and members of the Senate Communications & Technology, Law & Justice, and the Veterans' Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees. I am Warren County Commissioner Benjamin Kafferlin, and I have oversight over the County's Public Safety Department. Joining me today is the Department's Director, Todd Lake. On behalf of the County, I thank you for inviting me to speak concerning the P25 radio system from a county's perspective and its potential to enhance public safety of our constituents across the Commonwealth.

As Major Stackhouse rightly points out, interoperable communications are essential to effectively incident management and, ultimately, public safety. The events of September 11, 2001 have put a spotlight on the inadequacies of public safety communications nationwide, but little progress has been made, particularly in rural communities, such as Warren.

Warren County offers a microcosm of our current difficulties. The County presently operates on three different radio spectrums. Local Fire Departments operate on low band radios, despite the fact that most radio vendors no longer produce equipment in this spectrum. Municipal police agencies operate on the VHF spectrum. Finally, EMS agencies operate on the UHF spectrum. The three spectrums are not interoperable: Fire can talk to fire; police can talk to police; EMS can talk to EMS. This is, of course, not to mention cross-county incidents or communications with state and federal partners that are an integral part of public safety within the geography of the County but are hard to communicate with as they are also on separate systems. If personnel need to regularly communicate with another agency, they have to have multiple radios.

Through collaboration of ten (10) counties in the Northern Tier 911 County Consortium, Pennsylvania's northern tier has a multi-county, IP-based phone system, capable of Next

Generation 911. The same Consortium is implementing a shared Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system that is also capable of Next Generation 911. The only remaining gap from status quo to a fully-integrated, common, regional Next Generation 911 system, including state and federal partners, is the disparate radio systems.

In short, the County does not have a common interoperable channel to coordinate a multi-agency response. There is plenty of unhelpfully redundant systems, but no interoperability.

Warren County is in the process of evaluating multiple options to provide an upgraded radio system to local Public Safety agencies. Funding has been the largest obstacle to moving forward with our radio project. While Warren County's system is decrepit, we are waiting for the State to take the lead on a regional system – one that strategically integrates agencies from top down and bottom up.

Warren County currently owns or leases eight (8) tower site locations. These strategically placed sites provide adequate radio coverage to the majority of Warren County on all three radio spectrums, including coverage of areas that the State Police currently have identified as dead zones. Our tower sites are backed up with battery power, as well as generators. These sites have connectivity through combinations of copper wire circuits, fiber or microwave links.

The Pennsylvania State VHF P25 Radio pilot project could provide counties with the opportunity to have truly interoperable, secure communications between all public safety agencies. The Warren County 911 Center has the ability to contribute tower space and radio spectrum to this project, in addition to regular maintenance and testing. Utilizing the current infrastructure would result in a significant cost savings to the Commonwealth, as well as Warren County.

The County's perspective is that the P25 system is a state-of-the-art option. Most importantly, from a County perspective, this project has the opportunity to bridge the gap in radio communications for all agencies and the region. Existing infrastructure can be leveraged to benefit both State and local agencies, and simultaneously eliminate the need for the Commonwealth to construct or lease multiple new tower sites to cover dead zones. A common interoperable group of channels provided by this project could increase the efficiency, accuracy of communication, and ultimately the safety of our responders. A shared radio system would create the opportunity for redundancy of dispatch capability. The 911 Centers would be capable of assisting State agencies in a disaster situation where communications with a local State Police Barracks were lost. Fundamentally, seamless transitions in redundant communications could save lives.

Pennsylvania's legislators have the opportunity to start from the bottom up, and build a robust system that that can meet the needs of the entire Public Safety community. We strongly urge the Commonwealth to support true interoperable communications systems. Thank you for the opportunity to present a county's perspective.