

Opening Remarks

Sen. Lisa Baker

October 16, 2012

Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing

Good morning.

Pennsylvania's 9-1-1 system is the backbone of our emergency response network. A call for help reaches one of the state's 69 public safety answering points, and from there, a police car, ambulance, or fire engine is dispatched. First responders can arrive at the scene of a car accident, house fire or crime scene before too many critical seconds tick away.

But our 9-1-1 system is showing its age. Technology is developing more rapidly than our equipment, and many call centers are rapidly becoming obsolete. Pennsylvania's funding stream for 9-1-1 centers is becoming obsolete as well. Revenues are based upon the days when everyone in need called 9-1-1 from a landline phone. Today, cell phones have eclipsed landlines in usage. At the same time, never-anticipated technologies, such as texting, webstreaming, Facebook, and Voice-Over Internet Protocol, have become increasingly popular ways to communicate, especially among younger callers.

As mobile devices play a growing role in the daily lives of so many Americans, it only makes sense that callers would use their mobile devices to access 9-1-1.

To cope with this new digital age, we must transition from our current system of stovepipes and silos, and a patchwork of fees, to a fair and forward-thinking funding system.

With each new technological breakthrough, Pennsylvania has struggled to update our laws to accommodate it. But this piecemeal response cannot go on forever. It is time for policymakers to take a more coordinated, streamlined approach that is cost-effective, technology-neutral, stable and equitable.

The expectation is that as early as 2013, wireless carriers will unveil text-to-9-1-1 services, video-to-911 services, and other innovations.

Knowing that big changes are needed, legislators commissioned a study of 9-1-1 funding streams. The findings were released this past May. The Legislative Budget and Finance Committee found some disturbing trends, and sounded the alarm for change. We called this hearing today to begin to craft legislation to implement the improvements called for in the study.

Today, we will hear from committee researchers, and then from leaders in the field about modernizing our 69 public safety answering points and saving the Wireless Fund from bankruptcy. Many counties are already realizing the value of cooperation in the world of 9-1-1, with pioneering projects such as WestCORE and the Northern Tier Project lighting the way.

Across government, consolidation through technology is frequently the answer to achieving efficiencies and economies of scale. Many counties and townships are already sharing services and saving money. By cooperation and consolidation, counties can still remain in control of their 9-1-1 operations, but do so better and more cost-effectively.

As we work to expedite the deployment of Next Generation 911 services, we must involve carriers, manufacturers, the public safety community and other service providers in the solution.

Based upon what we hear from the field, we are looking forward to crafting constructive solutions.