

Statement of Chuck Haston

Warren County Emergency Communications District
TACIR Commission Panel
On the
E911 Funding Study

December 6, 2016

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, good morning. My name is Charles D (Chuck) Haston. For the last 13.5 years I have been the Director of the Warren County Emergency Communications District. Prior to my employment with the District, I spent 2 years as a manager of a commercial radio station and 12 years as an airline pilot. Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective and experiences with you and for the opportunity to contribute to this important study. In preparing my remarks for today, I decided that the best way to describe the challenges faced by the 911 Districts I communicate with regularly, would be to include some of the challenges of my District, Warren County. Our operations, structure, and experiences are similar to others across the state.

The Warren County 911 Center began operation in February of 1995 as a unified communications facility, with 911 call processing and dispatching under the same roof. We serve Warren County in its entirety and dispatch all emergency services. Over the years, this model of operation has served the district, and most importantly the citizens who place their trust in us, well. Warren County was a charter member of TN911 and is a member of the Tennessee Emergency Number Association. We take pride, in the life-saving services we provide the citizens of, and visitors to, Warren County.

In 2003, Warren County 911 was understaffed. We utilized computer systems that booted from a diskette and surplus outdated communications consoles culled from other county departments. In fact, one position was on a folding table....and we had it better than some. The local AM radio station had much better technology than our 911 Center. The talent and skill of the District's 911 Telecommunicators/Dispatchers made up for these technical deficiencies. It was clear to the Board of Directors of the District, and to me given the impending, explosive growth of cellular phones that we had a long way to go.

Collectively, we wondered how we could accomplish the upgrades needed with a quasi-utility financial structure. "Quasi"-utility because most utilities I was familiar with had rate flexibility to accommodate growth. Additionally, the emergency telephone service charge or "rate" did not and does not fully fund the operation as it does with other utilities. City and County Governments contribute to 911 Districts to one degree or another through property taxes. This local contribution was and is a year to year revenue source. There are no guarantees.

We made some progress. We were able to make improvements to pay and benefits but the technology part took a bit longer. We realized that technology, obviously, comes with a purchase price. It also comes with a commitment to train and maintain. 911 Telecommunicators/dispatchers not only have to be proficient in how to use these systems when they are working right, they must understand the system well enough to know when something is wrong. Other considerations... Maintenance and support

agreements for the life of the equipment, routine attention by IT personnel, replacement and upgrades to servers and peripheral devices, insurance, budgeting for depreciation... just to mention a few. Nevertheless, we did what we had to do to increase our staffing, provide the training, and acquire the technology necessary to meet the expectations of our community.

During the late 2000's, faced with declining landline revenue and the ever-increasing demand placed on our 911 center due to the growth of wireless technologies...cell phones, we applied for an increase in our residential landline emergency telephone surcharge, the maximum allowable by law. We increased landline rates to help meet demand placed on our 911 Center by wireless technology. Unfortunately, the gains were temporary. Landline telephone service subscribers continued to decline. We turned to City and County Government for help. Facing their own budget challenges, they did what they could.

By 2013, the financial situation went from challenging to serious. Demand was at an all-time high, technology requirements had changed, and our financial margins had decreased significantly. Over the years our cash reserves, money set aside for continued operation should a catastrophic event occur, went from close to 300,000 to a low point of 60,000. We avoided becoming classified as a financially distressed District by one year. We made tough choices and once again leaned upon the talent and skill of our 911 team behind the consoles to do more work. Something had to give. Our legislators recognized this.

The 2014 911 Funding Modernization Act provided funding stability for 911 Districts in Tennessee. This was a welcome and important step. However, the base funding amount *we* now receive was calculated on 2012 revenue figures.

“Turning toward the future” would fit well in my remarks here, but perhaps we should “turn toward today.” The needs are immediate. Districts continue to experience negative net asset changes. According to TECB Audit Reports, for 2015, of 100 Districts 31 experienced negative net asset changes, 21 for the first year, 10 for the second year in a row. The safety of some of our smaller communities still rests in the hands of one 911 Telecommunicator/Dispatcher. Many districts, including my own are at absolute minimum staffing levels... one major event away from being overwhelmed. Some Districts operate from outdated facilities-facilities never intended for such an important, life-saving endeavor and it is becoming harder to attract and retain the special people, who have the special skills, and the special knowledge of his or her community, needed and necessary to staff 911 consoles. 911 in Tennessee has immediate funding needs.

A system of call delivery exists within the state of Tennessee that supports, and will in the future allow text-to-911, sending photographs, and perhaps video to 911. We have to be ready to accept requests for emergency services through any and all devices and technologies. As it stands today, Districts like Warren County have not yet reached adequate staffing levels to accommodate today's demands.

The 2014 911 Funding Modernization Act stabilized our revenue. Unfortunately the level to which it stabilized is not sufficient to:

- Provide consistent balanced budgets
- Accommodate present-day demands for 911 services
- Retain experienced 911 professionals and increase staffing levels
- Replace outdated or obsolete equipment and facilities
- Maintain adequate cash reserves

Accommodate Depreciation

Consolidation?

Regionally consolidating Emergency Communications Districts or Public Safety Answering Points is not the answer. Unification at the local level however has tremendous advantages. The public expects and deserves seamless, fast and efficient call processing and dispatching. In Warren County, integrated technology means that as soon as the 911 Telecommunicator takes your call and initiates an event in our computer aided dispatching system, Law Enforcement can see the details of the call, the location, nature, and comments as they are being typed. In real time, life-saving information is seamlessly transmitted to first responders. This occurs before first responders are even dispatched by radio. Our employees are cross trained to take 911 calls or dispatch responders. During peak demand they can do both. All employees follow the same operating guidelines providing a consistent, high level of service. In fact, our medical protocols and patient instructions (emd) are tailored to mesh with the treatment they will receive upon arrival at our local hospital. When a life hangs in the balance, we look for every advantage we can get. If, for example, a caller is unsure of his or her location, there is no substitute for a local 911 Telecommunicator who has local knowledge. This local familiarity comes in handy, not every once in a while, but every single day in a 911 Center. In Warren County, if a caller tells 911 there is a motor vehicle accident “next to the old packing barn on highway 30” chances are, we know exactly the location they are talking about. Finally, intra-facility communications is incredibly important. There is a misconception among the public that all 911 calls arrive with all of the available information the first time. We then disconnect, and move to the next phase or event. The reality is that a 911 Center may receive multiple calls from different individuals about the same event or follow-up calls from the same person with more information to pass along. What begins as a verbal-domestic event suddenly becomes a person with a weapon....rapidly and seamlessly getting this information in the hands of responders can make the difference between life or death. Unification at the local level has many advantages. Regional PSAP consolidation would be a step backwards and goes against the grain of community expectations and technology. Furthermore it would add an unnecessary seam into what is would best remain a seamless operation.

Where is the flaw? And what is the solution?

Legally speaking, 911 Districts are utilities, life-saving utilities. It would be easy to argue the most important utility of all. Financially speaking, we are quasi-utility. We are the only utility with a rate written into the law. I would respectfully submit that this has been and remains the nexus of our problems. 911 needs to have the same rate flexibility afforded other vital utilities. The ability to raise rates when demand and technology require it. The ability to plan for growth. The ability to retain the most valuable asset of all, experienced 911 Telecommunicators and Dispatchers and to staff our 911 Centers adequately. We need rate flexibility to accommodate depreciation and to maintain cash reserves. The body best suited to be the rate setting authority is the Tennessee Emergency Communications Board. Perhaps before we discuss specific numbers, we need to engage in discussions to establish a realistic, up to date operational model consistent with the way the majority of 911 communications centers now operate. The traditional approach in Tennessee of funding just the Public Safety Answering Point component of 911, ignores what the majority of 911 Districts in Tennessee have, by default or by design, already become...unified, integrated, emergency communications systems.