

2024 County Government Priorities Key Talking Points for Counties

Counties should tell their local stories, including examples of relevant impacts to their programs and those they serve, within each of the following priorities as appropriate. Consider using the below talking points and county example prompts to highlight why these priorities are important to your county and showcase what positive outcomes would look like for those you serve.

BACKGROUND

- Each of these priorities showcases counties' commitment to the core services they provide to improve the well-being of the people and communities of Pennsylvania.
- Counties deliver services in partnership with the state and seek partnership in decision making regarding their programs and responsibilities.
- Collaboration between the state and counties is necessary to arrive at more effective solutions.

911 FUNDING AND REAUTHORIZATION

Ensuring swift and efficient 911 access for all residents and visitors in Pennsylvania, regardless of location or time of day.

Talking Points

- Counties are responsible to provide 911 services to our residents.
- Since 1990, counties have received state funding to support 911 services. That funding comes from a monthly surcharge on all phone bills.
- Last year, the state increased that surcharge from \$1.65 to \$1.95.
- But system costs are increasing as we work to keep up with technology, and to make sure we have enough well-trained staff.
- With a surcharge of \$1.95, our county taxpayers are still shouldering 25-30% of the system. Back in 2015, the county property taxpayer only funded about 10% of the system.
- Over the next two years, we need our state partners to continue discussions with counties about how to provide the true state funding support the 911 system needs.
- Counties need the state to address technical changes in the law that better meet the current needs of our 911 system.

Tell Your County Story

- Consider using call data to showcase the magnitude of the service that is provided.
Ex: Last year, _____ County answered over ____#____ calls to 911.
- What does NG911 mean to your residents? What can they expect when they call 911?
- What do increased investments into the 911 system look like for your county?
Ex: With implementation of NG911, residents will be able to _____.
- While an increase in a surcharge will likely be minimal, don't be afraid to discuss what this will provide for your residents.

COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH BASE FUNDING INCREASE

Accessible and timely mental health treatment and services for all in the commonwealth, without undue burden.

Talking Points

- Counties play a crucial role in delivering vital services, including mental health support, on behalf of the state.
- Base funds are state funds allocated through counties that support education, prevention, and other services to address local needs.
- Prior to last year, the legislature flat-funded county base funds for 15 years, even cutting funding in 2012.
- The \$20 million increase counties received last year was appreciated, but only scratched the surface of the actual need that exists.
- Counties estimate that the current funding needed to restore the community-based mental health system exceeds \$1.2 billion.
- Counties are seeking a \$250 million increase directly toward the county base funding, separate from other state investments, such as funding for school-based mental health services.
- This substantial investment in county programs will ease the burden on various system partners, including law enforcement, jails, emergency rooms, and schools.
- The state must invest in the system holistically – addressing mental health, particularly for children and families, shouldn't be an "either-or" proposition.
- Creating a separate mental health system only continues the siloed system in place now as we compete for limited funding, resources and workforce.
- Counties stand ready to be part of the solution along with stakeholders in the communities we serve.

Tell Your County Story

- To the extent possible, include local stories that may resonate with your legislators. For example, was there a situation that occurred within your community that could have had a different outcome if there were more available funds? Or is there a success story your community has seen that comes from a program that base funds paid for?
- Talk about the numbers – what does your county's base funding currently go toward?
- If the county were to receive an increase in funding, what programs or services could you stand up or develop? What would the actualized impact of these services be? (i.e., number of residents that could be served, potential savings that could be seen from keeping programming at the community level, predicted decreased stress on another community system/partner)
- If your county continues to receive level funding, what impact does that have to the services you provide?
- There is a continued focus on investing in schools and youth mental health. How is your county working to collaborate with schools or other partners on programming for youth?

- Humanize the story – remember, you serve the same constituents. Providing examples or stories for how these programs are impacting the communities you jointly serve is critical. Without providing specific identifiable information, are there stories you can share of how this funding positively impacts the lives of those individuals and communities you serve?

ADDRESSING INMATES WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Providing individuals facing mental health issues with access to services and diversion programs, to prevent incarceration. For those already in the correctional system, provide rehabilitation services to reduce costly interactions with the criminal justice system.

Talking Points

- When mental health issues aren't properly treated, they can cause behaviors that lead to interactions with the criminal justice system and ultimately our jails.
- Our jails are not equipped to address the needs of people who need mental health treatment, nor are they the best place for people with mental health issues to be.
- This inevitably results in poor outcomes for those individuals and for their communities.
- County jails have for years been reporting a steady growth in the population of inmates within the jail who have mental health issues, and they struggle to provide the services and treatment to meet those increasing needs.
- For these individuals to have access to services and to help keep them from ending up in jail in the first place, there must be a serious working relationship between the state to enhance community behavioral health and crisis capacity.

Tell Your County Story

- If available, consider highlighting the percentage of inmates in your jail with behavioral health issues.
- If available, discuss the increase in inmates with significant behavioral health issues over time (i.e. the past five years).
- Are there any diversion programs your county has in place currently that have aided in reducing recidivism?
- Provide any other relevant statistics and data you may have to make the case for this increased need or the successes of alternative approaches to incarceration for those individuals.
- Don't forget to humanize these individuals. They often are not violent-repeat offenders, but rather those who may have committed a minor crime or were in a situation where their mental illness resulted in their arrest. Discuss why jail often is not the best place for these folks.
- Consider tying this priority to the need for increased county mental health base funding. If investments are made upfront for mental health services and prevention, how might this reduce burden on the inmate issue?

INCREASING THE PREVAILING WAGE THRESHOLD

Enhancing county flexibility to allocate limited financial resources across projects and prioritize essential services, easing the burden on taxpayers and government budgets statewide.

Talking Points

- Under Pennsylvania's Prevailing Wage Act, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry sets minimum hourly wages for specific occupations that must be paid to workers on publicly funded projects of more than \$25,000.
- These wage rates are typically higher than local market rates, increasing the cost of construction, maintenance and infrastructure projects for local governments.
- For counties, examples of these projects include broadband projects, construction of prisons, juvenile detention facilities and local courthouses, among many others.
- The \$25,000 threshold that triggers these prevailing wage requirements has not been increased since the 1960s.
- In 2024, virtually all public construction projects in the counties are now subject to prevailing wages.
- By raising the \$25,000 threshold to meet 2024 levels, counties would be able to again take on smaller projects at local wage rates, rather than prevailing rates.
- This means public dollars could be used more efficiently and stretched further to meet the needs of Pennsylvania's communities.
- To be clear, counties are not seeking changes to Prevailing Wage Act rates or to eliminate the Prevailing Wage Act – counties simply wish to return the use of prevailing wage to a similar playing field as 60 years ago.

Tell Your County Story

- Cite examples of projects that have met the threshold and the cost difference associated with the projects.

RIGHT-TO-KNOW LAW (RTKL) REFORMS

Enabling counties to dedicate time and resources to key services for residents while maintaining integrity and transparency in government.

Talking Points

- Counties believe that government has a responsibility for transparency and accountability to its residents and stakeholders.
- There is a balance that must be maintained among access, privacy and security concerns.
- However, the number of Right-to-Know requests counties receive continues to increase, particularly from repeat requesters and requesters who want extremely large amounts of information.
- In recent years, this has also started to include increased requests for overwhelming amounts of election-related information, often impacting county election offices amid their other duties administering elections.
- Many times, these requests are vague, overbroad, or simply very large.

- In turn, this has dramatically increased workloads for county governments to deal with these requests.
- Counties are seeing more and more of these requests for large databases from commercial businesses.
- Counties are unable to recoup any of the additional costs for these requests because the current fee structure does not allow any fees beyond duplication and mailing costs.
- This ultimately forces taxpayers to foot the bill for these types of requests.
- Counties are fully supportive of the need to be transparent, but the law needs to be updated to help address the burdens caused by vexatious and commercial requesters.
- We can provide transparency while still meeting the initial intent of the law.
- Counties propose a specific timeframe around elections when election-related requests can be temporarily halted.
- This ensures that information can still be provided while allowing county staff to concentrate on essential election tasks rather than handling disruptive records requests.
- With proper reform, counties will be able to dedicate time and resources to providing key services to residents, while maintaining integrity and transparency in government.

Tell Your County Story

- Consider using data points around RTKL request volume in recent years.
- Without disclosing identifiable details, discuss a scenario (or several) where requests have been used to intimidate, harass or tie up county resources.
- Has your county had an influx of requests related to elections? To the extent appropriate, note the increase in RTKL request volume since Act 77 of 2019.

VOTE-BY-MAIL REFORMS

Giving counties needed tools to run fair, secure, and accurate elections, restoring public trust in the election system.

Talking Points

- Counties take their responsibility for the fair, secure and accurate administration of Pennsylvania's elections very seriously.
- Since Act 77 of 2019, which expanded mail-in ballots to all voters, there have been multiple court decisions and appeals trying to help interpret different provisions of the law.
- Counties have identified aspects of the Election Code that need clarification to help them fulfill their responsibilities in election administration. These areas include ballot curing, signatures, naked ballots, and undated or misdated ballots.
- Two specific focus areas for counties are pre-canvassing and adjusting unrealistic deadlines for mail-in ballot applications. These changes aim to significantly improve the election experience for both counties and voters without compromising ballot security or voting access.
- Extending the pre-canvassing period gives counties more time to prepare mail-in and absentee ballots for counting and helps manage workloads and resources, ensuring timely availability of results.

- Moving the application deadline back to 15 days before an election achieves two critical goals: providing voters enough time to request a ballot and assuring voters that their ballot will be properly counted if they meet the deadline.
- While counties are fully confident in their ability to administer run fair, secure, and accurate elections, we need the state's support to become as efficient as possible.

Tell Your County Story

- Stick with the facts – how many mail-in ballots (absentee and mail-in) did your county receive in the most recent election?
- Consider using this as an opportunity to highlight different voter education outlets and where to find factual information about the voting process and deadlines, including your county website and any places/outlets you post updates about elections.
- Try to avoid the argument of whether mail-in ballots are good or bad. Rather, what logistics are needed for the county to carry out a secure, efficient and timely election with the voting methods and logistical obligations currently in place?

BROADBAND ACCESS AND DEVELOPMENT

Ensuring safe and affordable internet access for all Pennsylvanians, regardless of income, geography, or individual circumstances.

Talking Points

- Business, education, health care, emergency services and other key parts of our everyday lives rely on access to broadband.
- Counties have been working for years on expansion and access efforts, building relationships and creative solutions with industry and community partners to provide internet connectivity for their residents.
- With the promise of more than \$1.1 billion in historical one-time funding available, collaboration of the public and private sector is critical to expanding broadband and identifying successful approaches and best practices.
- Development and access extend beyond physical connection and include affordable access to devices, digital literacy, cybersecurity, and other existing barriers to internet usage.
- Counties must be brought to the table in discussions surrounding expansion, access and equity efforts in our communities. We stand ready to continue aiding in bridging the digital divide through stakeholder partnerships.

Tell Your County Story

- Provide details about your any expansion, development or access projects your county has been involved in, including number of houses served, costs, partnerships, contributions from the county, etc.
- Provide any information about plans you may have to further bridge the digital divide, including any upcoming efforts to partner with community anchor institutions on digital literacy, cybersecurity and access programs.

JUVENILE DETENTION CAPACITY CRISIS

Providing justice-involved youth with timely community-based services and protection in detention for their safety and that of the community.

Talking Points

- Counties are responsible for juveniles who interact with the criminal justice system, providing diversion programs and services as well as shelter care and juvenile detention.
- These services are designed to assure the individual needs of juvenile offenders are met while also ensuring community safety.
- Evolving policies on juvenile services have led to the closure of many county detention facilities, as counties seek to use community services wherever appropriate.
- Staffing shortages have also made it more challenging to keep detention facilities open.
- This now means that increasing cases of serious and violent juvenile offenders are outpacing the availability of detention options.
- Counties are finding that youth charged with violent crimes are being placed in inappropriate settings, and counties have been forced to contract secure detention beds and send youth out of state.
- We must make it easier to provide sufficient staffing numbers in detention facilities and provide the proper treatment for youth with complex behavioral needs in these settings.
- Addressing these challenges ensures that juveniles involved in the justice system receive timely community-based services, and that they are cared for and protected in detention settings when necessary for their own safety and that of the community.

Tell Your County Story

- If available, discuss placement availability over time to place juvenile offenders.
- If available, provide information about the cost to the county for placements last year/over the past five years (or another appropriate length of time).
- Discuss how a detention shortage affected the safety of juveniles, staff, or the community.
- How has your county addressed this issue short-term?