

Developing PSAPs and Telecommunicators

Comments of the Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association

5/28/03

Here are three recommendations from Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association members supporting the use of 911 Funds generated through the proposed new monthly surcharge on wired telephones.

Background

Because of funding limitations (the unique and declining Massachusetts Directory Assistance surcharge) 911 telephone surcharge revenues have only been able to fund the Telephone Equipment Part of the 911 Program. Other states use 911 telephone surcharge revenues to fund both Telephone Equipment Part and the Call Processing Part of a complete 911 Program.

The 911 Telephone Equipment Part of the 911 Program includes the costs of 911 telephone network services, special circuits and dedicated switches; the costs of 911 ALI databases and their support elements; and the costs of telephone answering equipment to deliver a 911 call to the ear of a public safety dispatcher in a PSAP.

The 911 Call Processing Part of the 911 Program includes the costs of the personnel, training, computer and radio equipment, as well as support services, required in the PSAP to answer a 911 call, to properly determine the nature and extent of emergency services required to service the call, to properly alert the required emergency services, and to effectively help callers perform pre-arrival tasks so important to reducing injuries and improving scene and caller safety.

Massachusetts has recently raised about \$7.5 million yearly from its (DA-only) 911 telephone surcharge whereas others states similar in size (Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Indiana, Tennessee and Washington) raise \$30-90 million yearly to support all parts of their 911 programs.

Many PSAP's need operational support to enable them to provide the 911 call answering and call processing services required by their citizen callers. They do not have the equipment, staffing, training, or procedures necessary to most quickly and effectively answer and process 911 calls according to state and FCC requirements. In other states similar in size to Massachusetts the great majority of the funds raised from telephone line surcharges go directly to PSAP's to help pay some or all of the operational costs of 911 call processing so that citizens can get the prompt and efficient results they expect when calling 911.

Recommendations

1. Use 911 Funds to Support Adequate Pre-Service Training and Certification of newly hired 911 Operators

- We should insure that every 911 Operator is properly prepared and certified to answer and process 911 calls.
- Approximately 300 new full-time 911 operators are hired each year across the state; they currently are required to receive only 16 hours of training which is currently focused mostly on two topics: how to operate the 911 phone device ("APU") and how to operate the TTD keyboard system so that calls from hearing-impaired persons are handled properly.
- Over the last two years, the MCSA and the SETB have developed and now sponsor a 5-week Dispatch Academy that bundles 15+ mini-courses and delivers 7 certifications for each graduate.
- The Academy is far undersubscribed; less than ¼ of newly hired dispatchers are able to attend. This is mostly because localities cannot afford to pay their personnel while they are not sitting in a chair in the local 911 center. In general, only the wealthier communities have been able to send their dispatchers to the Dispatch Academy.
- The Fund should support the prudent and reasonable costs of full participation in the Dispatch Academy by paying for new dispatchers to attend. If 300 dispatchers attend 200 hours of Academy training at an average of \$15/hr each (whether reimbursed to trainees or localities), the training support costs to the 911 Program would be approximately \$900,000 each year. This is a very modest amount to pay to assure, over time, that

all 911 operators have the skills and certifications required to answer and process 911 calls according to state standards.

2. Use 911 Funds to Support Adequate In-Service Training and Continuing Education of 911 Operators

- Currently 911 operators/dispatchers are required to receive no in-service training each year. Many actually receive no in-service training at all and have received little or no training over many years of service as dispatchers
- Contrast this with the 40 hours of yearly in-service training that every police officer receives, and the greater amount of yearly in-service training received by every firefighter and EMT.
- Standards should be set for in-service training for dispatchers and funds provided for the prudent and reasonable costs of participation in this training. Only thoughtfully developed and state-approved in-service training can develop the hundreds of skills needed to handle any and all of the state's emergency events. Examples of skills that need development include: ability to handle suicidal callers, ability to question callers about domestic violence events; changing use of Emergency Medical Dispatch cards; supporting fire companies at the scene of a hazmat; managing a hostage or barricaded suspect situation; coordinating mutual-aid for a mass casualty event; understanding communications interoperability; operating 911 TTD devices; using on-call language interpretation services for 911 callers; activating the town Emergency Operations Center; liability of police dispatchers; managing dispatcher stress; etc.
- The fund must support the prudent and reasonable costs of full participation in in-service training by paying for current dispatchers to attend. If the state's 2000 dispatchers attended 16 hours of In-Service training at an average of \$15/hr, the costs would be approximately \$500,000 each year to insure participation.
- The State of Washington is a model for our consideration: their state 911 Fund sets aside \$2,000 each year for each dispatcher's training needs. Under state guidelines, the funds can be used in various ways such as funding in-house training run by larger PSAPs or reimbursing PSAPs for attending regional training programs. Funds are used to pay relief costs so that dispatchers may be freed up to attend training.

3. Use 911 Funds to Expand Support for PSAP Equipment and Materials Sufficient to Process 911 Calls

- PSAPs need to continue to receive the equipment and supplies provided through the 911 Program
- Additional 911 call-handling related equipment needs to be provided. Here are just three examples of equipment or services that need to be continued or provided under SETB standards.
 - Headsets – allow 911 operators to clearly hear callers and speak clearly back to them. Cost: about \$50/each in quantity: maximum of \$50,000 to insure that headsets are available to all PSAPs.
 - EMD card sets – provide life-saving instructions to 911 callers. Cost: Maximum of \$500 per set. Usually one set is kept at each 911 phone position. There are approximately 770 phone positions (“APU”) among the state’s 265+ PSAPs. This cost would be a one-time expense of \$385,000.
 - Language Line service – allow non-English-speaking 911 callers to receive 911 service. Costs vary on service arrangements. If a master contract was negotiated on behalf of PSAPs that do not have this service provided in another way, the cost might be less than \$50,000/year.
- Many other items are needed and should be considered as well.
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See www.ma911.org for more information on MCSA and its views on 911 Funding.