

State's 911 system needs to be studied

Act 1171 of 2013 created the Blue Ribbon Committee on Local 911 Systems. This committee studied 911 for more than a year, and then in December 2014 provided recommendations to then-Gov. Mike Beebe and the legislature. The committee stated, "The state's 911 system can no longer be funded through wired lines as 911 calls in Arkansas are overwhelmingly wireless." Think about this: before cell phones, there may be one or two 911 calls for a car wreck. Someone would run into the closest business and dial 911. Now every motorist that passes by the accident dials 911, and each call has to be answered and taken as seriously as the next. A 911 operator has to be present to answer all these calls. Therefore, staffing has been increased to handle the call volume.

The state levies a 65-cent user fee on cell phones per month; each person with a cell phone pays \$7.80 a year for 911 services. In 2015 this fee generated \$18,957,120.76. This amount was split among more than 130 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) across the state. The national average for the 911 user fee is approximately 95 cents, so most Americans pay around \$11.40 for 911 services per year.

Another source for 911-dedicated revenue is wire-line tariffs. In 2015 the revenue generated from wireline phones totaled \$7,390,852.52. Wireline revenues have decreased significantly over the past years but should plateau since most people have already tossed out their landline. Most landlines now belong to businesses.

The last source of dedicated revenue for Arkansas' 911 system comes in the form of legislation passed in 2013. Act 442 of 2013, known as the Telecommunications Regulatory Reform Act of 2013, provides additional funding for county-operated PSAPs. This act directed \$2 million to counties, using a formula that provided more funding to smaller counties. This is a flat amount that does not grow from year to year.

The Tax Foundation released a study in October that said Arkansas is the ninth highest taxed state for wireless services. If you look at your cell phone bill you will see that you also pay sales tax to your provider. The state sales tax collected on cell phone service is treated no differently than the regular sales tax. The state sales tax collections of 6.5 percent are

distributed as follows: 4.5 percent to the General Revenue Fund, 0.875 percent to the Educational Adequacy Fund, 0.5 percent to the Property Tax Relief Trust Fund, 0.5 percent to the Highway Fund, and 0.125 percent to the Conservation Fund. None of this revenue is dedicated to 911 services. The lower taxed states have more dedicated revenue directed to 911 services. For instance, in Tennessee and Mississippi the 911 user fee is set at \$1 — 35 cents higher than Arkansas. Should a portion of this sales tax be diverted to 911 services?

In 2015 there were approximately 2,345,304 911 calls placed to 911 centers in Arkansas. Ninety percent of those calls were made using a cell phone. Sixty-seven percent

GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS



JOSH CURTIS
Governmental Affairs
Director

The state levies a 65-cent user fee on cell phones per month; each person with a cell phone pays \$7.80 a year for 911 services ... The national average for the 911 user fee is approximately 95 cents, so most Americans pay around \$11.40 for 911 services per year.

of the dedicated revenue comes from the wireless user fee. The other 10 percent of the 911 calls were from landlines, which accounts for 26 percent of the dedicated revenue. The number that the counties focus on is

\$20,821,055.76. This is the amount of money counties and cities are spending to supplement 911 operations.

The Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2015 allowed the governor and the legislature to appoint the Legislative Criminal Justice Oversight Task Force. This task force and Gov. Asa Hutchinson brought in The Council of State Government (CSG) to perform an outside, non-biased study of Arkansas' criminal justice system. CSG worked with all the stakeholders in the criminal justice system and has delivered recommendations to the task force. The majority of these recommendations are supported by the majority of the stakeholders. Most legislators believe these recommendations will be supported in the upcoming session and be enacted into law. A subcommittee of the 911 Blue Ribbon committee has recommended a similar study be conducted on Arkansas' 911 system. For something to change, an out-

911

Continued From Page 20 <<<

side group should come in and bring all the stakeholders together to talk about reforming the system.

One subject that should be studied and reviewed is how many PSAPs are adequate for Arkansas. There are 132 PSAPs in Arkansas. Is that too many? The County Judges Association of Arkansas voted earlier this year to support a bill that places a moratorium on new PSAPs. This is a bill the judges will propose in the upcoming session to coincide with a study of our 911 system.

Technology is another issue. The governor and the legislature are always looking for ways to increase technology to improve inefficiencies and to save money. I can get on my phone right now, push a button and have an Uber car pick me up within a few minutes. I wouldn't have to give my location and the driver would know exactly where I was from the technology on my smart phone. If Uber can find you that easily, then why can't 911? People can argue that Uber is only in the highly populated areas of the state, and there isn't a demand for it statewide. That's a fair argument, but there is a high demand for 911 services statewide. If Uber can use this technology in downtown Little Rock why can't 911 use something like this to better serve Arkansans all across the state.

Next Generation 911 (NG911) is an Internet Protocol (IP)-based system that allows digital information (e.g., voice, photos, videos, text messages) to flow seamlessly from the public, through the 911 network, and on to emergency responders. This is technology that will improve communication and save lives because of faster response times. Is Arkansas ready for this technology? Another topic the out-

side consultant should look at is training for dispatchers. The turnover rate for 911 dispatchers in Arkansas is one of the highest in the country. What can we do to minimize the turnover rate?

The news normally opens the show with "good evening," and then tells you everything wrong with the world. In this day and time, law enforcement has to be perfect with every decision they make. The media likes to point out when one law enforcement officer makes one mistake, and it's magnified. 911 is far from perfect, but there are places in the state that come very close, and the rest of the state can learn from them. Citizens in Calhoun County deserve the same service as those in Benton County. Obviously the response time cannot be the same for all Arkansans because not everyone is the same distance from a fire station or a hospital. One thing that should be consistent is the reaction time. When you pick up the phone and dial 911, the fire truck or the ambulance should leave its post around the same time whether you make the call from Benton County or Calhoun County.

Going into the 91st General Assembly, every legislator has heard many wants and/or needs from multiple constituencies. So how does the legislature maneuver these needs and how important is 911? Many people believe public safety is the No. 1 job incumbent on our government. This legislature supports our men and women in uniform and the job they do to keep us safe each day. If you ask an officer what is the most important tool they use, just about all of them say communication. That starts as soon as someone dials those three digits.

Advertiser Resource Index

AAC Risk Management.....	47
AAC Workers' Compensation Trust	55
DataScout.....	Inside Front Cover
Apprentice Information Systems, Inc.....	14
Crews and Associates.....	3
Custom Pavement Maintenance and Safety	8
Guardian RFID.....	43
Ergon Asphalt & Paving.....	4
Financial Intelligence	28
Nationwide Insurance.....	25
Rainwater Holt & Sexton, PA.....	Back Cover
Southern Tire Mart.....	59
Tax Pro.....	10

This publication was made possible with the support of these advertising partners who have helped to underwrite the cost of County Lines. They deserve your consideration and patronage when making your purchasing decisions. For more information on how to partner with County Lines, please call Christy L. Smith at (501) 372-7550.