



NYSAC
— NEW YORK STATE —
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

**The United Voice
of New York's
Counties**

Funding the Future of 9-1-1 in New York State

APRIL 2025



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Background

In 1968, the United States designated 9-1-1 as the universal telephone number for emergency assistance. Since then, New York State’s 9-1-1 system has evolved alongside advancements in cell phones, fiber optics, and global positioning systems (GPS). Today, residents across the state benefit from rapid emergency response services—often arriving within minutes or even seconds of placing a call.

What began as a State Police–administered program has devolved to the county level, where local governments now fund, operate, and maintain 9-1-1 systems. This paper explores the evolution of New York’s emergency communications infrastructure, the critical role counties play, the projected system upgrades for the next decade, and the ongoing funding challenges.

From Devolution to Consolidation

Initially, 9-1-1 answering services were handled by the State Police, who dispatched first responders to general emergencies. Over time, administration was decentralized and delegated to local governments, particularly those with police and fire departments.

Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) are the facilities where 9-1-1 calls are answered and emergency personnel dispatched. Historically, counties housed multiple PSAPs across various municipalities. Over the past decade, however, most counties have consolidated into a single PSAP to improve coordination and efficiency. From these centralized locations, dispatchers coordinate with local police, sheriff’s offices, EMS, state troopers, park police, and other relevant agencies.

This consolidation has enabled law enforcement to better adapt to modern challenges and has streamlined emergency response operations.

Preparing for Next Generation 9-1-1

Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG 9-1-1) refers to a suite of system upgrades that allow call centers to:

- Pinpoint a caller’s location using mobile GPS;
- Accept photographs and videos;
- Translate text messages;
- Maintain service during high call volumes.

While the State has begun investing in NG 9-1-1 infrastructure, there is no timeline for full implementation. Counties must proactively plan and secure financing to adopt this vital technology.



Current Funding Mechanisms

Public Safety Communications Surcharge on Contracted Cell Phones

This surcharge, appearing on monthly cell phone bills, is currently \$1.20 per contracted device. It was introduced in 1989 to fund emergency communication services. However, only \$0.70 of the fee goes toward public safety programming, while \$0.50 is diverted to the State’s General Fund under Tax Law Section 186-f.

Since 2010, the total amount diverted has increased from \$39.7 million to over \$113 million in 2024, according to the Empire Center for Public Policy. Counties may also opt to impose an additional \$0.30 surcharge locally with legislative approval. These funds are more flexible than state-controlled revenues.

Public Safety Surcharge on Prepaid Devices

Authorized in the 2017–18 Enacted Budget, this surcharge applies to prepaid wireless devices sold in New York. The State collects \$0.90 per transaction, while counties may impose an additional \$0.30 local surcharge. This fee is collected at the point of sale and excludes “Lifeline” devices. To enact the local surcharge, counties must adopt a local law and notify the Department of Taxation and Finance.

Landline Surcharge for Enhanced 9-1-1

Under County Law §§ 308–309, counties may impose a \$0.35 monthly surcharge per access line on landlines, collected by service providers. Some counties, like Broome and New York City, are authorized to impose higher rates. These funds support the cost of enhanced 9-1-1 services.



The NET 9-1-1 Improvement Act

Passed in 2008, the New and Emerging Technologies (NET) 9-1-1 Improvement Act mandates that funds collected via mobile service surcharges be used exclusively for 9-1-1 services. It also requires the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to provide annual reports on the collection and distribution of funds for 9-1-1 services. According to the FCC, New York State has diverted more than \$1.3 billion of the \$3.1 billion collected. In response, the FCC has threatened to withhold federal grants.

In New York, Assemblyman Billy Jones and Senator Monica Martinez have introduced legislation (A.5910 / S.196) to ensure more money is available for grants and reimbursements to counties for PSAP development and operations.

The Future of 9-1-1 in New York

Counties continue to invest in the future of emergency communications, including integration with FirstNet, the national public safety broadband network. However, funding shortfalls often delay these improvements, especially in areas struggling with basic interoperability.

To ensure public safety communications keep pace with technological advancements and public expectations, NYSAC urges the following policy actions.



Policy Recommendations

End Diversion of Funds

Ensure that all revenue from the Public Safety Communications Surcharge is used exclusively for its intended purpose—funding emergency communications systems.

Codify Annual County Allocations

Enact legislation requiring the State to distribute funds to counties on an annual basis, providing predictability for local budgeting and long-term planning.

Streamline the Funding Process

Simplify the process through which counties apply for state funds. Reducing administrative hurdles will ensure that public safety dollars are used effectively.

Support Regional Collaboration

Provide leadership and coordination for county consortiums that aim to make regional infrastructure investments. The State should foster statewide interoperability through strategic guidance and support.



Conclusion

Counties are the front line of New York’s emergency response system. They answer every 9-1-1 call and dispatch the appropriate personnel, but they cannot continue to modernize and operate these essential systems without equitable and consistent support. The State must partner with counties to ensure that New Yorkers have access to fast, modern, and reliable emergency services—no matter where they live.



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