

Research Plan: Public Chapter 1103, Acts of 2026, Tennessee's Emergency Communications System

Research Director: Jennifer Barrie

Project Lead: Hannah Newcomb

Support: n/a

Deputy Executive Director Approval: Initial: *MMB* Date: June 1, 2026

Executive Director Approval: Initial: *CML* Date: June 1, 2026

Purpose

To study the emergency communications system in Tennessee, including methods to increase operational and financial consistency and uniformity of all emergency communications districts (ECD); the consolidation of ECDs; and an analysis of ECD call sharing, potential benefits of a statewide system, and direct dispatch protocol of public safety answering points (PSAPs).

Background

Emergency communications systems and services are integral to public safety in the United States—people rely on calling 911 when they have an emergency requiring a quick response. Over the years, as technology has continually evolved, 911 systems across the country have been challenged to adapt, upgrade, and pay for the changes. One key example is the upgrade to enhanced 911—or E-911—which provides the location of the caller and a call-back number for 911 calls from wireless phones—that was necessary as technology transitioned from landline to wireless phone service.

The Tennessee Emergency Communications Board (TECB)—the state board overseeing 911 operations—is considered a national 911 leader. It has been recognized with several national awards since 2005 and continues to respond to changes to maintain its effective and award-winning system. In 2015, the TECB began making the shift from an analog system to a digital system known as Next Generation 911 (NG911), to allow for new types of data exchange and communication, such as texting. Tennessee was one of the first states to fully implement the new technology and currently has a multi-year contract out for bid that will bring the state's core services of NG911 to version 3.0. This upgrade will

better connect and aid every 911 center in the state and provide a redundant system in case any districts were to go offline.

Currently, 100 emergency communications districts (ECDs) serve their local jurisdictions delivering 911 services across the state, mostly covering county areas. A local board of directors governs each ECD. Each district has one or more call centers—known as public safety answering points (PSAPs)—that receive 911 calls and route them to emergency services agencies, including law enforcement, fire, and EMS. Currently there are 142 PSAPs in the state that receive 911 calls, called primary PSAPs, and a number of secondary PSAPs, which are often backup centers or centers where calls are transferred from primary PSAPs.

The law defines ECDs as municipalities, but they cannot levy or collect taxes. Prior to 2015, ECDs could levy a surcharge or fee on telephone services to fund 911 service. Public Chapter 795, Acts of 2014, effective January 1, 2015, changed this by implementing a flat statewide \$1.16 fee on all telecommunications devices that can connect to 911. The rate was increased to \$1.50 beginning in 2021. During the second session of the 114th General Assembly, Senate Joint Resolution 48, which would have increased the fee to \$1.86, passed in the Senate and the House but was later vetoed by the Governor.

The TECB distributes revenue from the flat fee to the ECDs. This revenue can be used for the lease, purchase, modification, upgrade and maintenance of equipment, systems, services and devices necessary to provide reliable and up-to-date 911 service and other services to ensure compliance with the TECB Minimum Technical Operating Standards. The fee distribution is a base amount equal to the average of total recurring annual revenue the district received from distributions from the board of 911 surcharges for fiscal years 2021, 2022, and 2023 and cannot be less than the amount the district received in fiscal year 2023. The TECB distributes the fee to ECDs six times a year.

Almost every other state uses a similar fee on telecommunication services to fund 911, setting fees at the state or local level, or both. Other states distribute 911 fee revenue based on population, call volume, call-taking positions, district acreage, or a combination of these, and some states use 911 fee revenue to reimburse districts for expenditures. In an effort to share resources, lower costs, or improve efficiency, some states have consolidated or attempted to consolidate operations, either by mandate or by making it voluntary.

The TECB encourages both ECDs and PSAPs to consolidate and offers financial support up to \$250,000 to each ECD and \$150,000 to each PSAP to assist with their consolidation. The TECB determines the amount of financial support provided to each district on a case-by-case basis after a site visit and analysis. If two ECDs consolidated, and they each had one PSAP that consolidated, that would be a total of up to \$800,000.

While Tennessee is leading the way, technology continues to change quickly, posing a challenge to adapt to the evolution of telecommunications, fund the state's E-911 system, and operate the system in an efficient manner. To address these concerns and update information from previous commission reports on E-911, Public Chapter 1103, Acts of 2026, sponsored by Senator Walley and Representative Bricken, directs the commission to study the emergency communications system and ECDs in Tennessee.

The study must include

1. an analysis of the current funding model for emergency communications systems in this state, and a comparison of the funding models of other states;
2. an analysis of the different operating structures of emergency communications districts (ECDs), along with the benefits or disadvantages of each;
3. an organizational chart of all ECDs from leadership down to the public safety answering points (PSAPs);
4. methods to increase operational and financial consistency and uniformity of all ECDs in this state;
5. a discussion regarding the consolidation of ECDs and analysis of ECD call sharing, particularly in rural areas;
6. the rationale behind maintaining multiple ECDs and whether a uniform, statewide system would be beneficial;
7. an analysis of requiring direct dispatch protocol at all PSAPs; and
8. any other related topic TACIR finds would be of interest to the general assembly, along with recommendations for legislation.

Define the Problem

It is unclear whether the state's E-911 system is operating cost-effectively, how it could be improved, and whether more funding is needed to support it.

Assemble Some Evidence

- Interview sponsors of the study bills.
- Review relevant legislation and committee hearings, including but not limited to the following:
 - Senate Joint Resolution 48 by Senator Massey and Representative Carringer, and
 - Past legislation intended to address this issue.

- Interview other stakeholders to understand their concerns and determine what is driving the issue. These include but are not limited to representatives of the
 - Tennessee Emergency Communications Board (TECB)
 - Emergency communications districts
 - Public safety answering points in the state
 - Local government officials, including but not limited to city and county mayors, chiefs of police, and sheriffs
 - County Technical Advisory Service (CTAS)
 - Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS)
 - Tennessee Emergency Number Association (TENA)
 - National Emergency Number Association (NENA)
 - National Association of State 911 Administrators
 - Telecommunications providers
- Review Tennessee's statutes and regulations relevant to emergency communications and other topics germane to the study.
- Review existing programs, including those of nonprofit organizations in Tennessee, designed to address this issue, and interview stakeholders involved with such programs.
- Review relevant federal statutes and regulations.
- Review emergency communications systems, regulations, and programs in other states.
- Review relevant literature on emergency communications systems, including previous commission E-911 reports.
- Gather relevant data sets such as financials, call volumes, and population.

Proposed Research Timeline

- Problem statement and research plan May 2026
- Research
 - Assemble evidence (May-August 2026)
 - Construct alternatives and select criteria (August 2026)
 - Convene panel for discussion at Summer commission meeting
 - Project outcomes, confront trade-offs, and select draft recommendations (September 2026)
- Storyboard, outline, and write the report (October-November 2026)
- Draft report to the commission for comments (Fall 2026 commission meeting)
- Final report to commission for approval (January 2027 commission meeting)



State of Tennessee

PUBLIC CHAPTER NO. 1103

SENATE BILL NO. 1898

By Walley, Gardenhire, Campbell

Substituted for: House Bill No. 1702

By Bricken, Reeves, Baum, Atchley, Marsh, Reedy, Scarbrough, Powers, Sparks, Barrett, Hurt, Maberry, Carringer, Boyd, Crawford, Mitchell

AN ACT relative to a study on emergency communications.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. The Tennessee advisory commission on intergovernmental relations (TACIR) is directed to perform a study of this state's emergency communications system.

SECTION 2. The study required by Section 1 must include:

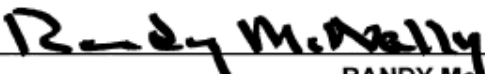
- (1) An analysis of the current funding model for emergency communications systems in this state, and a comparison of the funding models of other states;
- (2) An analysis of the different operating structures of emergency communications districts (ECDs), along with the benefits or disadvantages of each;
- (3) An organizational chart of all ECDs from leadership down to the public safety answering points (PSAPs);
- (4) Methods to increase operational and financial consistency and uniformity of all ECDs in this state;
- (5) A discussion regarding the consolidation of ECDs and analysis of ECD call sharing, particularly in rural areas;
- (6) The rationale behind maintaining multiple ECDs and whether a uniform, statewide system would be beneficial;
- (7) An analysis of requiring direct dispatch protocol at all PSAPs; and
- (8) Any other related topic TACIR finds would be of interest to the general assembly, along with recommendations for legislation.

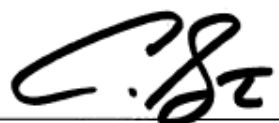
SECTION 3. TACIR shall file the completed study with the speaker of the senate and the speaker of the house of representatives on or before January 31, 2027.

SECTION 4. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.

SENATE BILL NO. 1898

PASSED: April 22, 2026


RANDY McNALLY
SPEAKER OF THE SENATE


CAMERON SEXTON, SPEAKER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APPROVED this 22nd day of May 2026


BILL LEE, GOVERNOR