

PSAP Tours with Elected Officials

A How-To Guide for a Successful Event

Why Host a Tour of Your PSAP?

There is no better way to understand the important role that 911 plays in the public safety system than to spend a few hours watching the dedicated people who answer the calls for help from your community 24 hours a day.

Many of the elected officials who make decisions about how 911 is funded and governed, both at the local and national level, would benefit from experiencing even an hour in a PSAP. While planning for a visit from an elected official may seem daunting, a few simple steps can help plan a meaningful visit that will bring attention to the challenges that exist for the 911 community. In addition, a successful tour can create a lifetime advocate for 911.

“I’ve visited a number of local 911 call centers in my district as well as the Office of Unified Communications in Washington, DC. While each center I’ve visited has been staffed by confident and capable professionals, each faces its own unique challenges. I encourage all my colleagues to visit a 911 center themselves to learn more about what we can do as legislators to support them.”

- Congressman John Shimkus (R, Illinois-15)
Co-Chair, NextGen 9-1-1 Caucus

I. Schedule the Visit

If the elected official instigates the tour request, identify a single point of contact to serve as a liaison with the official’s staff. Ensuring a single contact can prevent confusion in scheduling details and provides confidence to the official’s staff that the tour will be a good use of the elected official’s time.

If the PSAP wishes to instigate a tour request, first, research protocols to ensure it is appropriate to reach out to an official to request a visit. If the PSAP can request a visit, be sure to do so using the appropriate method.

Elected officials, such as members of Congress, state officials and county commissioners, often receive requests for appointments through their schedulers or staff. As these individuals often have busy schedules, you may need to follow up on the initial request by phone or email a few times. Look up contact information for the city, county or state official or their office *online*. The sample invitation letter included in this toolkit provides appropriate language to request a visit.

Should staff persons attend?

If the elected official is unable to visit the PSAP but suggests that someone from their staff attend instead, do not be disheartened, and take advantage of the opportunity. This person will serve as a great resource in advocating 911 issues for you directly to the official. Members of the staff often counsel lawmakers on issues such as public safety and can help raise awareness of 911 issues within the official's agenda.

Timing the Invitation and Visit

While it is beneficial to host a tour any time of the year, consider inviting officials for a tour during April, which is National 911 Education Month. Linking the tour date with a milestone awareness event like National 911 Education Month will help generate a sense of urgency for scheduling a visit. Referencing National 911 Education Month in your invitation and in all media materials may help to generate more interest in the visit, both by the official and the media.

“Those who answer 911 calls – the “first first responders” – act quickly and provide comfort, all while maintaining a professional attitude. It’s not an easy job, but it’s an important one. Talking directly with those on the front lines of emergency communications drives home why we need to support them and the entire first responder community.”

- Senator Amy Klobuchar (MN)
Co-Chair, NextGen 9-1-1 Caucus

See next page for a sample invitation letter.

Sample Invitation Letter

**Note to user: Send letter or email using your PSAP's letterhead*

Dear [name of official or scheduler],

I would like to invite [name of official] to visit the [name of PSAP and town/city/county] during the month of March or April. National 911 Education Month and Telecommunicator Week are both honored in April and, as you know, public safety and the evolving landscape of 911 technology are important topics that affect every citizen in [town/city/county].

911 services play a critical role in ensuring that first responders and emergency medical services are there to help your constituents when they need it most.

We hope your visit to our call center or public safety answering point (PSAP) will help develop and strengthen relationships between [name of official] and our local public safety leaders in 911. By meeting the people who answer the calls of [name of official]'s constituents, [he/she] will get a sense of the real issues and successes of 911.

Consider the recommendation of Congresswoman Anna Eschoo:

"Each and every day our local 9-1-1 call centers are on the front lines making sure that emergency information is delivered quickly and accurately to first responders. I encourage my colleagues to meet these dedicated professionals by visiting their local call center and seeing first-hand how new and innovative technologies are enhancing the information available to 9-1-1 call takers."

During the visit, we will demonstrate the current technology used to process 911 calls, the public safety needs unique to [town/city/county], and the duties call-takers and dispatchers perform throughout a shift.

We are happy to accommodate [name of official]'s schedule. Please feel free to contact me at [phone number] to discuss dates that might work for the [role of official's, e.g. city councilman's] schedule.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[PSAP Manager name]

[Title]

[PSAP name or location]

II. Plan the Itinerary

The official's staff or scheduler may request a more detailed schedule of events for the PSAP tour and what it will include. By creating an itinerary, you are able to set realistic expectations for the official, prepare your staff and secure any necessary resources to ensure that the visit goes as planned. This visit should prove worthwhile and meaningful for both your PSAP and the official.

Sample PSAP Tour Itinerary

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 1:00 – 2:00 pm | Lunch and/or meeting with [name of PSAP manager/tour guide] and [name of third-party supporter like the local police chief/sheriff, state 911 administrator or other industry expert who is supportive of advancing the state's 911 services] |
| 2:00 – 2:15 pm | Break |
| 2:15 – 2:45 pm | Tour of operations headquarters and dispatch center – photo op with local media |
| 2:45 – 3:15 pm | Meet with dispatchers, staff, and review technology |
| 3:15 – 4:15 pm | Sit alongside PSAP call-takers |

Make the Most of the Experience:

- **Choose a busy time for 911 calls.** To provide your visitor with the most well-rounded experience of a PSAP tour, it is best to select a time in which you usually receive a high volume of calls for a variety of situations.
- **Identify and prepare staff members to interact with the official.** Well before the tour, select a call-taker, dispatcher, and supervisor/manager who have an exemplary service record and who are well-spoken and comfortable around those not familiar with 911 services. Brief them on the purpose of the visit, the objectives for both the PSAP and the official, and share a few talking points for when they meet with the official.

III. What Should You Say?

Your key objective during the PSAP tour is to educate your elected official or staff person about how federal and/or local legislation (as appropriate for the official's title) impacts your service and efforts to advance 911 systems. Your official is also interested in learning about the issues that are important to you.

Develop Your Message. It is important to develop your message regarding how legislation and regulations affect your local PSAP and 911 service. Be prepared to tell your unique story in a clear and succinct manner that avoids industry terms and jargon or requires insider knowledge of 911 issues.

- **Profile your service.** Develop a one-page overview of your operation, including the types of services offered, area served, number of employees, years of service, local innovations, and partnerships with local public safety, public health, and health care organizations.
- **Emphasize impact on the community.** Explain how your service benefits local constituents and your contributions to society such as education at schools, senior centers, and businesses.
- **Gather local statistics.** Research and share statistics about your community, such as population, average number of calls per day/week/month/year, local socioeconomic status, etc.
- **Share the impact of legislation and policies.** Describe the impact of federal policies on your service and the official's constituents. Some policies that might be discussed are Next Generation 911 (NG911) planning and implementation, location accuracy, MLTS challenges, text-to-911 capabilities, cybersecurity concerns and plans, as well as governance and how 911 collaborates with other public safety agencies and leaders.

Be prepared to explain the current challenges for 911 and your local solution.

- **Review the concepts of NG911.** Share both local and national progress toward an IP-based system of 911. Educate the official about the nature of 911 services and the need to update technologies to meet the needs of the community.
- **Relate the concepts of NG911 to the local community.** Share the history of your region or PSAP's previous efforts to upgrade 911 services and discuss how the transition to NG911 is the same or different than previous challenges. Provide specific information about what progress has been made toward NG911, what steps remain, and what resources are needed to successfully implement NG911.
- **Address any other important issues.** While the future of 911 is important, it is also appropriate to highlight other challenges that the official's support may help mitigate.

Note: Be sure to tailor the conversation to the issues that the particular visitor can have an impact on. Speaking about federal funding needs to a city council member may not be the best use of their time; however, talking about the need to engage local 911 leaders in local emergency planning discussions may be appropriate. Be aware of the official's voting record and positions regarding public safety issues.

Deliver Your Message. Be sure to wrap your talking points about local 911 issues into the conversation throughout the day.

- **Begin with an introduction.** When the official or staff person arrives, introduce the individuals that they will be meeting during the visit.
- **Thank the member or staff person.** Be sure to give thanks to the visitor during the beginning of their visit and for their time that day and for previous support of 911 services.
- **Review the visit itinerary.** Provide an outline of what to expect for the day, appropriate protocols and safety procedures, and sign any necessary release forms or documentation.
- **Follow up.** After the visit, write a thank-you letter to the official thanking them for their time and participation. This letter is a good opportunity to recap some of the local 911 issues and topics discussed during the visit, and to follow up on any action items or requests. A PSAP tour may serve as the first step in establishing a long-term relationship with an elected official that may result in future efforts to support the needs of the 911 system.

IV. Media Coverage

An elected official visiting a PSAP is a great opportunity for media coverage focused on both the official's good work and to lend a voice to important local 911 issues. While organizing the visit with the official's office or staff, be sure to discuss making arrangements with local newspapers or TV stations. The official's office may have already made arrangements with media, but if not, inquire about this. News stories about the local impact of federal legislation affecting emergency communications elevate the status and urgency of the issues.

Get Ready to Invite Local Media.

- **Determine logistics.** Make arrangements for a location, time, date, speakers and reception area for media. Ensure that there will be a photographer and videographer on-site to document the visit.
- **Prepare materials for media.** You will need to compile a list of local media including newspapers and TV, as well as local bloggers and online news sites, and write a press release and media advisory. Samples can be found in the section below.

- **Contact media.** Email the press release to print and online media one to two weeks before the event to allow time for sufficient coverage. The day after emailing the press release, follow up with a call to the reporter asking if they received the press release and/or media advisory and recounting the main points. About one week before, provide the media advisory to local broadcast media and follow up to request brief coverage of the event. Confirm that the media source will be in attendance, gather their contact info and thank them for their time.

If a local broadcast reporter typically covers public safety issues, reach out to them directly and check interest in a larger broadcast story about local 911 issues, including the official's visit.

Note: Media personnel are very busy and the local perceptions of the elected official may impact the media's interest in the PSAP tour. Try to pique the media's interest in the tour by offering a unique perspective on local 911 services, a link to current issues, or to a particular event such as April as National 911 Education Month. Be sure to ask the elected official's staff if they will be available to take any questions from the media.

See next page for samples.

Sample Press Release

**Note to user: Use your PSAP's letterhead*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Date]

CONTACT: [Name]
[Phone Number]
[Email Address]

[Name of elected official] to Participate in Tour of [Name of PSAP and town] to See 911 Services in Action

[City/Town, State, Date] – On [date of visit], [name of elected official] will participate in a tour of the [name of PSAP and town] to see local 911 services in action.

The [name of PSAP and town], which serves a population of about [insert estimate], invited [name of elected official] to get a first-hand experience of the 911 services provided to [his/her] local constituents and to meet the people behind the phones that answer the call during people's time of need.

The goal of this visit is to provide [name of official] with first-hand knowledge about the impact of [local or federal] legislature decisions on emergency communications funding and support. As technology evolves, both challenges and opportunities arise in the local 911 system's ability to provide optimal 911 services to the community.

"911 provides a critical service for the nation's public, and the [name of PSAP and town] is proud to answer the call from our residents. We look forward to [official's name] visit to our facilities to talk about the next wave of change for emergency communications and public safety," said [PSAP's spokesperson].

During the PSAP tour, [official's name] will experience day-to-day operations of a busy call center, listen in on calls telecommunicators receive, as well as learn about the kind of equipment used, the various roles of [name of town and PSAP] staff, and the community's emergency response needs.

Sample Media Advisory

**Note to user: Use your PSAP's letterhead*

MEDIA ADVISORY FOR

[Date of Event]

CONTACT: [Name]

[Phone Number]

[Email Address]

[Name of Town/City/County]

[Elected official, title] to Participate in Tour of

[Name of Town and PSAP] to See 911 Services in Action

April is National 911 Education Month, and [Name of official and title] will be visiting the 911 call center in [town/city/county] to see first-hand the impact of 911 to [his/her] constituents. During [name of official's] tour, [he/she] will see what happens behind the scenes when people call 911, and learn more about the emergency communications issues that are most important to the [name of PSAP] and the [number of residents] residents in the ["greater x area", name of town/city/county].

What: Tour of [name of PSAP]

Who: [name of official and title]

When: [day, date and time]

Where: [name of room, building, and street address]

Why: Elected official to visit local PSAP to understand important 911 issues in [his/her] community and to see first-hand the impact of federal regulation and fund disbursement on emergency communications for [his/her] constituents.

For more information, contact [name] at [phone number].

V. Day of Visit

As you prepare for the official's visit to your PSAP and go through your itinerary, it's important to reiterate your key messages and talking points throughout the day to foster support for your issues. While you are very familiar with the issues faced by your PSAP and local 911 service, there are great resources that further explain the critical issues for 911 at a national level that you can provide to the visiting official.

- [National Emergency Number Association Text-to-9-1-1 Resources](#)
- [Association of Public Safety Communications Officials Resources](#)
- [National 911 Program Resources](#)
 - [Text-to-911](#)
 - [Next Generation 911 Video](#)
- [Federal Communications Commission Text-to-911](#)
- [National Conference of State Legislatures 911 Legislation Tracking Database](#)

VI. Follow Up

- Send thank-you cards or emails to the elected official and their staff or office (whoever helped coordinate their visit). Include any pictures that were taken during the visit.
- Monitor media for coverage of the visit and save any articles or TV spots to help promote future visits.
- Look for opportunities to develop an ongoing relationship with the official.