

House Republican Policy Committee Hearing on Volunteer Fire & EMS Issues

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On behalf of Pennsylvania's volunteer fire services, we want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to outline some of the challenges we face in protecting and serving communities throughout the Commonwealth.

As way of background, the Firemen's Association of the State of Pennsylvania (FASP) was organized in 1880. Our Association advocates for the general improvement of fire service throughout the state; develops best practices for the fighting of fires and public fire safety education; provides protection to disabled fire fighters and to those dependent upon them; promotes the organization of fire companies for communities in need, and encourages a fraternal friendship among firefighters.

The Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services Institute (PFESI) is an educational, non-profit association of emergency service organizations, emergency responders, industry and public service professionals who research, exchange information, and cultivate relationships among constituents about the issues affecting emergency response and life safety issues in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania has the proud distinction of being the home of the first organized fire protection efforts, dating back to the early eighteenth century. Numerous social, environmental, technological and economic changes within our society have dramatically expanded the role of volunteer firefighters since that time. Firefighters today must be equipped with expanded skill sets and training in order to handle incidents involving hazardous materials, threats of terrorism and technical rescue. But we also need to be capable of fundraising, administrative services, emergency service support and building and equipment maintenance. We are expected to deliver a greater level of service and professionalism than ever before, with very scarce resources.

Fortunately for all of us, men and women today continue to risk their lives on a daily basis for the benefit of their neighbors and communities where they reside. There are roughly 3,500 volunteer departments and nearly 70,000 volunteers actively providing fire protection service within Pennsylvania. The number of volunteers has steadily fallen from 152,000, an alarming reduction of more than half since 1985, and as a result, retention and recruitment strategies have become a primary concern and the focus of both rural and urban departments.

While it is challenging to assess a monetary value, it is estimated that collectively volunteer firefighters save the Commonwealth \$6 billion annually. This number strictly represents the funding level that would be required to replace volunteers with paid responders and does not factor in the intangible costs of protecting property and saving lives. Recognizing the direct cost

savings that volunteer firefighters provide local communities, state policymakers have been supportive of our needs and helpful in enacting laws that support the fire service community. We thank you for your efforts on our behalf.

During this legislative session, four priorities of FASP and PFESI were addressed, including:

1. The Volunteer Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service (VFCVAS) Grant Program was reauthorized for another four years and a \$5 million annual increase in state funding was approved.
2. An amendment in the 2012 Tax Code eliminated the onerous requirement of Volunteer Firefighter's Relief Associations (VFRA's) renewing their sales tax exemption certificate every five years. Instead that exemption is now permanent.
3. The Marcellus Shale impact fee legislation (Act 13 of 2012) included a \$750,000 allocation for the Fire Commissioner's office to be used for training. Additionally, a portion of the proceeds distributed to counties and municipalities where drilling is occurring can be used to improve fire protection, at the discretion of the individual locality.
4. The Cancer Presumption Act, which allows firefighters to receive workers' compensation if they develop a form of cancer related to direct exposure to certain known carcinogens encountered while responding to an emergency, was signed by the Governor.

Providing additional funding for training and equipment, protecting the health of our men and women injured while on duty and reducing the administrative burden of complying with state regulations are of great benefit to the fire service community. THANK YOU!

Legislative Actions and Recommendations

A report that was prepared by a bipartisan legislative committee in response to Senate Resolution 60 (2003) makes several recommendations and offers solutions in four areas: funding, recruitment and retention, legislation and service delivery model. The SR 60 recommendations have been the basis for our advocacy efforts over the last several years, as we recognize we need to develop a stronger partnership with state and local governments to improve service and meet retention and recruitment challenges. There are five areas we believe that the state could advance initiatives that would attract more people to the fire service, including:

1. Modify the VFRA rules to permit expanded spending for recruitment and retention initiatives, pension/length of service plans and permissible benefits spending plans.
2. Provide local tax credits (e.g. Municipal Emergency Services Tax or earned income tax to be waived for volunteer fire/ems personnel).
3. Allow education tuition credits (up to 6 per year) at any state university or community college for volunteer fire/ems personnel.
4. Authorize local business tax credits for allowing employees to leave for fire/ems calls.
5. Permit volunteer fire/EMS personnel to "buy in" to state health care programs at their local level, similar to an employee or their family member.

Given the economic climate and constrained state resources, we have not actively lobbied for the

above mentioned policies; however, to effectively increase the ranks of volunteers we highly recommend a combination of financial incentives be made available in the near future.

In addition to the SR 60 recommendations, we believe that legislation should be advanced to address the following:

1. Training – Legislation is needed to modify the training delivery system and make it free for all Pennsylvania firefighters. We recommend that training be paid for by a 0.5% increase in the foreign fire insurance fee. Almost 70% of citizens polled by Penn State supported the fee increase if it supports local fire departments. The fee would also allow VFRA's that currently receive less than \$10,000 per year to be brought up to a \$10,000 annual funding level.
2. Background Checks –The Commonwealth should mandate that all new members of volunteer fire departments should undergo a comprehensive background check. We recognize and appreciate the time and dedication that volunteer firefighters are willing to devote to their communities; but it is imperative that these men and women have a flawless criminal history, and a clean driving record for those who may drive company equipment. Other states have enacted similar legislation, which has proved extremely beneficial. For examples, New York State requires applicants for membership to volunteer fire departments to undergo a criminal history check to determine if they stand convicted of the crime of arson. The law also requires that this background check be completed by the county sheriff's department.
3. Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP) – The lending limits and repayment terms for this program have not been adjusted in years. Currently approximately \$50 million is available for lending. One proposal would be to implement and immediate adjustment in the apparatus category from \$100,000.00 to \$500,000.00 and the aerial category from \$150,000.00 to \$750,000.00.
4. Carbon Monoxide Alarm Standards –Similar to smoke detector mandates, the implementation of a carbon monoxide alarm standard, especially in apartment buildings or multifamily dwellings, is a good common sense practice that saves lives. Senate Bill 920 unanimously passed the Senate, and is now before the House Consumer Affairs Committee. We encourage the House to consider this legislation in the Fall.

Again, thank you for your support for the men and women who voluntarily provide these critical services at the community level. We look forward to working with you going forward to ensure these services can be maintained and that our recruitment and retention efforts are successful.