

Statement for the House Republican Policy Committee

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OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

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Chairman Reed, Representative Dunbar, and Members of the Committee, please accept my thanks for providing me an opportunity to speak at this hearing today. More importantly, I appreciate the opportunity to be the last person to testify today because it gave me the chance to listen to what others had to say. It also gives me an opportunity to expand upon some of the issues previously raised or answer questions you may have as the result of the previous testimony.

As many of you know, I have served as the Fire Commissioner since June of 2000 when Governor Ridge appointed me to the position. It has been my privilege to serve under four governors and work with many wonderful people in the Pennsylvania fire service throughout the commonwealth. Since my appointment, I have witnessed and been part of many positive events that have impacted the Pennsylvania fire service. Unfortunately, I have experienced more than my fair share of heartbreaking, gut wrenching, and life altering events with firefighters lost in the line of duty. I care deeply about the safety of our firefighters. Ensuring their safety has been my top priority from the first day I took this job. My goal, as the motto of the program to prevent line-of-duty deaths says, is to ensure that "Everyone Goes Home™" after responding to a fire.

As Fire Commissioner, over the past 12 years I have become thoroughly aware of and involved with the issues that face our volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania and across the nation. In 1977 a written report titled "Pennsylvania Burning" was issued. The report spelled out several recommendations and highlighted what significant issues were facing the volunteer fire service back then. Ironically, many of the issues identified in that report from 35 years ago continue to confront the fire service today. One key thing we all need to consider is the importance of the volunteer fire service in Pennsylvania. Of course, the most important thing is that volunteer firefighters save lives every day. In addition, it is estimated that if there were no volunteer fire departments it would cost our communities across the commonwealth several billion dollars (yes billion) to provide fire protection to its citizens.

The most telling fact from the "Pennsylvania Burning" report is that there were 300,000 volunteers involved with the Pennsylvania fire service in 1977. In the late 1990's another report estimated the number of active volunteers to be 70,000. Today, I would estimate that number is closer to 50,000. While many reports and studies have been completed since 1977 there does not seem to be any single reason for the decline in the number of volunteers. I often hear that the reason we have so much trouble recruiting and retaining firefighters is because of the purported "state training requirements." Nothing could be further from the truth because there are no "state training requirements." There are no state laws mandating any minimum level of training prior to an individual responding to a fire or other emergency. It actually is the local fire chief who decides what level of training the personnel in that fire department should have. If the fire chief decides no training is needed, a person could join the fire service this morning and be involved in fighting a fire this evening. My own personal view, and as the fire chief in my town, is that for safety reasons a person should have some level of training before engaging in such a high risk activity.

On the issue of recruitment and retention of firefighters, I never had a former volunteer firefighter tell me they quit because there was too much training required. I hear one of the following two reasons why people leave their fire company: they grew tired of the lack of leadership in the firehouse or they spent more time doing work to raise funds to support the fire company than they did actually responding to emergencies.

Some people have said the state does not do enough to help the fire service. I cannot agree with that perspective. The commonwealth provides in excess of \$150 million each year to the fire service. This is done through the Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program (“the Grant Program”), the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), and through Fireman’s Relief Funding.

The Grant Program is THE single most important commonwealth grant program for our first responders. This past year, 1,994 volunteer fire companies and 547 volunteer ambulance services received funding from the Grant Program. As you know, the Grant Program was to sunset on June 30, 2012. On June 26, the House passed Senate Bill 866 and Governor Corbett signed it into law on June 29 (Act 78 of 2012). SB 866: 1) reauthorizes the grant program for four years, 2) adds career/paid fire departments to the Grant Program, and 3) increases the Grant Program from \$25 million to \$30 million. Both the General Assembly and Governor Corbett should be given credit for making a very strong commitment to support the Pennsylvania fire service and further enhance public safety despite these tight fiscal/budgetary times.

I do think there are two major matters that should be addressed in the near future: amending the VLAP and reviewing the method by which local level fire training is funded. The VLAP continues to provide essential help with construction of new buildings, acquisition of apparatus and the purchase of equipment. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) processes and approves an average of 8 to 10 loans each month totaling an average of \$2 million dollars in addition to managing the loans that have already been approved. Since its inception in 1975, there has been 6,948 VLAP loans approved totaling \$422,359,675. I believe it is important for the General Assembly to consider changes to the VLAP. The VLAP program has not been amended since 1995 and the loan amounts have not changed since mid 1980's. For example, the typical aerial device (ladder truck) cost in excess of \$800,000 yet the maximum loan a fire department can obtain is \$150,000. A fire engine (pumper) can easily cost in excess of \$350,000 and the maximum loan amount is \$100,000. Therefore, I believe we need to seriously look at amending the VLAP with meaningful changes that are in line with the current cost of fire apparatus.

State approved and delivered training is provided through our Resident Programs at the State Fire Academy, our Academy on the Road Training Program, and the local level delivery system. The Resident Programs are located at the State Fire Academy and there is no fee charged to Pennsylvania residents to attend the programs. While the training is free, there is the cost of travel, meals and motels to attend the programs. Some of our more affluent fire departments will pay these expenses for their students. Unfortunately, many of the students must absorb this cost on their own.

The Academy on the Road Training Program was started in 2000 and was a large success with many fire departments across the state. This program allowed the students to stay in their own community and attend specialized training programs which were delivered by adjunct instructors. However, budgetary

cuts at the state level forced that the Academy on the Road Training Program be suspended. I am pleased to tell you that because of Governor Corbett's leadership and the support of the General Assembly, we will be able to begin offering these programs again. The passage of SB 866 will provide funding so we can restart the program in the very near future.

The local level delivery system by far has always been the most popular method for our firefighters and officers to receive the training they need. For years these programs were offered for free or very inexpensively through a system of community colleges and county-operated fire training facilities. However, in recent years the funding method to our community colleges has changed and the method of reimbursement for non-credit public safety training no longer exists. This means the fire training entities at the community colleges had to start charging fees for the training. I am concerned these fees could reach levels many of our firefighters and fire departments simply will not be able to afford the cost. This means that local training could become non-existent in some areas of the state.

While I do not have any specific solutions to some of the problems facing the Pennsylvania Fire Service, I do believe many things to consider can be found in a number of the reports and studies that have been completed since the "Pennsylvania Burning" report was done in 1977. The most recent report issued was in 2005 when the "Senate Resolution 60" report was released. Some of the recommendations in SR 60 have been implemented but there is much more to do. I strongly urge everyone to take another look at SR 60 as a starting point as we move forward. Governor Corbett, like many of you in the General Assembly, is committed to public safety and believes that it is an essential core function of government. I look forward to working with the General Assembly to meet the challenges that lay ahead for the volunteer fire departments throughout the commonwealth.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I am happy to answer any questions that Members may have.