

Good morning, I would like to speak with you today regarding an important topic in Pennsylvania, the lack of volunteers in the fire service. When I joined the fire department in 1998 we had approximately 45 members on our roster, today we have 23! Of the 23, 1/3 of the membership is over 60 years old. This is a staggering loss for a small community that responds to approximately 550 calls a year. I know we are not alone in this struggle, as the rest of the volunteer fire service in the Commonwealth is beyond a crisis.

I spent time researching previous studies such as S.R. 6 and the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute. It is estimated that we currently have 30,000 volunteer firefighters across the state.¹ I believe this number is inflated.

What can be done? Recruitment and retention is not a “one size fits all” approach. Everyone has different reasons for being a volunteer firefighter. With that being said everyone has different visions of how to retain volunteers, whether that is pay per call, gas cards, family days, gym memberships or other incentives such as free college tuition, insurance or a pension plan. These have all been tried in different organizations with varying success. Over my 24 years in the volunteer fire service I have heard many complaints about why individuals choose to not join or join and resign within a few months. I have heard “the amount of training is too long, I can’t sell that many tickets, I don’t want to work BINGO or give up a week in the summer to work our street fair.”

¹ Pennsylvania Fire Departments Facing Volunteerism Emergency, Associated Press Dec. 25, 2021

Recruiting new faces into the volunteer fire service is tough! When we interview a candidate for the organization and tell them all the fundraising they are required to participate in, they are shocked. Young people have families, children and work obligations. Older adults may not have the desire to complete the training necessary to be a firefighter.

I would like to speak on possible solutions that may “stop the bleeding” in the volunteer fire service. Again, there is not one specific solution to our crisis.

The first solution I would like to discuss is found in S.R. 6. It involves firefighter training and making it more attainable for volunteer firefighters in the Commonwealth.² It also helps with standardizing the training that all members should have in order to safely and effectively operate on the fireground. The Commonwealth would introduce legislation to treat volunteer firefighters as the state treats the National Guard.³ They would allow 2 weeks of training for 2 consecutive months or 1 week a month for 4 consecutive months for an employer to allow their employee to attend an accredited firefighter program or Essentials of Firefighting program. The employer would pay their employee for their time at training provided they submit a slip to their supervisor prior to attending and present a slip to their supervisor from the training agency upon returning to work stating they successfully completed the course. The business would get tax reimbursements from the state government to allow this to occur. The firefighter must agree to stay with the fire department for a time of 5 years or would be responsible to pay back the money allotted for the training. This would allow standardization of firefighters across the Commonwealth. Every year after they complete the initial training

² S.R. 6 Recommendation 18: Establish definitions, classification and training levels for fire service providers

³ S.R. 6 Recommendation 20: Incentivize employers to permit trainees to attend fire and EMS training

CORY SNYDER

they would be granted 2 “weekends” to complete other firefighter related training. This would attempt to solve the issue of “no time to train.”

Another option is to create legislation to allow volunteer firefighters to complete an associates degree or a certain amount of credits towards a bachelors degree. The volunteer would need to make a commitment to the organization for a period of 5 years after the completion of the credits. This was instituted in Allegheny County previously by County Executive Dan Onorato.⁴ This was an incentive offered to Allegheny County volunteer firefighters to allow them to attend the Community College of Allegheny County free of charge for up to 65 credits towards an Associates degree. The program paid for tuition, fees and books associated with the degree. The program was called FireVEST and it is being looked at being revamped or restarted. This would allow volunteer fire departments to recruit young adults with a tangible benefit. We are asking you to volunteer your time, and we are encouraging to pursue post secondary education free of charge. This is another way the volunteer fire departments can give back to their communities and foster a positive image. A win-win for all parties involved.

It was also proposed in S.R. 6 to allow school districts and county government to allow 100% tax reduction to volunteer firefighters.⁵ Act 172 of 2016 is already a provision in place to allow local municipalities to offer a real estate tax credit of 20%, an earned income tax credit or both to members , but it is a small amount and may not be a great selling point in recruiting

⁴ Guide to best practices in volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention; Prepared by the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness

⁵ S.R. 6 Recommendation 2: Use financial and non-financial incentives to recruit and retain first responders

CORY SNYDER

new members. Being that there is currently legislation on this topic, it would take tweaking it to make it more of an incentive to use to recruit new volunteer firefighters to the organization. A state tax break for members of volunteer fire departments would be another incentive that could be looked at to aid in the recruitment and retention. Again, this is a tangible incentive that could be used in recruiting advertisements in the community.

Other options include having an incentive program instituted through the Commonwealth to all volunteer firefighters. This could include having discounted items in a “catalog” that volunteers could purchase by earning points for attending calls, attending training, completing work details and for firefighter certifications. This could be a statewide program that all volunteers in the Commonwealth would be eligible for.

A recruiting tool that could be enacted across the Commonwealth would be a “Citizens Fire Academy.” It could be a set date or week every year in the state. The date could coincide with fire prevention week. We could include “firefighter recruitment and retention” in with fire prevention week. These go hand in hand, we need volunteers to make our communities safe. By scheduling this as a set date in the commonwealth it allows departments to work together to use this in the communities. We can take members in our community out and give them a feel for what it is like to be a volunteer. They can pull hose lines, set and climb ladders work the rescue tools and tour fire apparatus. In order for this to be beneficial we must have benefits in place to “sell” to the new recruits. We need to begin to think outside of the box when it comes to recruiting and retaining our members.

CORY SNYDER

At the end of the day, this problem isn't going to solve itself. The problem of recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters is getting worse by the day. The Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute estimated that in 2001 volunteer fire departments in the Commonwealth saved \$6 billion dollars in costs to local governments. At the same time it estimated that the hourly value of a volunteer firefighter in Pennsylvania was \$20.51. Those costs have most definitely increased in the past 21 years. If the volunteers go away, most communities will lose their fire protection as many communities will not be able to afford to pay firefighters and purchase fire apparatus and equipment. This would become a heavy burden on residents and municipalities.