

### **Current Status of the Volunteer Fire Service**

Words like crisis and emergency are often used as descriptors to explain the current status of the fire service in Pennsylvania, and more specifically the volunteer fire service in Pennsylvania. It is a well-known fact that the fire service in Pennsylvania has been struggling to recruit and retain its members.

These concerns date back to 1973 with the publication of the *America Burning Report*. Since that initial report, this issue was revisited in the 1976 *Pennsylvania Burning Report*, the 1987 *America Burning Revisited Report*, the 2004 *SR 60 Report*, and most recently the 2018 *SR6 Report*. Each of the aforementioned reports noted that the American Fire Service, and more specifically the Pennsylvania Fire Service, has seen a significant decline and that, over a 50-year span, issues with relatable fire and life safety codes, training, regionalization, and man-power continue to exist.

The overarching issue in the Pennsylvania Fire Service continues to be the critically low levels of staffing in both career and volunteer organizations. In the 1970's approximately 300,000 volunteer firefighters served their communities throughout approximately 3,000 fire departments within the Commonwealth (Governor's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, 1976), however due to the lack of concrete data, even these numbers are an estimation; according to the 2018 SR6 Report approximately 60,000 volunteer firefighters were serving their communities in the early 2000's which further dwindled to roughly 38,000 in 2018 (SR6 Committee, 2018). According to a December 2021 interview with then Acting Fire Commissioner Thomas Cook the number of volunteer firefighters throughout the Commonwealth is now estimated at approximately 30,000 (Strawser, 2021). These numbers indicate that volunteer firefighter populations have diminished to nearly 10% of what it was two generations ago; this is no longer a crisis this is a statewide emergency.

An important initiative that should be considered is the implementation of a registry that can assist with identifying the number of firefighters throughout the Commonwealth. A similar program was created within the emergency medical field that could help lay the ground work to identify the number of firefighters, as well as the level of training/certification that each firefighter may achieve. A clear and defined number of firefighters in the Commonwealth would assist in more readily identifying and addressing this man-power emergency.

While some solutions to this emergency might be considered controversial, there is a need for further discussions. One such topic for consideration that would assist with fire suppression, noting the limited resources in discussion today, would be the implementation of residential sprinklers. Similar requirements have shown a drastic impact in combating incipient fires prior to their development into structural fires as is evident in the 2011 *Communities with Home Fire Sprinklers Report* based on Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Overall, between 1988 – 2010 there were ninety (90) fire related deaths in one- and two-family dwellings, which accounted for 88% of all county fire deaths during this timeframe; with no deaths occurring in sprinklered homes; in addition, five (5) incidents in sprinklered homes were documented as saving five (5) lives (Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, 2011). This report also notes that the average property loss in sprinklered homes averaged \$14,000 with an average of 340 gallons of water used compared to an average property loss of \$179,896 and 5,974 gallons of water used in non-sprinklered homes (Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, 2011).

### **Regionalization and Consolidation**

The fire service as a whole and specifically throughout Pennsylvania has continued to adapt to the community's call for service. In fact, Pennsylvania has the great honor of being home to the first volunteer fire company in the country in 1736 thanks to Benjamin Franklin with the founding of the Union Volunteer Fire Company (International Fire Service Training Association, 2013). The Union Volunteer Fire Company was formed by community members who felt a civic responsibility to help protect their fellow neighbors. Each of the original twenty-six (26) members of the fire company were required to provide six (6) buckets to carry water and two (2) linen bags to protect property (Benjamin Franklin Historical Society, 2014). The dedication to community service that the original volunteer firefighters showed to their community continues through the dedication that we see today from the approximately 30,000 volunteer firefighters located throughout the Commonwealth protecting nearly 96% (PA Fire Service - Background Information on the State of the Volunteer Fire Service, n.d.) of the communities throughout Pennsylvania.

The dedication demonstrated by the founding members of the volunteer fire service also led to the continual progression of the American Fire Service as an all-hazards service throughout the country. Today firefighters throughout the state answer a variety of calls to service ranging from multi-alarm commercial structure fires, terroristic events, emergency medical incidents, vehicle accidents, blocked roadways, natural disasters, and yes even the occasional cat stuck in a tree. The fire service has become such an all-hazards answer to community concerns that if the incident does not fit into the broad purview of the EMS Agency or the law enforcement agency the call often results in an activation for the fire department. The increased call volume related to non-emergent events can add to the burden of volunteer firefighters which includes balancing family life, work life, incident, response, and fund-raising activities to only name a few (Firemen's Association State of Pennsylvania, 2013). This does not indicate a decline in the dedication of members of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Fire Service rather it demonstrates the impact the increase in incident response requirements can have on membership.

With these changes come increased training demands to prepare firefighters for the plethora of hazards that they could encounter. When we more closely examine even one element of firefighter response, we can realize the need for a standardized training platform. Specifically looking at residential structure fires and the effect that modern building construction and furnishing elements may have on fire growth and development, rooms with natural furnishing have been noted to have flashover times of approximately thirty (30) minutes, while the same size room with modern furnishings have been noted to have flashover times of five (5) minutes or less (Underwriters Laboratories Inc., 2022). Noting this significant discrepancy demonstrates the importance of consistent and updated training for firefighters who arrive at residential fires to find significantly more progression than what the fire service has become accustomed to. Modern fire progression creates a more focused attack on structural building components which has proven to lead to more firefighter injury and unfortunately death.

One method of combating limited man-power concerns, as well as valuable training and experience issues, would be a thorough consideration of regionalization and consolidation efforts throughout the Commonwealth. While concerns have existed over the decline in civic interest that could exist through regionalization and consolidation efforts, in many cases communities participating in consolidation and regionalization have realized cost savings, better records management, increased communications, improved incident response, improved training efforts, and more reliable man-power (Governor's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, 1976). An additional opportunity for improvement within the Pennsylvania Fire Service has been identified as the ability to better serve residents through

consolidated efforts (Firemen's Association State of Pennsylvania, 2013) while a concern identified through the potential failure of the current system has been addressed through the ability to develop legislation to facilitate efforts for regionalization and consolidation even through a county wide level (SR6 Committee, 2018).

As my esteemed colleague Mr. Snyder has noted, recruitment of new members has become a challenge in the fire service, but I would also like to note that retention of current members can also be very challenging. While there are a variety of reasons why both recruitment and retention efforts have been so challenging in modern times, leadership of organizations and communities have proven in many cases to be at the root of both issues (Firemen's Association State of Pennsylvania, 2013). As I discussed, the development of standardized training throughout the fire service in Pennsylvania would be a recommended solution; more specifically the development of a standardized leadership curriculum in which current or future department leaders are trained and educated not only within the fire service, but also with regards to the relationship between the fire department and local government officials. It is widely known that members of fire and emergency services are dedicated to serving their communities; often times there can be a disconnect between emergency service organizations and local elected officials (SR6 Committee, 2018), overcoming these inconsistencies will be vital to the progression of fire and emergency services.

### **Mental Health**

One final issue of significant concern for the firefighters that continue to protect their communities is mental and behavioral health support. First Responders are routinely exposed to some of the most horrific events that any one individual can imagine. Throughout the history of the fire service this type of exposure has long been considered “part of the job”. Unfortunately, it has not been until recently that the severe impact that emergency response has had on first responders has started to come to light. While there are many cultural changes that need to take place within the fire service, there are also many avenues that first responders can use support from our local and state level partners.

Recent studies have noted that an estimated 30% of first responders develop behavioral health conditions including, but not limited to, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); in comparison 20% of the general population experiences similar behavioral health conditions (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018). One recent study suggests that 37% of first responders who share EMS and firefighting duties have contemplated suicide, nearly ten times the rate of American adults (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018). In addition to the known stigma surrounding mental health concerns, firefighters increased likelihood of mental health concerns comes from repeated exposure to traumatic events and erratic sleep schedules (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018). Suicidal idealization and attempts have a marked increase among firefighters compared to the general population (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018).

Currently there is no known protocol in the Commonwealth to prevent, mitigate, or treat the mental and psychological wounds that may be inflicted on first responders in the course of their duties (SR6 Committee, 2018). In many cases, due to the stigma associated with mental health concerns, first responders may stray from seeking professional assistance from qualified counselors. As noted in the 2018 *SR6 Report*, a cross-agency effort to assist all first responders through a peer-to-peer network is a needed first step to assisting dedicated first responders throughout the Commonwealth. An important

second step to the development and support of peer-to-peer support is education and information distribution for all first responders on a routine basis to assist with ensuring that all available resources are at the disposal of the appropriate personnel.

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