



PA House of Representatives
Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120
(717) 260-6144

Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
“For Our First Responders”

May 30, 2023, at 1 p.m.

Emerald Star Hose Fire Company #1
7748 Penn Street
Slatington, PA 18080

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|-----------|---|
| 1:00 p.m. | Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance |
| | Firefighters Panel |
| 1:10 p.m. | Tito Burgos
<i>Fire Chief, Emerald Star Hose Fire Company #1</i> |
| 1:15 p.m. | Brian Carl
<i>Deputy Chief, Weisenberg Volunteer Fire Department</i> |
| 1:20 p.m. | J.T. Klein
<i>Firefighter, International Association of Fire Fighters Local 507,
Hazleton and Northeast Field Service Representative,
Pennsylvania Professional Firefighters Association</i> |
| 1:25 p.m. | Commissioner Thomas Cook
<i>Acting State Fire Commissioner, Office of the State Fire Commissioner</i> |
| 1:30 p.m. | Questions for Firefighters Panel |
| | EMS Panel |
| 2:00 p.m. | Howard Schwartz
<i>Certified Paramedic and Board Trustee, Northern Valley EMS</i> |
| 2:05 p.m. | Don DeReamus
<i>Legislative Committee Chair, Ambulance Association of Pennsylvania</i> |
| 2:10 p.m. | Questions for EMS Panel |
| 2:40 p.m. | Final Comments and Conclusion |



Testifier Biographies

PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing *"For Our First Responders"*



Tito Burgos **Fire Chief, Emerald Star Hose Fire Company #1**

Tito Burgos of Slatington, PA has been serving for over 43 years in the fire service within the Lehigh Valley. Burgos's service started in 1980 at River Road Fire Company that merged into Eastern Salisbury Fire Company in 1989.

Burgos has served in the positions of Chief, Assistant Chief and Deputy Chief for Eastern Salisbury Fire. He was also Assistant Chief at Neffs Fire Company for 2 years and now transitioned into the Chiefs position at Star Hose Company No. 1.

Advocacy towards education is key in his perception of the fire industry, being a former PA State Fire Warden for DCNR and Pro Board certified in Firefighter 1 & 2. The importance of certifying and educating the upcoming takeover of the fire service is critical in our area.

Brian C. Carl **Deputy Fire Chief, Weisenberg Volunteer Fire Department** **Township Manager, Weisenberg Township**

Brian Carl is the Deputy Fire Chief of the Weisenberg Volunteer Fire Department located in Weisenberg Township, Lehigh County, PA. Brian previously served as Fire Chief of the Weisenberg Vol. Fire Dept. from 2015 to 2020 and has held multiple other positions in the fire service over the past 24 years. He has been an active member at Weisenberg since the inception of the Department and previously was a member of the Fogelsville & Macungie Volunteer Fire Companies.

Brian has been the Township Manager and Zoning Officer for Weisenberg Township for the past 11 years. Prior to joining local government, he was a commercial construction manager.

Brian holds multiple PA State and National fire certifications and is very passionate about emergency services. He and his family live in Weisenberg Township and his oldest child became a Junior Fire Fighter at Weisenberg earlier this year.



J.T. Klein

Firefighter, International Association of Fire Fighters Local 507, Hazleton and Northeast Field Service Representative, Pennsylvania Professional Firefighters Association

In addition to serving as a firefighter for the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 507 in Hazleton, J.T. Klein serves as the Northeast Field Service Representative for the Pennsylvania Professional Firefighters Association.

With headquarters in Washington, D.C, and Ottawa, Ontario, the IAFF represents more than 335,000 full-time professional fire fighters and paramedics in more than 3,500 affiliates. IAFF members protect more than 85 percent of the population in communities throughout the United States and Canada.

The Pennsylvania Professional Fire Fighters Association represents approximately 8,000 career professional Fire Fighters, Emergency Medical Technicians, and Paramedics throughout Pennsylvania.

Commissioner Thomas Cook

Acting State Fire Commissioner, Office of the State Fire Commissioner

Thomas Cook has more than 36 years of experience in emergency services, and an extensive background in public and nonprofit administration — having served at the municipal, county, and state levels, with a primary focus on public safety and emergency management.

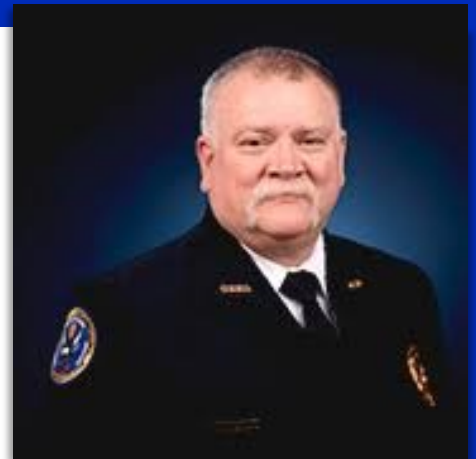
Most recently, Cook served as Assistant State Fire Commissioner. He was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Office of the State Fire Commissioner.

Prior to that, Cook was administrator of the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy, with oversight of the firefighter training system for the commonwealth.

He retired from active firefighting as assistant fire chief of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire, overseeing the day-to-day operations of a 700-person metropolitan fire department. He has served as a career company officer in the Mount Lebanon Fire Department, and a staff instructor for Allegheny County Fire Academy. He has held every rank but Chief of Department in the Monroeville Volunteer Fire Department.

Cook attended the Allegheny County, Pennsylvania State, and National fire academies. He is a Pennsylvania state fire instructor and has taught extensively for local fire and emergency management training agencies. He is an associate professor for the Point Park University, teaching programs in public administration.

Prior to pursuing a career in public safety, Cook was employed as a corporate controller for Consolidated Graphics, where he was a turn-around specialist.



Commissioner Thomas Cook

Acting State Fire Commissioner, Office of the State Fire Commissioner (cont.)

He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Carnegie Mellon University, and a Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Phoenix. He has a second Bachelor of Science degree in fire administration from Columbia Southern University.

Cook received his Chief Fire Officer and Chief Training Officer designations from the Center for Public Safety Excellence.

He has received awards as Fire Instructor of the Year, Fire Officer of the Year, and letters of commendation for his work managing various projects within the fire service. Cook has been decorated twice in his career for rescues, earning a unit citation for rescues made from an apartment fire in Mount Lebanon, and the Red Cross Hero Medal for the rescue of a civilian prior to the arrival of suppression units in Pittsburgh.



Howard R. Schwartz, NRP, CP-C Certified Paramedic and Board Trustee, Northern Valley EMS

Howard R. Schwartz has been a National Registered Paramedic for 33 years. He also is a Board-Certified Community Paramedic. Howard began his career in EMS (Emergency Medical Services) as a volunteer with his community's BLS (basic life support) ambulance service while in high school. Following high school, he attended and graduated The Williamsport Hospital & Medical Center's Paramedic Training Institute. Upon receiving his Paramedic certification, he took a full-time position as a Paramedic with a hospital based in New Jersey while continuing to volunteer in Pennsylvania.

In 1994 following his dream to be a Flight Paramedic Howard took a position with Samaritan AirEvac in Phoenix, AZ, the nation's oldest hospital-based air medical programs. Howard was primarily assigned to a rotor-wing (helicopter) where he performed both scene and interfacility transports. He also occasionally would do long-distance fixed-wing (airplane) and medical escort missions that has taken him all over the world. He also took the opportunity to become cross-trained as a Communication Specialist, spending several months full-time in the program's communications center. After eight years of flying, Howard accepted a position with the Arizona Dept. of Health Services as a Regional Coordinator/Program Manager where he performed base hospital and EMS training program audits, annual ambulance inspections, along with the intake and initial investigation of received complaints.

After nine years in Arizona, Howard returned to Pennsylvania, to his family, and his EMS roots. For the past 20 years he has continued to provide medical care on a 9-1-1 ambulance in Northampton and Monroe counties. Much of this time has been caring for the area where he grew up and began his career as a volunteer. Wanting to continue serving his community in 2017 he took a volunteer Board of Director position with Northern Valley EMS (Lehigh County) where his insight has been invaluable to the success of NOVA.

Howard R. Schwartz, NRP, CP-C
Certified Paramedic and Board Trustee, Northern Valley EMS
(cont.)

In his free time Howard has become an avid cyclist. In 2008 he participated in his first National EMS Memorial Bike Ride, which is a long-distance cycling event that honors EMS providers that have died in the line of duty. He along with a small group of participants in 2016 formed a task force under the Ambulance Association of PA to develop a Pennsylvania EMS Memorial Ride. For the past several years he has been a Co-Route Coordinator, assisting in the route planning and logistics of each year's event which culminates at the State Capital and the annual EMS Memorial service.

Donald DeReamus
Legislative Committee Chair, Ambulance Association of Pennsylvania
QA Manager and Government Relations Liaison, Suburban EMS, Inc.

Donald DeReamus has spent his career in the emergency services community.

Don currently serves as QA Manager / Government Relations Liaison at Suburban EMS, Deputy Coroner in Northampton County, and an Emergency Management Coordinator for Tatamy Borough.



Ryan Makenzie Meeting

May 30th

Issues affecting our first responders and potential legislative solutions.

First & Second Question:

What are your department issues that affect the overall performance?

What are some of the challenges that we as departments are generally faced with?

The “21st Century of Fire Service”:

- **Lack of Funding:** Federally & Regionally
 - Grant Writers charging per grant and the ratio of success is not balanced.
 - Money from operational budgets to meet matching grants must also be spent while paying grant writers per grant costing departments thousands of dollars.
 - The lack of education and resources towards different affiliations of funding considering private cooperation's and businesses are unknown to departments.
- **The “Dying Volunteerism”**
 - From an economic standpoint to ratio of hours spent volunteering as a firefighter is working another full-time job.
 - This is where the “burnout” happens within our people.
 - Not enough volunteers to help the ones that show up almost every time, relying on the same individuals repeatedly will not grow the department.
 - People want something out of their services: Retirement Plans, Compensation, Etc.
- **Technology Enhancements:**
 - In the next 5 years this will be a critical issue of revolutionary change in the adaptation of response/services in the fire agency.
 - The automation advancements will increase costs for departments which will cut into funding and operational budgets. The biggest cost will be the charging station for the apparatus.
 - More funding will have to be available.
 - Challenges will be faced with generational perception.
 - Rural Infrastructure will take more time to change than major cities.
 - EVs will be the only option of purchase in the next 10-15 years.
 - The overall picture of cost efficiency will balance overtime and will be cheaper to own an EV apparatus than an ICE vehicle today.
 - Laws & Regulations will be adapted into the legislation system to advance EVs into the congregation of commercial and emergency usage.
 - Education on EV vehicles & Energy Storage in emergency scenarios.

Solutions:

- **Lack of Funding:** Federally & Regionally
 - Sectionized Regional & State Funding:
 - AFG & SAFER (Smaller Version of the AFG & Safer Grant)
 - This would be a regional affiliation of state funding from each.
 - Section off Regional States for example: PA, NJ, NY, VA, DE
 - Only those selected states would be able to apply.
 - The federal grant for AFG & SAFER would still be available but this would be a smaller scale ratio of obtainment.
 - Preservation of Grant Funding on a Federal Level
 - Passing a Bill to prevent yearly legislation from Senators & Representatives for funding & sunset dates for USFA, AFG, and SAFER grant programs.
 - To get the IAFC more structured prevention towards this act.
 - This would stabilize our funding for the future.
 - The Fire Grants and Safety Act
 - The legislation would extend the programs through fiscal year 2030 and require both a federal audit which will put barriers on preventing fire departments from accessing federal funds.
 - Influence of advocacy from rural communities like us will impact the legislative perspectives of struggles.
 - Provision of Corporations and Businesses:
 - Provide tax breaks if they give a certain amount of grants out per year.
 - Influences more funding nationally.
 - Helping the instability of federal funding and helping corporations with tax breaks.
- **The “Dying Volunteerism”**
 - How to get people involved in our community?
 - LCTI- Tech Program
 - Recruitment & Retention Influence
 - Encouraging the younger generation to join local department to excel in their education at the tech school.
 - School would be more involved with the volunteering perception.
 - Offering internships/shadowing opportunities to establish and educate the upcoming generation. Having schools fund for the educational classes needed will cut costs for departments.
 - Colleges in the LV Area
 - Offering tuition assistance for emergency services.
 - Tuition Reimbursement if a fire related degree is obtained.
 - Offering more fire service-related degrees in the Lehigh valley.

- Educating the upcoming generation to be involved because volunteering is critical in the perception of work.
 - Offering Length of Service Award Program
 - There are two common types of LOSAPs:
 - Defined Benefits provides volunteers with a *monthly* monetary reward at the entitlement age based on years of service.
 - Defined Contribution provides volunteers with a *lump sum* monetary reward at the entitlement age based on years of service.
 - This will inhibit the influence of fulfillment of service.
 - Open consideration of future consolidation could be under discussion to obtain more funding.
 - More funding & consolidation of members enhances the chances of being transitioned into a part-time or full-time paid department.
 - Having in department staffing releases the stress from the members involved constantly.
- **Technology Enhancements:**
- Think of EV as an advancement than a negative impact.
 - Yes, the funding will need to be obtained for infrastructure change & purchase of apparatus but making the changes now would be the time to do it.
 - Developing how far do you drive and how long do you typically operate at an incident? To see EV apparatus will be a good fit in the future.
 - Fuel costs are certainly reduced with EVs, and consistent maintenance will be cut.
 - The quiet EVs which means your pumping fire engine will be quiet enough for communication to be more through.
 - Additional storage & fueling hazards are reduced.
 - Educating the upcoming/current fire departments with regulations and safety about new inventions of energy storage
 - More educational funding towards the upcoming generational takeover of technology and how to deal with it from a technical perspective.
 - Involving more training in the Lehigh valley in collaboration to advance the education in electric vehicle safety.

These are only a small portion of the problems we as departments are facing on a daily and yearly basis. Ideas of developing solutions were idealized in the best interest of what I have been seeing with my group.

Are there any comments or questions?

Thank you for your time.

**TESTIMONY
OF
BRIAN C. CARL
DEPUTY FIRE CHIEF
WEISENBERG VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT
Lehigh County, Pennsylvania**

**PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
CONGRESSIONAL HEARING
“FOR OUR FIRST RESPONDERS”
MAY 30TH 2023
Emerald Starhose Fire Company #1
7748 Penn Street, Slatington, PA 18080**

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to everyone for giving me this opportunity to speak with you and to commend each of you for devoting your attention to discuss the hurdles that our emergency first responders face and consider some possible legislative solutions. As I'm sure you are aware, the volunteer fire service has changed significantly over the past several years. Departments across the state are seeing decreasing numbers of volunteer firefighters while trying to respond to an increase in service requests from the communities we serve. Emergency situations are becoming more complex, and our call volume is increasing. Our departments are becoming more reliant on each other. Equipment costs keep rising and it is becoming increasingly difficult to cover expenses.

The main issues that volunteer fire companies are facing are pretty consistent among both urban and rural communities across the state. Having a close working relationship with the leaders of the community that fire departments serve is very important, however in many cases the individual communities cannot solve these issues alone.

Here in Weisenberg, we work very closely with our elected officials and neighboring fire departments in order to provide the best service possible for our community and to ensure the highest level of safety for our members. I felt that this opportunity to speak with you about this critical subject was so important that I reached out to a few other key people that I work very closely with and that share my passion and commitment to the volunteer fire service. The group of us and others meet regularly to discuss the constantly evolving state of the volunteer fire service. In speaking with Weisenberg Volunteer Fire Department Chief Matt Krapf, Community Fire Company New Tripoli Fire Chief Gary Kuntz, Goodwill Fire Company Germansville Fire Chief Jay Scheffler and Upper Macungie Township Bureau of Fire Commission Peter Christ it was evident that we all felt the same.

Below are a few issues that I believe are the biggest struggles volunteer fire companies are facing today:

1.) Declining number of volunteers:

- A.) Qualified Fire Fighters – people who take classes, attend training and are physically able to do the work.
- B.) Exterior Support – people with basic training to act as support & exterior fire fighters.
- C.) Leadership / Officers – experienced fire fighters who can manage staff and emergency scenes. People who are willing to provide extra commitment and assume responsibility.
- D.) Administrative Support – public education, fundraising, bill processing, building maintenance, equipment maintenance, etc.

Suggestions on how the State can help:

- A.) Recruitment & Retention incentives
 - earned income tax rebates for active members
 - free college tuition at state & community colleges
 - retirement plan
 - tax incentives for employers to let their employees leave work
 - additional resources to educate the public, municipalities, school districts & fire depts.
 - free vehicle license / vehicle registration
 - assistance from PennDOT staff on emergency incidents
 - free cdl training
 - high school training programs aimed towards firefighting & public safety

2.) Funding:

- A.) Equipment & Apparatus purchasing – trucks & tools.
- B.) Safety & PPE purchasing – gear, air packs, training, etc.
- C.) General Operating Expenses – utilities, building maintenance, equipment maintenance, annual testing, insurance, fuel, etc.

Suggestions on how the State can help:

- A.) Increase grants & simplify the application process.
- B.) Statewide insurance billing authority
- C.) Funding assistance for equipment life spans
- D.) Grant incentives tied to training requirements.
- E.) State funding & equipment assistance for responses on State & Federal highways

3.) Simply Training & Administrative Functions:

- A.) Difficulty in finding class instructors.
- B.) Time commitments for training & classes
- C.) Time commitments for behind-the-scenes administrative work

Suggestions on how the State can help:

- A.) Allow more online training – many classroom sessions could take place online via platforms like ZOOM which would allow more people to attend trainings, especially firefighters with children
- B.) Provide more instructors & more training classes so people do not need to travel far distances to a classroom
- C.) Streamline grant application processes.

4.) Additional Support from State Agencies

- A.) Volunteer fire departments are often called to incidents that state agencies could handle such as traffic control and trees that fall down. Most municipalities do this on their roads.
- B.) Volunteer fire departments often have to wait extended amounts of time to clear an emergency scene.
- C.) Although not required by PA law, many fire departments require CDLs to drive the larger apparatus for safety & liability reasons. The new CDL law has made it time consuming and expensive to get CDL drivers.

Suggestions on how the State can help:

- A.) Have additional on-call representatives from PennDOT to handle minor traffic control and trees down.
- B.) Have PennDOT respond immediately to larger traffic incidents and handle road closures so volunteer fire fighters can leave when the scene has been deemed safe.
- C.) Simplify the CDL process or provide instructors for fire apparatus operators.
- D.) PennDOT supervisors should have better communication with fire officers to streamline the response.

5.) Provide Additional Incentives for Regionalization & Consolidation:

- A.) It is a very time consuming process to get departments to consider consolidation.

Suggestions on how the State can help:

- A.) Provide financial incentives to departments that consolidate or regionalize, give them a better reason to do it.

As you can see by the list, a few key factors contribute to the bulk of the problems volunteer fire departments are facing today. Time, Money and Manpower. Unfortunately the workload of the volunteers is constantly increasing. It is just not feasible to ask a volunteer that risks their life to respond to emergencies to also have to raise money to keep the lights on and fuel in the trucks. The burden must be lifted in order to retain today's firefighters. New incentives must be created in order to attract new members. Having a good working relationship with the municipalities is very important and can solve a lot of issues and help to support the volunteer fire service however assistance from the County and State is also required. I hope that you find this information useful and invite you all to ask any questions that you may have.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to testify here today and thank you to the committee for taking on these topics. My name is J.T. Klein and I have been a professional fire fighter in Hazelton for 19 years. I've also been an EMT since 1994 and worked on ambulance and paramedic units. I have been active in IAFF Local 507 and served as the local president for the last six years. I was also elected amongst my peers to serve as statewide Northeast District Service Representative reporting to the executive board for the Pennsylvania Professional Fire Fighters Association. We represent over 7,000 members for both professional fire locals and EMS departments within local municipalities. My testimony today will be brief, because I would like to make my presentation as interactive as possible, so I would be more than happy to address any questions you might have based upon my remarks.

As professionals that collectively bargain, guaranteed under Act 111, we face several challenges and risks in doing our job to keep all of us safe. Some here today may wonder what Act 111 is. I would encourage you to walk down the front steps of the Capitol Building and walk across Front Street on the lefthand side. There is a plaque memorializing the place where the AFL-CIO was created and what shaped the foundation for Act 111 – what protects Our right to exist.

A friend of mine was explaining his job to his daughter, and he said to her, "What do fire fighters do?" The young girl said, "Daddy they come when you need help the most!"

Surely that is the case, but not without a multitude of challenges. In the last year, according to the IAFF, 74% of in-line-of-duty deaths were caused by occupational cancer. The reason being the protective equipment that we wear is coated with PFAS (Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances). This has been proven to cause cancerous diseases among my brothers and sisters. I have included in the email to this policy committee a short video, entitled "*Burn*," which provides more background on PFAS and the dangers of wearing our protective gear. So, what is the solution? There has been a movement across the country to ban such chemicals in our equipment. Currently there is a bill in the Senate that requires a warning label on all protective equipment alerting our members to the hidden dangers of their gear. Additionally, there are talks of an outright ban on PFAs. Our organization would be more than happy to provide more information on this topic to the committee if any conversations take place.

I wish that the in-line-of-duty deaths were the only challenges that we faced. Due to those challenges and the stressful nature of the job, we have a large number of brothers and sisters that die each year from suicide. This is caused not only by the isolated instances that our brothers and sisters witness, but the cumulation of these instances over time. It can be explained similarly in the tort law system as a "cracked window." As a kid growing up, a group of friends and I used to play wiffle ball. The neighbor across the street had a cracked window. Over time, the window cracked more with Pennsylvania winters and the extreme summer heat. One day, one of my friends hit a home run into that neighbor's yard – it hit the window and broke it. We did what any kids would do and ran. Well, one of my friends' dads made him go and confess what had happened. However, as I mentioned, there were a multitude of factors over the years as to why the window had broken. It was something as soft as a wiffle ball, which was the final straw that completely broke the window.

This happens to so many of my brothers and sisters because of what we see every day and over time. According to FEMA, about one hundred first responders commit suicide each year. That is eighteen per 10,000 compared non-first responder suicide each year, which is ten per 10,000 deaths. How do we protect our brothers and sisters? We define PTSI as an occupational injury in this commonwealth so we can get the treatment we need so that we can get back to work to continue to keep us all safe.

I have spent much of my testimony discussing the dangers and the stresses of the job and what it does to us but how is all of this affecting our communities? I can speak to my firsthand experiences of being in a third-class city on the cusp of rural Pennsylvania and getting called out of service territory to communities that do not have professional fire coverage. This can put a lot of stress on our departments across the commonwealth. Even our most populated areas, such as Montgomery County, face the same issues today. Montgomery County is the third largest county in the commonwealth and 74th most populated county in the country. Until the last several years most of their fire departments were non-paid departments. I respect anyone who answers the call, but we need to think about how we provide these services to our communities.

There is a metric called an ISO rating. Insurance companies use this to provide real property insurance and measure the rate of response and non-property specific. Montgomery County's rating was so high (high is not good), that homes and commercial properties were starting to get turned down for property insurance. The only course of action to solve this would have been for most of the communities to move to a combination of professional and non-paid departments. As we saw, this allowed the communities to get better ratings so their citizens could insure their property.

In closing, we need to keep our collective first responder strategy in Pennsylvania to protect those that protect us the most when we need it, both from the physical and mental issues they face. Our commonwealth and local communities also need to be a part of the conversation to ensure that we have the men and women in place to keep our communities safe and so that we can continue to become a more vibrant Pennsylvania. With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield the rest of my time for any questions you have about what I said today or to address any other concerns the committees might have. And, I would just like to say to all my brothers and sisters out there; Keep fighting the good fight and come home safe— the same way you arrived at work today.

Thank you again,

J.T. Klein
Member, IAFF Local 507
Northeast Field Service Representative, PPFFA

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House Republican Policy Committee

“For Our First Responders”

May 30, 2023

Emergency medical services (EMS) providers, and emergency services personnel, in general, have functioned far too long under an unwritten cultural tenet of, *once we put on the uniform, we are expected to perform and act a certain way*. Weakness is not permitted, strength is celebrated, and we can handle our problems on our own. After all, we are “invincible”, and this is what we have done for decades in modern EMS.

On scene, you and your partner are to expected take control of someone’s worst day of their life and deal with a myriad of simple to complex issues of trauma to medical problems, cardiac arrest, psychological emergency or maybe the worst to fathom, a serious or fatal response involving and infant or child. We bear witness to the best and worst of humanity and live with the good and bad outcomes of our work, some of those images seared into our souls.

We are expected to comfort the sick and dying, and their family or friends, all without allowing personal feelings to affect our ability to provide exemplary medical care at the level of the emergency room. We are expected to perform in austere environments while exposed to environmental and manmade hazards, infectious disease or other potentially infectious materials and more frequently,

physical violence. Finally, we are expected to push the reset button after each response and do it all over again on every call and every shift.

Then when things go wrong, either related to the “job” or the affects we see impacting our personal lives, we revert to that unwritten cultural tenet attempting to “control our scene” and handle everything on our own. Lost in the fray and forgotten is that we are human beings first, and then things become quite overwhelming.

A disturbing trend has been realized over the last several years, suicides in emergency services have surpassed line of duty deaths. Maybe it is related to better surveillance, or maybe just because our community is now asking why after the events begin to hit to close to home.

This opening was provided in 2019 when the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee held a hearing on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI). The emphasis at that time was a second attempt at legislation to add PTSD/PTSI as a work- related injury under our Workers’ Compensation statute.

During that hearing a doctoral dissertation was presented by now PsyD, Nicole E. Cressley titled *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Rural Emergency*

Medical Services Personnel, that surveyed rural EMS providers in our Commonwealth. Her analysis revealed:

*“When examining rates of PTSD symptoms in the present sample, this elevated risk is evident; 35% had clinically significant PCL-5 scores, and 96% of those individuals endorsed at least one traumatic experience occurring as a part of their job. Prior studies have estimated the **lifetime prevalence of PTSD among first responders at nearly one-third**. In contrast, the **lifetime prevalence of PTSD among American adults is 8.7%**, and the prevalence of PTSD among American Veterans who have served in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) is about 13.5%”.*

This was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. One study (**Yacout DAESA, Mohamed NY, El Sherbini HH. Post-traumatic stress disorders and burnout syndrome among community paramedic staff. Am J Nurs. (2020) 8:562–74. 10.12691/ajnr-8-5-9**) investigated the level of emotional exhaustion, fatigue and PTSD levels among 68 EMS providers working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results reported were 33.8% had emotional exhaustion, and 27.9% reported high levels of emotional exhaustion. Different degrees of PTSD and burnout were shown to be associated with demographic variables, such as age, work experience, education level and self-care and physical health.

Remember, EMS providers were the tip of the spear during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early months, the lack of clinical information, medical surveillance, personal protective equipment (PPE) and the constant doffing and donning of PPE on every response coupled with increased equipment and ambulance disinfecting created an overwhelming feeling and emotional distress. There was also changes in clinical practice and therapeutics and the enormous concern of infecting family and friends.

Later, mandated vaccination requirements from federal and state regulatory authorities required vaccination, of an “emergency use” authorized novel mRNA-based vaccine, to maintain your employment adding additional stressors.

To date, the General Assembly did address the issues of emergency responder mental wellness and stress management with the passage of Act 69 of 2020, now 35 PA C.S. Chapter 75A, sponsored by Representative Michael Schlossberg of Lehigh County. This statute deals with requirements of the Secretary of Health to develop mental wellness and stress management guidelines, peer-to- peer support programs, the training of peer support providers, the development of a toll-free hotline, a Statewide Critical Incident Stress Management Program and trauma and suicide awareness and impact training. While this statute provides tremendous assistance, it does not add PTSD/PTSI as a compensable illness under Workers’ Compensation.

Many states have passed PTSD/PTSI since 2016 and a majority of states have introduced legislation, or are investigating PTSD/PTSI, as an addition in their Workers' Compensation laws. Currently, Senate Bill 365 (Bartolotta), has been referred to the Senate Labor and industry Committee.

In the early discussions and legislation introduced by the General Assembly since 2017, actuarial data was difficult to come by. Florida, which has had a presumption in place since 2018, is among the first to publicly release data on costs. Since expanding workers comp coverage for mental health costs, the state has paid out approximately 50 claims for \$2.1 million total, or \$42,330 per claim, according to the Department of Financial Services.

A National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) study of mental health claims for first responder classes found the group accounted for approximately 1.6% of privately insured costs for mental treatment, with most states showing a range of 0.5% to 3%.

Bruce Spidell, NCCI's actuarial committee liaison, said that based on the study findings he believes legislation focusing on first responders may have a relatively small impact on overall workers comp costs.

PTSD is drastically more prevalent in emergency responders than the general population. There does not appear to be a difference between service area, paid status, years of service, or between fire and EMS responders. Early intervention is key for preventing and mitigating PTSD/PTSI in first responders. Personal financial difficulties emerged as the number one barrier to mental health treatment. EMS providers remain an extremely at-risk population who are traditionally underpaid and overworked.

We appreciate your interest and consideration on identifying and addressing this issue facing EMS providers and first responders in the Commonwealth.