

Written Testimony of Michael L. Nestico

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Pennsylvania House Republican Policy Committee

Protecting Pennsylvania: Strengthening Fire and Emergency Medical Services

October 14, 2026

Chairman Rowe, Representative Cooper, and members of the House Republican Policy Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the challenges facing Pennsylvania's fire departments and emergency medical service providers. I also want to thank Representative Cooper for hosting this hearing here in Murrys ville.

My name is Michael Nestico, and I serve as the Chief Administrator for the Municipality of Murrys ville in Westmoreland County. I am also an attorney and have spent more than a decade serving as a municipal manager in Pennsylvania.

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to manage communities utilizing both career and volunteer fire departments. This experience has provided me with an appreciation for the strengths and challenges of both service delivery models, particularly as they relate to municipal finances, operational responsibilities, and long-term planning.

My testimony is intended to address fire and emergency medical services from the perspective of municipal government. Although the challenges surrounding volunteer recruitment, retention, training, and emergency response are significant, I want to focus primarily on the areas where local elected officials and municipal administrators have the greatest ability to act: financial support, budgeting, capital investment, administrative oversight, and cooperation among emergency service providers.

The Role of Municipal Government

When we discuss fire and EMS services, much of the conversation understandably focuses on the individuals responding to emergencies. Those individuals are essential, and their service deserves recognition. However, I believe it is equally important to examine the governmental structure that supports them.

At the local level, emergency services require more than firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics. They require apparatus, equipment, facilities, insurance, reliable communications, training, and financial resources.

These responsibilities exist regardless of whether a community utilizes a fully paid department, a volunteer organization, or some combination of the two.

Municipal officials must determine how to best provide these services while balancing competing priorities, including police protection, roads, infrastructure, parks, and other essential municipal functions.

In Pennsylvania, municipalities have considerable responsibility and discretion in arranging emergency services. However, their financial resources, administrative capabilities, and organizational structures vary widely.

A municipality with a significant commercial tax base may have substantially different financial capabilities than a smaller rural community, even though both must address the need for emergency protection.

I believe this distinction must be recognized when considering statewide policies affecting fire and EMS services.

Murrysville's Approach to Fire Protection

Murrysville encompasses approximately 37 square miles and serves a population of approximately 21,000 residents.

Fire protection is provided through three volunteer organizations: Murrysville Volunteer Fire Company No. 20, Sardis Volunteer Fire Department No. 78, and White Valley Volunteer Fire Company No. 64.

These organizations have served our community for generations. While they remain volunteer organizations, the Municipality provides substantial financial and operational support.

One of the most significant examples involves our approach to fire apparatus.

Murrysville maintains a dedicated real estate tax of 1.35 mills specifically for emergency fire vehicle purchases and related expenses. In 2026, this tax is expected to generate approximately \$457,650.

Rather than relying entirely on individual fire companies to raise money for major apparatus purchases, the Municipality accumulates these revenues in a designated fund for vehicle replacement.

The Municipality also provides an annual General Fund contribution of \$130,000 for fire apparatus operating expenses, repairs, insurance, and facility support. This includes \$10,000 annually for each of our three fire companies to assist with building repairs and utilities.

Additionally, the Municipality funds workers' compensation coverage for volunteer firefighters. Our 2026 budget includes approximately \$69,570 for this expense alone.

We also distribute foreign fire insurance funds received from the Commonwealth to the three fire companies' relief associations. The 2026 budget anticipates approximately \$140,000 in these state-originated distributions.

These arrangements demonstrate that volunteer fire protection, while providing considerable value to the community, still requires substantial public investment.

In fact, Murrysville's recent experience provides an illustration of the capital costs involved.

The Municipality committed approximately \$979,000 toward a new fire apparatus for White Valley, with payments scheduled during 2025 and 2026.

As we look toward future apparatus replacement, we are planning for additional purchases that could exceed \$1 million per vehicle.

These are significant financial obligations for a municipality of our size, and they must be considered alongside the many other capital needs facing local government.

Long-Term Financial Planning

In my experience, one of the most important steps municipalities can take is to move away from treating fire apparatus and emergency equipment purchases as unexpected expenses.

Fire trucks have limited useful lives. Equipment requires maintenance and eventual replacement. Buildings need repairs, and insurance and operational expenses continue regardless of the number of emergency calls received.

These needs are predictable, even if their exact costs are not.

Municipal governments should be incorporating fire and EMS needs into their annual budgets and long-term capital improvement programs.

That includes establishing realistic replacement schedules, identifying reliable revenue sources, and working with emergency service organizations to distinguish essential operational requirements from discretionary expenditures.

However, even municipalities that plan responsibly face significant challenges.

The rising costs of fire apparatus are particularly concerning. Industry consolidation, limited competition, manufacturing delays, and increasing equipment prices warrant closer examination.

When a municipality budgets for a vehicle several years before its anticipated replacement, substantial price increases can undermine the financial assumptions on which that plan was developed.

This can place additional pressure on local taxpayers and potentially require municipalities to delay other necessary capital projects.

I would encourage the General Assembly to examine the financial impact of these developments and consider how state assistance programs can better support long-term capital planning.

Municipal Support for Emergency Medical Services

Emergency medical services present a different, but equally important, financial challenge.

In Murrysville, ambulance service is provided by Murrysville Medic One, a paid emergency medical service provider.

The Municipality has historically provided financial assistance to Medic One through a dedicated funding arrangement.

In 2024, following a request for additional support, Murrysville increased its annual contribution from approximately \$63,000 to approximately \$109,000.

At the same time, the Municipality changed its funding mechanism from a dedicated real estate tax allocation to a direct General Fund contribution.

That funding level has continued through 2026.

The important point is that while Medic One is a paid service, it still requires municipal financial assistance to support operations and the delivery of emergency medical services.

EMS providers face significant operating expenses, including personnel, ambulances, equipment, insurance, and training. They must also contend with the financial challenges associated with reimbursement for emergency medical services.

Municipalities should work closely with EMS providers to understand their financial needs, service expectations, and long-term sustainability.

However, we should also recognize that local tax revenues are finite. Increasing public support for EMS must be considered in the context of the municipality's overall financial responsibilities.

Financial Assistance, Accountability, and Cooperation

I believe government has a legitimate role in financially supporting essential public safety services. At the same time, that assistance should be accompanied by appropriate accountability and responsible planning.

Municipalities should understand how public funds are being used and should work cooperatively with emergency service organizations to establish reasonable budgets, capital plans, and service expectations.

This does not necessarily mean municipalities must assume direct operational control of independent volunteer fire companies.

Rather, there should be a working partnership in which public financial support is accompanied by transparency, communication, and a shared understanding of community needs.

I also believe local governments should continue examining opportunities for cooperation among fire departments and EMS providers.

That cooperation can take many forms, including shared equipment, joint purchasing, standardized training, coordinated capital planning, and regional agreements.

Not every community needs the same organizational structure, and consolidation should not be treated as the only answer.

But municipalities should be willing to evaluate whether existing arrangements remain effective and financially sustainable.

Recruitment and Retention

Although recruitment and retention are not the primary focus of my testimony, they are directly connected to municipal financial planning.

Pennsylvania has developed various tax incentives, stipends, and other programs to encourage volunteer participation.

While I recognize the value of acknowledging individuals who volunteer their time, I question whether relatively modest financial incentives are sufficient to materially change recruitment decisions.

A few hundred dollars annually may be appreciated by existing volunteers, but the decision to become a firefighter involves substantial training, personal responsibility, and time away from family and employment.

I believe policymakers should distinguish between programs that reward existing volunteers and those that demonstrably increase participation or improve emergency coverage.

This is particularly important when taxpayer resources are limited.

Before significantly expanding such programs, we should examine their measurable effectiveness and consider whether alternative investments might have a greater impact.

The Commonwealth's Role

My general philosophy toward government emphasizes fiscal responsibility, limited government, and local decision-making.

However, I also recognize that essential governmental responsibilities must be supported by the resources necessary to fulfill them.

I do not believe expanding government is inherently the solution to every public problem. Likewise, reducing expenditures without considering the consequences for essential services is not necessarily responsible public policy.

Fire protection and emergency medical services are fundamental public safety functions.

The Commonwealth has an opportunity to strengthen these services while continuing to respect the role of local government and independent emergency service organizations.

I would encourage consideration of several areas:

First, provide predictable financial assistance. Grant programs are valuable, but local governments and emergency service organizations also need funding mechanisms that support long-term financial planning, particularly for capital equipment and facilities.

Second, support regional cooperation. State technical assistance and financial incentives could help municipalities evaluate joint purchasing, shared services, and alternative organizational arrangements where they are appropriate.

Third, evaluate recruitment and retention programs. Financial incentives should be assessed based on their actual effectiveness in attracting and retaining active responders.

Fourth, assist municipalities with long-term planning. Local governments could benefit from additional technical resources to evaluate service needs, apparatus replacement, staffing availability, and the financial implications of various service delivery models.

Finally, recognize the financial limitations of local government. State legislation and regulatory requirements can have significant financial consequences for municipal governments and emergency service organizations. Those costs should be considered when new requirements are established.

Conclusion

I believe municipalities must take an active role in planning for and financially supporting their fire and emergency medical services.

That responsibility should not be placed entirely on the shoulders of volunteer firefighters, independent EMS organizations, or the fundraising efforts of local residents.

At the same time, financial assistance alone will not resolve every challenge. Sustainable emergency services require cooperation, responsible financial management, appropriate oversight, and realistic planning for future needs.

Pennsylvania's communities are diverse, and there is no single service delivery model that will work everywhere.

The goal should be to provide municipalities with the flexibility, resources, and tools necessary to meet their public safety responsibilities in a manner that is effective, accountable, and financially sustainable.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your attention to the challenges facing Pennsylvania's fire and emergency medical services.

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