

Good afternoon, my name is Bruce Hezlep. I am the Director of Public Safety in the Township of Pine, which is a relatively new position in our community. I am also an Assistant Fire Chief, serving under a career Chief, in a community that borders the Township of Pine, where I have been a member for close to 25 years. I hold pro-board certifications as a Fire Officer II, Fire Instructor II, and several other pro-board certifications in hazardous materials and traffic incident management. I am a PA State Fire Instructor and Pro Board evaluator, and I also serve on Butler County's Water Rescue Team. To say that I am highly invested in the fire service would be an understatement.

Pennsylvania has a very proud fire service which traces back to December 7, 1736, when Benjamin Franklin and a group of folks from Philadelphia established the Union Fire Company. On December 7th of this year, the volunteer fire service in Pennsylvania will turn 290 years old.

There is tremendous strength in tradition. It represents generations of people who have left their dinner tables, birthday parties, and the comfort of their warm beds in the middle of the night to help their neighbors on what can, at times, be their worst possible day. Knowledge and experience are passed down to new members; we take pride in our equipment, apparatus, and stations, and we feel a

great deal of responsibility for serving our communities. This pride fosters commitment, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to serve. As the father of a son who has followed me into the fire service and is now a career firefighter, I feel that pride every day.

The traditions of volunteer fire are very much worth preserving, and I am a huge advocate for the volunteer fire service. As I said earlier, I am highly invested.

However, pride and tradition do not respond to fires. A good friend of mine, and fellow firefighter, once boiled the fire service down to one thing – the people. Without people, all the shiny trucks, state-of-the-art fire stations, and equipment are useless. The fire service needs people to operate.

In 2018 Senate Resolution 6 simply stated that “Fire and EMS are in crisis – **right now**. Simply put, EMS is woefully lacking in funding – and the number of volunteer firefighters has fallen dramatically over the decades.” Senate Resolution 6 stated that in the 1970’s – which I will call the heyday of the volunteer fire service – there were 300,000 firefighters in the Commonwealth of PA, and estimated that number at around 38,000 at the time of the 2018 report. That’s roughly an 87% decrease in numbers. This problem, identified in 2018, was not new; in 2004, the “Pennsylvania

Senate resolution 60 Report” determined that recruitment and retention were problems.

This raises the question of why we are losing volunteers. I believe there are several reasons.

The mission of the fire service has changed dramatically in the last 40 or so years. We are now an “all hazards” service, and we respond to much more than just fires. In fact, we don’t respond to as many fires as we used to due to changes in building codes and construction.

We respond to vehicle accidents, hazardous materials calls, medical emergencies, cardiac arrests, technical rescues involving confined spaces and heights, water rescues, flooding, severe weather emergencies, downed power lines, gas leaks, carbon monoxide incidents, and assistance for people who have fallen or been trapped.

These types of calls vary by department, but our communities rely upon us to respond whenever lives, property, or public safety are at risk. To paraphrase Deputy Chief John Eversole of the Chicago Fire Department:

“Our department answers 1,120 calls every day. Do you know how many of the calls the public expects perfection on? 1,120. Nobody calls the fire department and says, 'Send me two dumb firemen in a pickup truck.' In three minutes,

they want five brain-surgeon decathlon champions to come and solve all their problems.

That is what the public desires, and that is what they deserve.

So, this leads to the second issue that has arisen, which is a challenge for the volunteer fire service. It takes a lot of time and energy to become a “brain-surgeon and decathlon champion”. When some of us joined the fire service, the investment in training was not as high as it is now. I know myself; it was - here’s a pair of boots and some turnout gear – now follow me, kid.

Now the amount of time required to become a Pro Board-certified Firefighter I, which is a certification that tests a firefighter’s skills commensurate with the ability to operate on the fireground safely and effectively, requires 200 hours of initial training and preparation, and that’s before adding in a weekly drill night to meet department-specific qualifications and ongoing training. The skills learned are perishable skills if not kept up with.

The classes include a 48-hour fireground support class, an 88-hour Firefighter I training class, Hazardous Materials Awareness and Operations, Traffic Incident Management, First Aid and CPR, along with a few FEMA classes on the National Incident Management System.

That's a lot of training. And that's just the start. To address all the types of calls I mentioned earlier requires even more advanced training.

And that's just the operations side of the fire company. The administrative side of running a volunteer fire company deserves just as much attention. Bills need to be paid, budgets need to be managed, funds need to be raised, facilities need to be cared for, and equipment needs to be inspected and repaired as if someone's life depends on it – because it does.

In Pennsylvania, there are also volunteer firefighters' relief associations, and managing and keeping those records adds another layer of administrative burden.

In an increasingly small pool of volunteers, the same people who respond to emergencies also manage these administrative functions. We first ask that a volunteer spend an inordinate amount of time learning to become a firefighter, and then we ask that person to become an administrator, bookkeeper, grant writer, facilities manager, and human resources manager (remember, it's the people who make a fire company).

This creates a sustainability problem – people cannot keep up. Many times, members join, complete their initial training, and then face the burden of increasing demands

that take them away from their families, and simply burn out. When they leave, much of the institutional knowledge they have of the organization often leaves with them.

Let's face it: with most families having both parents working outside the community, the time they have to raise kids, take them to soccer games, dance recitals, and children's birthday parties, and volunteer diminishes. They get burnt out, and something must give.

And that something is the volunteer fire service – a job that can get you killed. Simply put, the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker are not coming anymore – especially during the day when people are at work.

So, what can be done? This is an age-old question, and one that was addressed in both the 2004 Pennsylvania Senate Resolution 60 report and the 2018 Senate Resolution 6 Report, both of which point to local solutions that I believe are still valid.

Some of these solutions include:

- Strengthening partnerships between volunteer fire companies and their local government

- Offer volunteer tax credits, tuition assistance, service awards, and employer incentives to allow their employees to volunteer
- Enhance regional cooperation and establish mutual aid frameworks
- Assist municipalities in supporting finance, administration and HR, legal and technology needs

Lastly, I firmly believe that training and leadership must be part of the solution. We need to help people prepare to lead. Experience on the fireground is valuable, but managing volunteers requires communication, fairness, accountability, and the ability to work with local government. Strong leadership gives new members a path forward, helps experienced members stay engaged, and prepares the next generation to take responsibility. Those capabilities deserve the same deliberate investment we make in our apparatus and equipment.

Pennsylvania's volunteer fire service has served our communities for nearly 290 years. Preserving that legacy requires us to invest in the people who carry it forward. We must make it practical for them to join, train, serve, and lead

through meaningful incentives, manageable administrative demands, regional cooperation, and strong partnerships with local government. I urge you to build on the recommendations already before us and support their implementation in our communities. Our volunteers have given generations of service to Pennsylvania. They deserve our commitment, and more importantly, our residents deserve a trained, qualified crew when they call for help.