



Testimony for House Republican Policy Committee Hearing on Public Safety –
Meeting the Needs of Our Firefighters

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Office of the State Fire Commissioner

John Tedorski, Deputy Commissioner

Chairman Rowe, Representative Shaffer, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Office of the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC).

The OSFC serves as Pennsylvania's central coordinating body for fire service leadership, support, and strategy. Our mission spans four core program areas:

- We provide **Financial Support** by administering grant and loan programs that strengthen operational capacity for fire and EMS agencies statewide.
- We champion the process of **Community Risk Reduction**, supporting prevention-focused initiatives that reduce fire and life-safety risks.
- We provide **Training and Voluntary Certification** to fire departments across the Commonwealth by establishing high-quality, standards-aligned training and certification through the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy (PSFA). In addition to its own training offering, the PSFA works with a network of independent Educational Training Agencies (ETAs) and other PSFA-approved training providers to offer training throughout the Commonwealth.
- We also assist departments with **Recruitment and Retention**, one of the main topics of this hearing today. Our office provides technical assistance, tools, and guidance to address the personnel challenges facing fire departments across the Commonwealth.

In a Commonwealth as diverse as Pennsylvania, which is home to more than 2,000 fire departments serving communities ranging from rural farmland to densely populated urban centers, the OSFC's work is critical in sustaining the fire service and ensuring public safety. The OSFC also serves as the liaison to the Governor, the General Assembly, and partner agencies, helping shape policy, standards, and statewide strategies..

To better understand the challenges facing the fire service, OSFC undertook a comprehensive research effort utilizing statewide volunteerism survey data conducted by other organizations and compiled the data into a follow-up analysis. The research was completed in February of 2026 and was presented to the State Fire Advisory Board.

The findings show that people are less likely to volunteer, which is consistent with decades of a documented decline in the number of firefighters. The

findings provide clearer guidance than ever on why Pennsylvanians do or do not volunteer, and provides insight on how departments can strengthen retention.

I would like to briefly summarize some the results of that research. The analysis reported that approximately 71% of surveyed Pennsylvanians reported being unlikely or very unlikely to volunteer as firefighters, while fewer than 14% were likely to do so. This confirms that there is a shrinking pool of those willing to consider volunteering in the fire service, placing greater emphasis on retention of existing members and broadening the recruitment pipeline.

Respondents identified five conditions that would make them more likely to volunteer:

- Flexible scheduling
- A welcoming and supportive environment
- Access to required training and equipment
- Opportunities to learn new skills
- Desire to give back to the community

These enablers closely mirror known best practices in volunteer management. OSFC is assisting fire department leaders in obtaining the crucial management skills through course offerings like the “Building Collaborative Teams” course, delivered in partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, which just happens to be running that class this weekend in nearby Westmoreland County.

We are also helping fire departments develop recruitment plans that speak effectively to their community about opportunities in the fire service. Our research project also found that some of the most common reasons for not joining a fire department included

- “I can’t see myself as a firefighter”
- Lack of required training
- Concerns about physical fitness
- Perceived age limitations

These findings reinforce that improving culture, educating the public about the various roles available in the volunteer fire service, and the career path to combination and career departments are key to recruitment.

Across all the available research, retention emerged as the single strongest predictor of department sustainability.

Culture—more than incentives, equipment, or training—determines whether members stay. Organizations that have an environment that makes members, both paid and volunteer, feel valued and supported have a far higher rate of retention than those who do not

These findings lay the foundation for OSFC's program priorities and our recommendations to the Legislature. OSFC's Recruitment and Retention Team has now completed in-person outreach and meetings in 65 of the 67 counties across the Commonwealth. These visits allowed OSFC to gather firsthand accounts of personnel challenges and share best practices with local leadership.

To expand access and reduce travel barriers, the team has now shifted to a regular online webinar format. These webinars increase accessibility and ensure both rural and urban departments can receive timely support.

OSFC recently launched a fully redesigned Recruitment and Retention section of the website, offering:

- A structured, step-by-step planning guide for departments
- Tools for analyzing local needs and setting recruitment/retention strategies
- Templates, checklists, and in-house OSFC-created resources
- Best practices grounded in statewide research
- Guidance for developing department-specific retention programs

This resource is designed to help every fire department, regardless of size, staffing model, or community type, begin the process of building a sustainable membership system.

For the first time, OSFC now hosts the most accurate, up-to-date list of Pennsylvania fire departments, searchable by ZIP code. This tool will help:

- Prospective volunteers find and contact their nearest department
- Departments reach potential recruits in their immediate area
- OSFC support statewide data improvements

This resource is the first step toward a larger digital platform to better connect departments with potential volunteers.

In recognition of the growing mental and physical health challenges facing emergency responders, OSFC has significantly updated the Health and Wellness

initiatives. We have developed a list of consolidated mental health resources, cancer-risk and information and tracking through the National Firefighter Cancer Registry, and guidance on best practices for firefighter well-being.

This reflects OSFC's continued investment in supporting the whole firefighter, both on and off the fireground.

The most powerful action any fire department can take to stabilize its membership is to strengthen retention before expanding recruitment. As I discussed a few moments ago, research shows that the majority of Pennsylvanians are not inclined to volunteer in operational roles, and recruitment alone cannot compensate for avoidable loss of existing members.

Departments should first address cultural, leadership, scheduling, training, and workload factors that drive volunteers away. Retention success reduces the pressure to recruit persistently and helps build a more stable service foundation.

Pennsylvania's fire departments vary widely in size, structure, service area, and staffing models. Because of this diversity, there is no universal template for solving recruitment and retention challenges.

This is why OSFC encourages every department to use the new step-by-step Recruitment and Retention website tools, which provide a structured, evidence-based process for identifying local needs, diagnosing root challenges, and designing tailored solutions. These tools empower departments to build a program that meets their unique circumstances rather than adopting strategies that may not translate across different communities.

Our research clearly demonstrates that administrative volunteer roles represent a significantly larger pool of willing volunteers than operational firefighting roles. Approximately 36.6% of respondents indicated they were likely to volunteer in administrative capacities compared to only 13.7% who would consider becoming firefighters. This means Pennsylvanians are nearly three times more likely to help administratively than operationally.

At the same time, administrative duties—fundraising, recordkeeping, reporting, onboarding, scheduling, communications—were identified as a major source of time pressure and burnout for operational volunteers.

Departments should intentionally recruit and utilize administrative volunteers.

This strategy addresses both retention and recruitment simultaneously by making service more sustainable and appealing.

Departments should treat recruitment as an ongoing, strategic process rather than an episodic one. Using OSFC's structured guidance, departments can establish:

- Clear community outreach plans
- Consistent messaging and branding
- Defined pipelines for onboarding
- Transparent communication about roles and expectations

Leveraging those administrative volunteers we just spoke about for recruitment itself can help reduce the burden on operational members focus on mission-critical activities.

As we look at new recruits entering the fire service, providing them the necessary training and skills is a key role of leadership in the fire service. OSFC has developed multiple approaches to providing those skills.

OSFC helps provide that training and skill development by providing curriculum and certification opportunities through the various career fire academies across the Commonwealth, supporting emergency services programs in Career and Technology schools, promoting firefighting curriculum and extra-curricular clubs in high schools, or delivering local level training through our network of Educational Training Agencies.

For example, we are currently aware of 42 programs in Career and Technology Schools and programs directly in high schools across the Commonwealth. Our Recruitment and Retention staff continues to champion these programs to local education officials.

As part of that effort, our staff will be doing a presentation on the various structures of those programs at the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and Pennsylvania School Boards Association annual conference this month.

Updates to our entry-level curriculum this year have restructured our entry level courses to provide training designed to meet the certification requirements of a new national standard for an exterior-only firefighter, opening the door to training for operational fireground roles for individuals who don not want to enter a burning structure.

The State Fire Academy also continues to develop curriculum that can be delivered online, or in a blended format. These updates allow the delivery of training that is more flexible and easier for students to access.

We encourage departments to consider cooperative arrangements including shared services like regional training, joint recruitment campaigns, and administrative pooling, when appropriate. Legislative updates to language enabling our grant and loan program are needed to align with the evolving organizational and service delivery models emerging across the Commonwealth.

While not always the right answer for all departments, collaboration can reduce costs, minimize duplication, and enhance organizational stability. OSFC's Municipal and Fire Organization Partnership Guide that was created in conjunction with the PA Department of Community and Economic Development can help offer some guidance for these efforts.

Pennsylvania's fire service is at a pivotal moment. **Maintaining a strong, sustainable emergency response system requires intentional action, modernized approaches, and collaborative problem-solving.** OSFC remains committed to supporting all fire departments, whether volunteer, career, or combination, as they navigate today's complex challenges.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome your questions and look forward to continued partnership in strengthening fire and emergency services across the Commonwealth.