



**Testimony Before the Pennsylvania House Republican Policy Committee
State of the Volunteer Fire Service in Allegheny County
Vice President Tim Leech, Pittsburgh Fire Fighters IAFF Local No. 1**

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Chairman Rowe, members of the Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

I am going to talk about the state of the fire service in Allegheny County and, specifically, how the challenges facing the volunteer fire service increasingly affect professional firefighters and the communities we both serve.

My name is Tim Leech, and I am here today in my role as the Vice President and legislative director of the Pittsburgh Fire Fighters, IAFF Local No. 1. Our members are professional firefighters serving the City of Pittsburgh and, through both intergovernmental and mutual agreements, several communities beyond the City's borders. In addition to these roles, I am also a Captain on the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire with over 20 years of experience with the Bureau.

I want to begin by making something very clear: **when I talk about the problem with our volunteer fire service in Pennsylvania, the problem is not our volunteer firefighters.**

The men and women who volunteer their time to protect their neighbors deserve our respect. They train on nights and weekends, they respond at all hours, and perform an extraordinarily dangerous job without expecting a paycheck in return.

The problem is the system we are asking them to sustain.

Pennsylvania's volunteer fire service was built around a model that worked when communities had large numbers of residents who lived and worked close to home and could leave work or home when the fire siren sounded. That model has become increasingly impossible to sustain.

The State Legislature sounded the alarm with the SR6 Report in 2018, regarding the crisis of the dwindling number of volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania, resulting in a report with 27 recommendations; many of which have yet to be implemented. However, you can go back to the SR60 Committee of 2003 to point out that the general assembly has been aware of this issue for decades.

The current State Fire Commissioner has been raising awareness since he assumed the office in 2023 that departments across the Commonwealth are confronting volunteer shortages, an aging workforce, and recruitment and retention challenges. But he is not the first Commissioner to do so.

A recent report by the Congress of Neighboring Communities (CONNECT) pointed out that Volunteer firefighters are increasingly being asked to do much more than fight fires. Fire Chiefs reported that volunteers are spending time on fundraising, grant writing and administrative

responsibilities, in addition to training and emergency response. CONNECT identified concern that these additional responsibilities contribute to recruitment and retention problems.

Leaders here in Allegheny County have recognized this crisis as well. In 2025, County Council adopted a resolution specifically addressing staffing and budgetary challenges facing volunteer fire departments. That resolution stated that Allegheny County has more than 200 volunteer fire companies protecting hundreds of thousands of residents, and those departments are struggling to remain equipped, staffed, trained, and ready to respond.

When those departments struggle to put enough firefighters on the street, the consequences do not stop at municipal boundaries.

The pressure moves to neighboring departments—including both volunteer and professional fire departments.

When fire departments are more increasingly asked to leave their municipalities unguarded to respond to emergencies in other jurisdictions, they are leaving their residents unsafe, their businesses and properties at risk.

We have already seen a transition occurring in Allegheny County.

Wilkinsburg eliminated its municipal fire department and contracted with the City of Pittsburgh for fire protection in 2011. Pittsburgh firefighters now staff a station in Wilkinsburg 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The current intergovernmental agreement continues that relationship through 2028.

More recently, Ingram Borough entered into an intergovernmental agreement with the City of Pittsburgh to provide full time fire protection services.

In addition, we are aware other municipalities have inquired about the possibility of the City of Pittsburgh providing contracted fire protection.

That should tell us something, the current model is not sustainable.

Communities are beginning to recognize that fire protection must be treated as an essential public service that requires predictable staffing and response.

Other Allegheny County municipalities are already moving toward different staffing models. Bellevue reorganized its department under a full time career fire chief with professional firefighters supported by volunteers. Swissvale and Mt. Lebanon similarly operate as combination departments incorporating career and volunteer personnel.

These are not isolated examples. They are evidence of a larger transition taking place in the fire service.

There is another issue Pennsylvania must confront: **Pennsylvania currently has no minimum statewide training requirement for firefighters.**

The Commonwealth offers excellent certification programs, including Firefighter I and Firefighter II, but the Office of the State Fire Commissioner acknowledges that there are no minimum state training requirements.

That means the level of training required before someone performs structural firefighting can depend significantly upon the individual department, meaning that firefighters are working together across municipal boundaries with different levels of training and certification.

Fire does not recognize municipal boundaries, and neither should our expectations for firefighter competency and safety.

We also need to examine the economics of the current system.

According to the Office of the State Fire Commissioner, Pennsylvania has more than 2,100 fire departments. Maintaining large numbers of independent organizations can mean separate administrative structures, training programs, insurance, equipment inventories, apparatus fleets, stations, maintenance programs, and fundraising operations.

In densely populated Allegheny County, neighboring municipalities often maintain separate administrative organizations and expensive apparatus even though those departments routinely depend upon one another at significant incidents.

This is also a problem within many municipal borders, where multiple fire departments exist within a municipality.

I don't want to point out all negatives though. You can a great example of positive change happening right here in Allegheny County. It was highlighted at a recent hearing on this subject that Ross Township has been working to consolidate its eight separate volunteer departments under one Chief and one Department of Fire and Emergency Services.

A quote from their website sums it up well: *"The Department provides centralized leadership and oversight for fire and emergency services throughout Ross Township, with a focus on unifying and strengthening the combined service provided by the Township's fire companies. **This includes reducing unnecessary duplication of services, improving operational efficiency, strengthening staffing and recruitment, enhancing coordination among departments, and ensuring the responsible use of Township resources.**"*

Regionalization can provide opportunities to share facilities and apparatus and centralize training, planning, and administration. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner itself identifies those efficiencies as potential features of regionalized fire protection.

This is not about eliminating the volunteer fire service.

It is about recognizing that **one model will no longer work everywhere in Pennsylvania.**

I have brought some real solutions and approaches state and local policymakers should examine:

- **Merge or regionalize fire protection.** Encourage neighboring municipalities and fire departments to combine administrative functions, training, facilities, apparatus, and operations where doing so makes sense.
- **Increase counties' role in fire suppression.** Counties should assume greater responsibility for planning, coordination, funding, training, specialized resources, or potentially direct delivery of fire protection where municipal systems cannot sustainably provide it. We can look to neighboring states such as Virginia and Maryland for examples of successful countywide combination departments.
- **Transition communities to combination departments or, where appropriate fully paid professional departments.** Career firefighters can provide predictable baseline staffing while volunteers continue to provide valuable additional staffing and community involvement. In communities where call volume, population density, staffing shortages, or risk make volunteer response increasingly impossible to sustain, municipalities should evaluate fully career staffed departments.
- **Establish meaningful statewide firefighter training standards.** Pennsylvania can preserve local flexibility while ensuring that firefighters performing structural firefighting meet an appropriate baseline level of training and competency.
- **Provide state support for consolidation and regionalization.** Financial incentives and technical assistance can help communities overcome the initial costs and administrative barriers associated with restructuring fire protection.

I want to caution, though, that as departments transition to professional firefighters, the hiring of firefighters should be done by the municipalities, not by the individual volunteer fire departments. These organizations were not designed to handle hiring and employment issues, they do not have HR departments, payroll departments, or benefits offices.

Members of the Committee, the question is not whether Pennsylvania's fire service is changing.

It already is.

Wilkesburg has changed. Ingram has changed. Bellevue and Ross have adapted. Other communities are asking what comes next.

Professional firefighters and volunteer firefighters ultimately have the same mission: when someone calls 911, qualified firefighters need to arrive quickly, with sufficient staffing, training and equipment to solve the problem safely.

Pennsylvania has an opportunity to begin building a fire service system around that principle rather than around municipal boundaries and organizational structures created generations ago.

The volunteer fire service has provided extraordinary service to Pennsylvania. Recognizing that the traditional model is under increasing pressure does not diminish that legacy. It gives us an opportunity to determine how we preserve what works, change what no longer works, and make sure every Pennsylvania resident has access to reliable fire protection.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I would be happy to answer any questions.