



**COMMENTS BY
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF
TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS**

**FOR THE
SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE**

ON

**VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER
RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

BY

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Chairmen Vulakovich and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee:

My name is Elam M. Herr and I am the assistant executive director for the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. I thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on behalf of the 1,454 townships in Pennsylvania represented by the Association on this critical issue. Due to other obligations, we cannot be here this evening, but want to express our appreciation to you for holding this hearing. We are available should you like to discuss this issue further at your convenience.

Townships comprise 95 percent of the commonwealth's land area and are home to more than 5.5 million Pennsylvanians, nearly 44 percent of all state residents. These townships are very diverse, ranging from rural, agricultural communities with fewer than 200 residents to more suburban, populated communities with populations approaching 65,000 residents. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on an issue that impacts every township across the state.

Volunteer fire departments and volunteer firefighters are the primary providers of fire protection in townships. We strongly support our volunteers for providing a valuable service, one that the local government would need to provide if there weren't volunteers willing to prepare for and respond to incidents requiring rescue, fire suppression, and hazardous materials cleanup.

The responsibilities of these first responders have expanded over the years to include rescue, hazardous materials response, and terrorism prevention, which has significantly increased the training needed by these volunteers and, in turn, led to the reduction in willing volunteers. It is critical that we provide recruitment and retention incentives for volunteer emergency responders throughout the Commonwealth.

Senate Bill 575 (PN 645) would expand the Volunteer Firemen's Relief Association program to allow these funds to be used for necessary training, financial assistance for recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters, and to establish and pay for length of service award programs through the relief associations.

PSATS supports SB 575 because it would allow fire relief funds to be used for these additional necessary uses. This bill would provide volunteer fire companies with new funding options to try to retain existing volunteers and recruit new volunteers. While it will not solve the challenges that we face with the future of our VFCs, it will provide another tool to help.

In addition, we support language in SB 575 that would clearly give the Fire Commissioner the ability to establish eligible uses of these funds in accordance with this act. We believe that the Fire Commissioner is the most appropriate state official to make these determinations. The Auditor General should continue to audit to ensure compliance with the rules established by the Fire Commissioner, but should not create additional rules or restrictions on the use of these funds.

Volunteer fire departments struggle with adequate funding sources and, according to the Department of Community and Economic Development's Municipal Statistic reports, 99.5 percent of townships of the second class reported contributing a total of \$157,654,622 to help their volunteer fire departments in 2015. In fact, 84 percent of reporting townships reported spending more than \$10,000 for fire protection and 40 percent reported spending more than \$50,000. Sixty townships reported spending more than \$500,000 on fire protection in 2015. But this assistance by our members is not enough, and this is where SB 575 would be valuable.

PSATS urges its members to work with their volunteer fire companies and to be proactive in discussing the needs of their VFCs, current and future, to make sure that our volunteers remain active well into the future and can spend their time training and responding, not fundraising. This is a requirement that was added to all of the municipal codes several years ago as a result of the SR 60 Commission and we work to make sure townships are aware of their responsibilities.

Again, we support SB 575 and feel that this legislation will provide another needed tool to our VFCs.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment today and I will attempt to answer any questions that you may have.