

Pennsylvania State Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee
Public Hearing
on

Volunteer Fire Companies – Recruitment and Retention Efforts

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I would like to thank Senator Randy Vulakovich the Pennsylvania State Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, Senator Kim Ward, Commissioner Tim Solobay, Director Rick Flinn, and the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners for their invitation to appear and speak at this hearing. My testimony this evening to discuss the Recruitment and Retention Efforts throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is influenced by 33 years of Fire Service experience including;

- Lifetime membership - Elfinwild Vol. Fire Co., Shaler Twp. having served as past Chief and President, currently Lieutenant Officer and Executive Board
- Currently serve as Shaler Twp. Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator
- 22 year ongoing employment by MSA – Pittsburgh, PA
 - Research and Development of Firefighter Personal Protective Equipment
 - Having worked with large city fire depts. including Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire, Philadelphia Fire Dept., New York City Fire Dept., Washington D.C. FD, and Cleveland FD, as well as hundreds of paid, combination, and volunteer departments across the North America.
 - NFPA Technical Committee Member for;
 - NFPA 1971, Standard on Protective Ensembles for Structural Fire Fighting and Proximity Fire Fighting
 - NFPA 1977, Standard on Protective Clothing and Equipment for Wildland Firefighting
- A.W. Beattie Career Center, Emergency Response Technology Advisory Board

My comments this evening are based on many years of personal experience, knowledge, and observation in the fire service and do not necessarily represent the views or opinion of any organization by which I am currently affiliated. I have been asked to participate in tonight's hearing by Shaler Twp. Manager Tim Rogers and PA Municipal League Director of Governmental Affairs Amy Sturgis.

Over the past two years four of the six Shaler Twp. fire depts. have engaged in good faith discussions toward establishing a collaborative partnership in an attempt to address declining

rolls in membership. Progress toward that end has been slow at best. During such time the “Futures Committee”, an ad hoc task group comprised of Township of Shaler fire dept. officers, has held many discussions and solicited input from various fire service and government resources. The barriers toward a multi department partnership are not in regard to financial qualms, identity preservation, or apparatus paint schemes. The issues which continue to impede progress toward the goal to provide a stronger, more reliable service to the residence of Shaler Twp. are;

- Agreeing on a Standard Service Delivery Model
- Creating an interdependent administrative structure augmented by local government
- Ability to Influence regional collaborative partnerships and leverage other municipal services to enhance the manpower pool.

In order to boost membership and retain volunteers in the 21st century the 1776 business model for the volunteer fire department in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania must change. The fire dept’s operations and response models have changed in particular after Sept. 11, 2001. The public now expects fire departments to be able to respond to emergencies of all types including fire, EMS, technical rescue, hazardous materials, natural and manmade disasters now Chemical, Biological, Radiation, Nuclear, and Explosive (CBRNE).

In 2003, Senate Resolution 2003-60 (the SR 60 Commission) created a bipartisan commission comprised of fire and EMS leaders, local government representatives, key state agency staff, and members of the General Assembly. A report by the commission was issued in November 2004. Also, in 2005 the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee issued a report known as HR-148 examining a study on the feasibility of regionalizing Pennsylvania’s volunteer fire departments. A revisit to these two in-depth reports suggests funding alone is not the remedy to the Commonwealth’s declining volunteer population.

Service Delivery Model Legislation/Incentives

As stated in SR-60, throughout the Commonwealth there is no consistent statutory statement of authority, responsibility and accountability for fire service. This lack of consistency creates a dilemma in the service providers as well as the expectations of the community and the local elected officials, as the service delivery model can change from municipality to municipality and more so within municipalities with multiple departments. There is no standard level of performance and no minimum requirement of training or certification. There is no structure to provide an incentive to do this, or to require it. Some volunteer leaders believe “If it is built they will come.” Throughout the Commonwealth and across the U.S. are excellent examples

where volunteer fire depts. have put in place well-defined performance and certification requirements for their membership to follow. Their recruitment and retention is strong. The membership knows and accepts what is expected upon joining and acknowledges the requirements of participation. As published in the US Fire Administration Report FA-310, Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services released in 2007, structured organizations attract and retain members. Research has found that many volunteers, especially younger ones are more willing to devote a fixed rather than open-ended amount of time each month to volunteer work. Their constraints can be met by using duty shifts. Duty shifts help retention by limiting time demands placed on volunteers. Volunteers are on call or in the station only during assigned time periods. They are not obligated to respond during non-assigned periods. Duty shifts remove the burden of having to be available 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year.

SR – 60 proposed creating a simplistic approach to a standard which applies to all types of communities, allowing for each local government to decide what level they want to provide, different standards for different types of communities. However, the difference in community type should not eliminate a need for a structured model to determine what can be generally expected by the community in the way of service in time of emergency. Many states are well ahead of Pennsylvania in defining the delivery of services.

Municipalities to provide Fire Dept. Administrative support and supervision

The administrative relationship between local government and the volunteer fire department needs to be more interdependent. The need for administrative support and supervision from local government is high. It comes as no surprise that the demands on the volunteer fire fighter is one of the most time-demanding volunteer activities one could participate in especially for dept. leaders. Surveys addressing recruitment and retention indicate volunteers are willing to put in the time to train and respond to emergencies. However, the time spent on meetings, building and equipment maintenance, fund raising, and PR events are deterrents to retention. Again, the business model much change. Just think, we could increase our training time by 20 - 25% if we didn't require our members to attend a monthly membership meeting. That's an additional 24 – 36 hours per year spent on training instead of discussing the purchase of hall rental supplies. The day to day functions of running a fire dept. have become a huge time burden to the volunteer, especially with fewer and fewer volunteers.

Funding at most levels is geared toward providing money to purchase equipment and hardware not people or administrative resources. The system is supporting a redundancy of large dollar apparatus purchases. In many cases fire department leaders are trying to solve their

recruitment and retention issues by purchasing more specialized equipment to attract interest and participation. As HR 148 has identified, there is a need for closer working relationships between local governments and their volunteer fire companies. Many local governments do not play a role in the planning, budgeting and other volunteer fire dept. policy discussions. They tend to stay away from influencing volunteer fire dept. business decisions for fear of taking on financial and administrative responsibilities they are not prepared for. Likewise, most volunteer fire depts. do not openly seek input and participation from their local governments in their financial and operational planning.

A fire department's ability to retain volunteer members has a direct relationship to its ability to manage its people. Many retention problems can be traced back, directly or indirectly, to inadequate or misguided efforts from department managers. Let's face it, the volunteer fire service is not practicing or being trained on the latest organizational management techniques. Chiefs and presidents are put into positions not necessarily because they are the most qualified. Most volunteer departments find that strong but fair discipline helps rather than hurts retention. There is no room for double standards of discipline and performance in the volunteer fire service. It can also improve the relationship with local authorities as well as make the department more professional. Administrative support provided by local governments in the form of personnel dedicated to coordinate the fire service day to day functions (Fire Administrators, Chiefs, Directors, etc.) is paramount. If we do not administratively support and preserve the volunteer depts. now we will be forced to support paid depts. in the future.

Many volunteer leaders do not understand the difference between fireground and fire station management. On the fireground, a set military-style structure of command and leadership may mean the difference between life and death. However, at the station, leaders should consider options other than a traditional military style of management. A lack of leadership leads to a lack of direction, and in almost all cases, the department declines. Members respond to defined expectations and follow people who lead by example. How can we in the fire service expect our members to be proficient when our leadership does not possess the knowledge and skill?

The fire service is quick to change when it applies to new equipment, technology and apparatus. It is very slow to adapt to new management techniques and business philosophies. The fire service is often decades behind the business community in adapting to new management techniques to solve their problems. The volunteer fire depts. of the Commonwealth are responsible only for themselves and accountable to no one. Company decisions can be made by way of popular vote among the membership which may or may not be the best for the community they serve. Many retention and recruitment problems can be traced back directly or indirectly to leadership problems. Effective leadership helps retain

members as well as reduce dissatisfaction. Ineffective leadership is the most common reason for a decline in membership. Other reasons include lack of coordination, authoritarian management styles, and failure to manage change.

Regionalization/Collaborative Partnerships/Cross Functional Resources

Both HR-148 and FA-310 pointed out the benefits of forming collaborative partnerships and its effect on recruitment and retention. Successful merger and consolidation efforts in Pennsylvania provides evidence of a variety of benefits that can result in other areas such as equipment and facilities usage, planning and budgeting, training, as well as improve inter-company cooperation and enhance fire company – local government relations. In the process of developing these partnerships, municipal and fire officials who have been involved in collaborative regionalization efforts provided valuable advice for others considering forming collaborative partnerships in their areas. The challenge is most regionalization efforts in Pennsylvania are incubated from the rank and file grass roots core of volunteers. A lack of trust and confidence exists between the volunteers and local government. Local governments don't want to accept the financial responsibility and volunteer fire depts. don't want to let it go. Just throwing money at the fire service will not fix the recruitment and retention issue. More funding is not the answer. Some may argue funding is fueling the problem allowing poorly managed agencies to survive financially. Cooperation between agencies and local governments must be established. At a recent presentation in Harrisburg by the DCED Center for Local Government Services on Regionalization and Collaborative Partnerships the local government representatives only accounted for a single digit percentage of participation. The majority in attendance were volunteer fire dept. leaders. Perhaps we should look at local governments as a starting point for regionalization.

One of the largest stumbling blocks we face in our efforts to merge multiple agencies in Shaler Twp. is differing standards among the departments. The leaders of the interested departments cannot agree on credentials, certifications, or requirements. This goes back to the subject of adapting a standard service delivery model. Regionalization efforts cannot occur in isolation among the fire depts. In order to preserve and enhance the volunteer service consolidations and mergers must include the input, support and cooperation of local governments. Local government must be part of the plan.

When consolidating and regionalizing resources, personnel are better deployed, more effectively trained, and used more efficiently than in multiple fire companies. Regionalization reduces funding and other competition between adjacent departments, reduces equipment redundancy, improves cost and operational effectiveness, and may increase the pool for

recruiting. This is an important move especially for rural fire departments that lack the necessary funds to run an efficient operation. For example, several small departments joined together can employ unified purchasing that is less expensive and time consuming. A recent merger between two municipalities in Lancaster County produced a saving of \$50,000 per year in insurance costs by combining policies under one umbrella.

Regionalization and collaborative partnerships among emergency services must include the cooperation and planning efforts from local and state governments. In 1985 when PA EMS Act 45 was established an estimated 2/3 of the Commonwealths EMS services were operated by volunteer fire depts. The EMS service provided a cross-functional resource pull of volunteers which strengthened recruitment and retention within the volunteer services. The reaction to Act 45 by local governments was to separate the EMS delivery system from the volunteer fire depts. in order to ensure a 24/7 service. Volunteer fire dept. recruitment could no longer reap the benefits of a dual service agency. The inclusion of local and state governments in the efforts to regionalize and form cooperative partnerships allow for the opportunity to be creative with utilizing other municipal services to preserve the volunteer fire service delivery model. Some municipalities allow municipal employees to respond to daytime calls. Others are combining job functions relative to fire suppression such as Fire Marshals, Code Enforcement Officers, Zoning Officers, and Building Inspectors serving as Fire Service Administrators to oversee fire dept. operations.

In conclusion, recruitment and retention of volunteer fire firefighters is not simply an issue that more money and more manpower alone will solve. It is an issue of state and local governments uniting with emergency services to address a long term plan of what the fire service delivery model will look like in the next 3, 5 and 10 years. We have the information, we have conducted the studies. We must;

- Revisit the 23 recommendations of Senate Resolution 60 – 2003
- Build partnerships between local governments and volunteer fire depts. to increase recruitment, retention, and achieve organizational efficiencies as suggested in House Resolution 148 – 2003
- Look at the recommendations sited in U.S. Fire Administration FA-310, 2007, Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services Challenges and Solutions.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to present my comments. I look forward toward continuing our work to strengthen and preserve the impact and role volunteer fire services and first responders provide to our communities.