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The Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

Testimony – April 28, 2021

James Jay Delaney, Fire Chief, EMC, EMT/P

Chairman Stefano, Minority Chairman Muth and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss – “Fire & EMS Accomplishments, Implementation & Next Steps”.

I am the Fire Chief for the City of Wilkes-Barre. I have been honored to serve the city in this role for over 15 years and a total of 40 years in Emergency Services. I am a certified paramedic. In addition, I am the **President of the Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association** representing career and combination Fire Chiefs from across the Commonwealth.

I have had the privilege of serving on the Senate Resolution 6 Commission from April of 2017 until November of 2018 when the 39-member commission voted to adopt 27 Recommendations. During these deliberations there were no divisions between all the emergency service groups. Our work was meant to be the pathway to the future for Fire and Emergency Medical Services.

Unfortunately, the Senate Resolution 60 Commission from 2004 identified many of the same issues as presented in the SR 6 report. The failure to act

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on many of the recommendations has caused the “crisis” we are in today. From 2013 to 2017 the state has lost 367 EMS agencies and many more since 2017. The Pennsylvania Department of Health Bureau of EMS reported a high of 30,000 EMS workers and is then down to approximately 17,000 statewide. On the fire side the number of volunteer fire fighters was about 300,000 in 1975 and dropped to 150,00 by 1985. There has been a steady progression since 1985 to about 38,000 today.

Make no mistake, in many areas across the Commonwealth our emergency services are operating in “crisis mode”. Add the current pandemic to the funding equation of many of these emergency service organizations and the conditions will continue to get much worse.

While there has been a slow start to implement many of the recommendations of the SR 6 Committee, we are pleased that many are moving now:

Act 91 of 2020 (Omnibus Measures – Fire Commissioner’s Office/Fire Advisory Board, Fire & EMS Grants, Fire & EMS Loans – Tax credits) was a critical component and signed by Governor Wolf in October 2020.

Part of Act 91 is the STATEWIDE REFERENDUM – ACT 2020-91 – MAKING MUNICIPAL FIRE AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES COMPANIES ELIGIBLE FOR LOANS – Ballot Question. In 2014 the legislature removed 30 million from the VLAP fund and in 2016, 9 million was removed from the fund to balance the state budget. During this past budget cycle another 6 million dollars was transferred from the Emergency Services Loan Assistance Fund to help balance the Commonwealths budget. The Fire Service **did not** support this removal in fire service funding. The Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association and other statewide emergency response organizations are hopeful on May 18, 2021 the Commonwealth voters approve the ballot question by allowing 22 career fire departments participate in this fire equipment loan fund. Currently there are 2,462 fire companies across the Commonwealth that may use the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program. In addition, this program was Recommendation 10 from the SR 6 Commission.

Act 26 of 2020 (Covid Fire & EMS Grants) helped many Emergency Service organizations by providing supplemental funding.

Act 93 of 2020 (EMSOF Enhancements) has the potential to assist the Emergency Medical Service funding. Since this legislation has been signed by the Governor, EMS services have seen no additional funding to date.

Act 106 of 2019 (Online Training) has not worked out well for the Career and Combination Fire Service and needs to be refined to include Essentials of Fire Fighting and portions of Fire Fighter 1 and Firefighter 2 and Rescue.

If we are to move Pennsylvania's Fire and EMS service out of the "crisis mode" and offer a pathway to the future the remaining recommendations from SR 6, need to be addressed.

The PCFCA priorities are:

SR 6 Recommendation 22 – DEVELOP A MENTAL WELLNESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL. Suicide and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are very serious issues within the Fire and EMS service. Pennsylvania's first responders are exposed to traumatic events and tragedies on a regular basis. The mental wellbeing of Pennsylvania's First Responders is a critical component to emergency response. *While Act 69 of 2019 (Mental Wellness & Stress Management Program) also known as HB 1459 was signed by Governor Wolf in July 2020. The statute has not been clearly disseminated to the First Response Community. This may be as a result of the current pandemic. The requirements set in this legislative action needs to be immediately promulgated to all statewide Emergency Responders.*

SR6 Recommendation 24 – REASSESS FIREWORKS LAW ADOPTED IN 2017. The PCFCA has steadfastly opposed the expansion of consumer grade fireworks back to SB 1055 of 2016. When Act 43 of 2017 was passed as part of the tax code, the emergency response community had no way to voice any opposition through a public hearing. The current law poses a significant public safety and first responder risk. 39 members of the SR 6 committee supported reassessing the current Fireworks law adding a local option to set regulations as a priority. This

reform has been a legislative priority for the PCFCA. House Bill 988 – Session of 2021 is a good start to this reform.

SR 6 Recommendation 5 – CREATE A STATE FIRE COMMISSION AND EXPAND THE OFFICE OF STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER. While Act 91 of 2020 addresses this issue, the funding mechanism has not been put in place to structure the new responsibilities within the State Fire Commissioners Office.

Pennsylvania's First Responders are the Commonwealth's first line of defense for all natural and man-made disasters and emergencies. We are considered critical infrastructure. We are nearly at a crossroads, if someone calls 911 and no one responds.

I am grateful to the Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee for the opportunity to add my voice and that of the Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association statewide membership.

Thank you.