



**Testimony for the
Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee**

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Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency
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Office of the State Fire Commissioner
Timothy Solobay, Commissioner

Senator Vulakovich, Senator Costa, and Members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity for us to speak at this hearing today.

First and foremost, we want you to know that when Governor Wolf offered us the job as the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) Director and the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC), he made it clear that his Administration would make a very strong commitment to public safety for all the citizens of the Commonwealth. Governor Wolf, his Cabinet Secretary designees, and his key staff came to PEMA the Thursday before he was sworn-in to get a briefing about the agency and how state agencies function during a disaster or emergency situation. The week after the inauguration we had a severe winter storm affecting the southeastern counties of the state; the Governor participated in the state weather calls, issued a proclamation of disaster emergency and came to the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) during the event to oversee the operations. Since then, Governor Wolf and his Cabinet Secretary designees have been at PEMA for two table top exercises that focused on a disaster involving a train carrying Bakken Crude Oil and a COOP exercise for downtown Harrisburg. In short – Governor Wolf is very actively engaged in emergency management matters.

We want to now take this opportunity on behalf of Governor Wolf, to thank the tens of thousands of first responders who put their lives on the line for the citizens of Pennsylvania. Each day they see first-hand the horrible and tragic mini disasters individuals and families face. From the emergency managers, 9-1-1 operators, State and local police, career and volunteer EMT's,

Paramedics and Firefighters these men and women are truly on the front lines saving lives and protecting property. Their jobs are thankless and dangerous as witnessed recently having lost two fire police officers, two firefighters, and a paramedic in the line of duty. Your continued support for their programs and safety is certainly appreciative and needed. Every disaster is local and these dedicated men and women are truly the ones that are the point of the spear in Pennsylvania's disaster response.

Pennsylvania has a very strong and proud tradition of volunteer service. In Pennsylvania, about 96 percent of all fire companies are staffed by volunteers. They usually are a community's first line of response when a serious incident happens. In addition, the local emergency management programs are staffed by volunteers. They play a major role in emergency management planning at the local level making sure their communities are fully prepared before an event happens. They also play a significant role in recovering from any disaster since the vast majority of federal funding for public infrastructure damage and hazard mitigation flows through municipalities. We owe these volunteers our deep thanks and gratitude for their service to our communities.

Although we will highlight matters that are specific to the fire service, many of the same trends and issues relate to other volunteer responders and those who volunteer in emergency management. In March 1976, a lengthy written report from the Governor's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control entitled "Pennsylvania Burning" was issued. The report spelled out several recommendations regarding our volunteer fire services as well as pointing out what the issues the volunteer fire service faced. Many of the issues identified in 1976 continue to confront the fire

service today. The most telling fact from that report is the fact that there were 300,000 volunteers involved with the Pennsylvania Fire Service in 1976. In the late 1990's, another report estimated the number of active volunteers to be 70,000. Today, we believe that number is closer to 50,000. With the dramatic drop over the years in volunteer firefighters, there is concern that there may be a public safety crisis in coming years.

While many reports and studies have been completed since 1976 there does not seem to be any single reason for the decline of those individuals who wish to become a volunteer firefighter ("recruitment") and those who decide to leave the fire services ("retention"). We often hear that the reason the fire service has so much trouble recruiting and retaining firefighters is because of the mandated state training requirements. Nothing could be further from the truth simply because there are no "mandated state training requirements." There are no state laws mandating any minimum level of training prior to an individual responding to an emergency. It is the local fire chief who decides at what level of training the personnel in that particular fire company should have. Rarely will you hear a former volunteer firefighter say they quit because there was too much training. Instead, it is usually because they grew tired of the lack of leadership in the firehouse or they spent more time doing work to raise funds to support the fire company than the time actually responding to emergencies.

Some have said the state does not do enough to help the fire service. The facts do not support that view. The Commonwealth provides in excess of \$150 million each year to the volunteer fire

service. This is done through the Fire Company-Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), and the Fireman's Relief Fund.

Several years ago, the OSFC had \$500,000 in critical funding restored to its budget. Those funds have been used to directly support the fire service through: restarting the popular Academy on the Road Program, returning to a full complement of Resident Training Programs, restoring Instructor Workshops, the ability to offer Professional Development Workshops, enabling the State Fire Academy to upgrade curriculum used in the Local Level Training System, and updating and adding hands on instructional tools at the State Fire Academy. Act 13 of 2012, the new Marcellus Shale law, provides \$750,000 annually out of the impact fee to OSFC and an additional \$750,000 to PEMA, to help our first responders prepare, train and respond to incidents or address issues that may arise related to natural gas development.

While the restoration of funds has enabled OSFC to restore Academy on the Road Programs and Resident Training Programs, the Local Level Training System by far has always been the most popular method for our firefighters and officers to receive the training they need. For years these programs were offered for free or very inexpensively through a system of Community Colleges and County operated fire training facilities. However, Act 46 of 2005 changed the funding method to our community colleges and eliminated the reimbursement for non-credit public safety training and full time equivalency (FTE). This means the fire training entities at the colleges had to start charging fees for students. There is concern these fees could reach levels many of our firefighters

and fire departments simply will not be able to afford. This means training could become non-existent in some areas of the state. This is an important matter to assess and review.

With regard to specific solutions to the problems facing the Pennsylvania Fire Service, a good start is to review a number of the reports and studies that have been completed since 1976 when “Pennsylvania Burning” first addressed many of the same issues. You may wish to review the Senate Resolution 60 Report that was issued in November 2004. Senate Resolution 60 established a special bipartisan legislative Commission to “develop legislation to provide direct and indirect assistance for the purpose of improving the delivery of emergency services in the Commonwealth.” In addition, you may wish to review the June 2005 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee Report entitled “The Feasibility of Regionalizing Pennsylvania’s Volunteer Fire Companies.” These reports coupled with all of the previous reports might be a great place to start as we search for answers to the complex challenges confronting our volunteer fire services, other volunteer first responders, and emergency management program volunteers.

We want to stress something that is of utmost importance in trying to address the challenges facing Pennsylvania’s fire service. There must be a true partnership between state and local governments and the fire service -- including the paid/career departments -- in order to develop a comprehensive “tool-box” of solutions to the issues facing the Pennsylvania fire service today and in the future. The same holds for other volunteer first responders and emergency management program volunteers. The safety of our citizens depends on it. We simply cannot sit by and do nothing at all.

In closing, we again want to assure the Committee that Governor Wolf has made a very strong commitment to public safety for all the citizens of the commonwealth. It is a core governmental function. We believe that with his commitment -- and your continued support of our missions -- PEMA and OSFC will continue to move forward and become premier agencies in the nation.

On behalf of Governor Wolf, We thank you Senator Vulakovich, Senator Costa, and Members of the Committees, for your continued support. Again, thank you for the opportunity for us to speak at this hearing today. We are happy to answer any questions that you may have.