

**Testimony of Don Konkle, Executive Director
PA Fire & Emergency Services Institute
April 29, 2015**

Senators Vulakovich and Ward

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Donald Konkle. I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Service Institute and the Law and Legislative Chair of the Fireman's Association of the State of Pennsylvania. I have been involved in the fire service since 1967, including 37 years as a member of the Harrisburg Bureau of Fire; 27 of those years as Chief.

Today the fire service is facing almost unprecedented challenges. In addition to concerns about manpower and budgets the fire service is facing a new and perhaps unprecedented challenge. That being new research from Underwriters Laboratories and the National Institute of Standards proving that fire burns faster, hotter, and produces more smoke and toxins than ever before. Many firefighters have thought this for several years, but now the research proves this.

Several factors have combined to create an almost perfect storm.

First, the furnishings in our homes are made largely of byproducts of oil and natural gas, creating an extremely combustible environment. This leads to flashover occurring at least 10 times faster than previously documented. Flashover is a condition where an entire area and its contents explosively and simultaneously erupt into fire. Neither firefighters nor civilians are capable of surviving the phenomenon of flashover.

Second, is the design of newer homes. Open floor plans have resulted in fewer walls and doors to slow the spread of fire and smoke. When flashover occurs an entire floor or the entire home explodes in flames.

Third, are new construction methods, such as lightweight beams and now lightweight stairs which results in very early and often deadly structural or floor collapse. These, collapses often occur without the traditional early warning indications of collapse.

This research presents a new challenge for the fire service. We are working hard to develop new strategy and tactics to combat today's new fires. New training has been developed to address this new hazard.

The fire and emergency services is also working hard to fully understand the challenges present by the large increase in the amount of crude oil being transported thru the Commonwealth. Any creditable solution starts with insuring we have a viable fire service.

Training is a critical issue in the fire service today. Training is vital as it affects responder safety, our ability to deliver quality and reliable services to citizens and recruiting and retention.

An examination of training concerns quickly gets you to two recurring themes. Those being time and treasure.

Time spent training is a concern and is often listed as a reason volunteers leave or do not join a fire department. However, training is at the heart of our ability to deliver service. We can reduce classroom time spent on training by developing and delivering quality web based training. This will provide firefighters a more flexible schedule to receive training. In order to accomplish this we need funding.

That brings us to the second concern about training, cost. The cost of training is a growing concern. Many of our poorer fire departments can no longer afford to train or certify their firefighters. There many factors driving the cost of training and some solutions on how to pay for it need to be discussed further. We would be happy to meet with staff or present more detailed testimony on this issue later.

An interesting concern has occurred recently in fire departments serving multiple municipalities. In at least two instances a fire department ask all the municipalities they protect to enact a fire tax. In both cases I am aware of two municipalities enacted a tax and the third refused. The fire departments fell they have a moral obligation to protect the citizens in the township that refuse the tax but are concerned that the tax municipalities will repeal their fire tax and demand free service.

Obviously, the fire service is facing many challenges. The solutions must be found. Many of the solutions need and will come from within the fire service and other solutions will need assistance from federal, state, and local governments.

I would like to proposed three ideas that if implement would be represent an important step in solving the emergency service crisis we face.

First is the passage of legislation that will allow local governments to provide a tax credit to their first responders. A bill similar to this has passed the House in each of the last two sessions.

Second would tax fireworks sold to people who are not residents of Pennsylvania. These sale take place at fireworks stores located at our borders with adjacent states. Senate Bill 642 gas been introduced to provide for this tax. We believe this a unique funding source that will cost Pennsylvanians' nothing.

Third is our proposal increase the current 2% tax on foreign homeowners and vehicle insurance by ½ percent. In a public affairs poll taken by Penn State showed that 61.3% of the males and 72.5% of the female supported the increase if they money was used to support local fire and EMS services.

In 2004 Senate Resolution 60 resulted in a working group that produced a report that recommended 23 specific actions to help our emergency services. Some of the solutions have been passed into law many have seen no action at all. Perhaps it is time to revisit the SR 60 report, revise where necessary, and recommend a comprehensive package of legislation to help Pennsylvania's emergency service.

Thank you I would be happy to answer questions