

Testimony to Pennsylvania Senate and House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committees' Joint Hearing on Fire & EMS Issues.

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Thank you members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees for the opportunity to offer insight regarding the current and future status of fire protection and emergency services within the Commonwealth.

My background is that of over 30 years serving in an all volunteer fire company, many years as a line officer including 10 years as past and current Fire Chief. Not to mention many years in administrative offices and committees within the Company like a lot of members.

I would like to start by addressing some of the recommendations that were identified from the Senate Resolution 60 Commission of 2004 and how they have affected us and what may be done differently. The overwhelming theme from the study was directed at recruiting and retention. Looking at the entire study, most obstacles could be overcome just by simply having enough manpower to answer the calls and provide other necessary duties. The old rule of "80/20" always comes to mind, in any organization 80% of the work is done by 20% of the group. I'd like to think that the volunteer fire service has a better ratio, but sometimes it does not. Therefore more calls, more reporting, more administration, is falling to fewer people. With more people, less burdens fall on the few, which would reduce burnout and improve retention.

Some of the incentives described in the study have merit such as longevity awards and anything related to retirement funds. The long term benefits seem to me to be of a greater value to recruit people that are not looking for instant gratification, because we know, that doesn't exist. That leads into areas of preparedness and training levels of volunteers. One of the more frustrating aspects of low retention is the time and costs associated with training members to a certain proficiency over and over again due to membership turnover. While a Company or Department can boast that they have trained their members to a certain level or in a specific technique, the sobering fact is that in all likelihood they will lose some of those members over the next few years. And the ones that remain may not be able to respond tomorrow morning when that call comes in where you need those specifically trained members.

The income tax rebate was an idea with great reception. However, the administration of it was not very popular. Most had their rebate request denied because they needed to resubmit their State tax return separately instead of jointly, unless their spouse was also a volunteer. I am concerned that anything else along the lines of income or property tax refunds would be cumbersome as well, even though they would be welcomed by volunteers as recognition of our impact and financial savings to State and local governments. That being said, I do agree strongly with tax credits for employers that allow volunteers to respond to calls during working hours. Unfortunately the administration of this would need to be thorough for obvious checks and balances. Another potential problem that is growing regarding this, in many areas, volunteer firefighters do not work close to where they live and volunteer as in the past.

I do not believe billing and impact taxes would ever generate enough of a revenue stream to be of any significant remedy to our stretched budgets, nor be of a greater value than the harm to and subsequent bad feelings from the public which will surely detract from ongoing annual fundraising, where most operating expenses are derived in many cases. We are in the emergency business. Our services should not be free for some and not for others. Locals have emergencies also, not just the transients.

A better approach, which would be welcomed by most if not all volunteer firefighters, is to bill for service not categorized as an emergency. I won't even mention the obvious false automatic fire alarms, varying degrees of success in fining offenders by ordinance have been documented. However, using a million dollars of fire apparatus to light a street for 6 hours of accident reconstruction is NOT an emergency. Using the same apparatus to block access to a road while waiting for a utility company to show up, often after the next shift starts, is NOT an emergency. We are more than willing to provide a reasonable amount of time after the emergency has ended, but we are being taken advantage of terribly for the simple fact that we are there and we haven't told them no at this point. The State could do wonders for us by requiring utility companies to hire or provide their own flaggers and traffic control professionals to control

access until the crew comes to make the repairs. The same for State and local police. While I respect them and we have a good working relationship with them, they are spread thin also and expect volunteer firefighters to handle hours of non-emergency related traffic closures when they can't. This is another area that the Commonwealth could provide resources not directly to the fire service, but where the fire service would benefit. If the State police were staffed adequately, we would not be pressed into doing their job. I know the issue of State Police funding has been battled for decades, but this is one part of the argument that probably is never examined. In my company, we have worked with our local Municipalities to let them know we will request their road crews to close roads when ever possible. We also use Penn DOT, but they are often unavailable. The fear is of that second alarm, which could be a life or death situation, and we are committed to a non-emergency. Not to mention the time commitment of the volunteers who have been taken away from work, sleep, or home life. This is one of the biggest reasons in my opinion that we lose members. They simply cannot afford the time commitment that is being asked of them. If we can in some way reduce or eliminate the ever time-consuming nuisance calls, I feel retention would improve.

A large percentage of the population doesn't know how many areas are covered by volunteer firefighters let alone all that we do. The obvious alarms, meetings, training, and fundraising may be known, but what is not known is the hours of administrative, maintenance, janitorial, bookkeeping, and other duties that need to be done, and are done by members instead of being hired out. This is a tremendous cost savings to us and in turn, the Municipality. Because of the many hats our members wear, there are many duties going on behind the scenes where workman's compensation should apply. If someone is performing duties that are for the functioning of the company or department, they should be covered if they are injured doing the same. That includes fundraising and public relations activities.

In Monroe County there are 20 Municipalities and 19 fire companies. There are almost as many different configurations as to how the fire service is funded and who owns what property. In most cases the coverage area is determined by Municipal boundaries. There are cases with one company covering one Municipality, one company covering multiple Municipalities in their entirety, companies that serve a portion of multiple Municipalities, and Municipalities with multiple companies covering a portion of their area. In my case, my company serves 2 Municipalities, one Borough and one Township. One protected with hydrants, one not. One with State police, one with local. One rural, one urban, plus one of the first stand-alone casinos in the State. We have very diverse primary coverage area and equally diverse interactions with the Municipal leaders. We maintain regular communication with joint meetings at least once per year. They manage to contribute toward our annual operating expenses by a dedicated fire tax but this does not cover any of our capital expenses such as fire apparatus and buildings. The

wide variety of funding levels among all companies/departments in the State is staggering. We have found that communication is the best preventative to any potential problems regarding financing and control. We enjoy a good relationship with them now but realize that their boards have the potential to turn over often as well. The previous study pointed out that with the many different configurations in the State, one size cannot fit all. However, the overwhelming theme in a volunteer's heart is the same regardless. "What can I do to help my fellow man and leave this world a better place?" With a good public relations campaign, maybe we can instill that feeling in future generations.

I thank you for your time and attention to these matters now and thank you for allowing me to speak here today.

Daniel A. Luddeni