

# SR60 Hearing Written Testimony

Donald Zipp III

This document is my testimony as related to SR60 recommendation implementation, recommendations, and what recommendations I can offer from the perspective of a local fire official.

## **Introduction**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee it is my pleasure to provide you with testimony on this important issue. My name is Donald Zipp III. I am currently the Deputy Fire Chief of the West End Fire Company of Brodheadsville, PA Inc. My department provides coverage to the residents and visitors of Chestnuthill Township, Monroe County, PA. Our coverage area is 36 square miles that has approximately 17,100 residents. We operate out of three stations; we have approximately 35 members; and operate 8 apparatus. Our average call volume per year is 500-600. Like many stations around the country, we have seen a decrease in membership over the last few years.

## **SR60 Feedback**

When SR60 was completed in the early 2000's it signaled a beacon of hope for the fire service. It showed that we had support and validated what we have seen in the years leading up to the report. It signaled that the legislation had an interest in assisting in saving the volunteer service from certain failure. Fast-forward to today and it should be noted that of the 23 recommendations from SR60, few have been implemented. With the few that have been implemented, some have been discontinued already. This is disheartening to see. As SR60 states, the volunteer service saves the Commonwealth and its municipalities billions of dollars each year. For a service that provides so much, so little seems to have been accomplished. I would like to provide you with some feedback on each of the 23 items and what they might mean to my department.

**Recommendation 1** – For this recommendation I applaud you. This regulation will be the basis for providing service to local governments. Without a standard, it is difficult to determine what type of service is required.

**Recommendation 2** – This recommendation has some work to be done yet. Like many businesses, the emergency services should have a standard coverage model. This allows for departments to be competitive, cost effective, and holds them accountable to the local government for service. Without a standard, departments are left to guess what level of coverage a local government would like to receive. This leads to redundant, expensive, and unnecessary cost burden on the department and the local area.

**Recommendation 3** – This recommendation is an unfortunate reality. It is a shame that firefighters are not afforded the proper safety equipment. While I personally feel that restructuring this funding stream would benefit small departments, it may prove as a detriment to others. I don't feel that a regulatory change should be required for basic safety equipment. This should be something the department or the town should provide their employees. If private industry did this, they would be fined or scrutinized until they became compliant.

**Recommendation 4** – This was a great benefit while it lasted. It is unfortunate that this effort appears to have been sacrificed to balance a budget. Taxes are a huge burden on the residents of the Commonwealth. Any relief; even the \$250.00 tax credit is appreciated.

**Recommendation 5** – This change was long overdue. I can't provide much feedback on this, as our department does not do EMS at this time.

**Recommendation 6** – This program is an important program to many fire departments. It is welcome news that the program now has an administration budget and will be continued. Many departments utilize this money for small equipment purchases or safety equipment purchases.

**Recommendation 7** – This funding mechanism is a welcome change. While many do not enact taxes for Fire and EMS services, it is good to have this option. My department has recently worked with our local officials to implement a 1-mil tax line for the fire department. It has helped substantially with our funding needs. With that said it is still a far cry from what is actually required to operate the department.

**Recommendation 8** – A regional fire district would create more opportunities to provide cost effective service to larger coverage areas. While the report says that this can be done without regulatory change, I would argue that it would be difficult. The piece that is missing from the regulatory statute is the ability for a fire district to become a taxing body as they are in many other states. In order to regionalize, departments would rely on two municipal bodies agreeing to form a regional department and then to tax their independent communities at a similar rate. The risk here is agreement on who will pay and how much. As a fire company that completed a merger a few years ago, this is no easy task. In our merger, both departments existed within the same jurisdictional boundary and had one local government. Perhaps this recommendation should be worded as to provide resources to help local governments do this within the current regulatory environment.

**Recommendation 9** - This recommendation is a good one in theory. I don't agree with the funding mechanism recommended. Act 84 money should ultimately be used to provide for the health and safety of the fire fighters, training, and other recognized expenses. In previous recommendations, the report notes that departments can't afford safety equipment. If we allow recognition programs to be paid for out of this fund, it would make the other issues more difficult. Rewards and recognition is a much-needed program. Many volunteers do not receive any recognition at all. In our department we have a simple dinner every year. At this dinner Local Officials and State Officials attend and provide citations and praise for the membership. Perhaps the Fire Commissioner's and/or the Governor's office could put together a rewards and recognition program in which key milestones or acts are recognized. The President's Volunteer Service Awards is one example that could be brought down to the local level.

**Recommendation 10** - This action was long overdue and I am glad it is complete. In today's fire service, mutual aid is a large part of daytime responses to fires. Without it, many departments including my own would not be able to provide a competent response to a fire.

**Recommendation 11** - This recommendation is most likely the best one I have seen in the report for recruitment. Like many departments, we operate a Junior Firefighter program. This program allows us to recruit and train the next generation of firefighters. With that said, many of these young adults leave our service to attend college (not that this is a bad thing). If we had a tool that promoted in-state higher education it would allow us to retain some of these young adults while they attend

school; as they would be enticed to attend local institutions. It would also offer a level of financial assistance for higher education that is paid for by their community service. At the Federal Level there is a Public Safety payback for student loans. In this program, folks that take a job in public safety are offered a better payback program. I would challenge the Commonwealth to take note of this program and implement a similar program that would actually count volunteer service as being eligible.

**Recommendation 12** – This recommendation would be beneficial for members who work in the community they volunteer in. In my department's case, we have members who leave their jobs during the day to respond to calls. It is primarily folks who are self-employed; but this would help them and perhaps encourage other local businesses to allow folks to respond from work at a time of day that is hard for volunteers to get to calls for service.

**Recommendation 13** – This tax sounded like a good idea when it was introduced. The unfortunate reality is that only 25% of this money is earmarked for Fire/EMS/Police. In my department I struggle to understand how this money is even distributed to us if it is at all.

**Recommendation 14** – Our department does not bill for service. From my understanding in talking with local EMS agencies this was a win for them.

**Recommendation 15** – I have no comment on this. I question how this would enhance the EMS system.

**Recommendation 16** – This is another effort that I applaud the committee for implementing. This allows departments to participate in the State Contract pricing

for many of the items we use. Our last fire apparatus purchase was done with state contract pricing.

**Recommendation 17** – I find it hard to understand how paying for paid fire service personnel training would help solve the fire service recruitment and retention issue. With that said, training is another expense that has to be absorbed by the local fire department. It was not that long ago that fire departments received free training from the State Fire Academy and their ETA partners. This is no longer the case and results in a financial burden to the fire department. While 2,000-3,000 dollars per year may not seem like much, if you multiply that by the number of departments in the Commonwealth, it is a large number. The added costs of certification result in an even larger price tag. Certifications cost on average \$100 per certification per person. In many cases if the department cannot cover the cost it is passed onto the volunteer.

**Recommendation 18** – This seems like a good idea. With that said, it is easier said than done. Even when the ordinance allows for billing, many of the services that are provided are not covered in the policy of the driver or homeowner. This leaves the department in a difficult position of suing the insurance company or victim for reimbursement.

**Recommendation 19** – This program is important for departments that do not have a large line of credit or a financial partner that will allow for loans to be drawn. It is good to see the limits of these loans have been increased and a longer payback period provided. The cost of equipment has substantially increased over the last few years and continues to rise. Take fire apparatus for example; these vehicles have increased in cost 4-8% annually over the last 10 years. We purchased a fire

engine 10 years ago for roughly \$250,000.00. We just purchased a similar one this year and it cost over \$600,000.00.

**Recommendation 20** – This is a good recommendation. In our jurisdiction, our Township funded a third party assessment of all emergency services provided to the township. They published a report and presented the findings to the township and residents. This report is the basis of the Township’s Emergency Services Strategic Planning Committee and their creation of a long-range plan. As part of this study, recommendations have been made for correcting deficiencies as well as working to meet consensus standards. Perhaps if the DCED or the Fire Commissioner’s Office had a resource or a couple of resources, this could be developed into a fruitful program.

**Recommendation 21** – This is a good idea for retaining members. However, I believe Act 84 money is likely not the best funding stream. As I stated previously, this money is already approved for expenses and it would seem, based on the SR60 report, that some departments can’t buy simple safety equipment out of this fund; let alone fund this recommendation.

**Recommendation 22** – This is a good idea on face value. With that said, I am not sure how the Affordable Care Act impacts this recommendation.

**Recommendation 23** – For this recommendation I agree that operating a fire department is full of legally required paperwork, submissions, audits, reports, etc. However, the unfortunate fact is that unscrupulous people seem to often find their way into a position of authority. This is evident by watching the news. Countless agencies have been scammed, stolen from, and had unauthorized expenses from

general funds and relief associations. Unfortunately, oversight is required as these situations are not good for any agency and can cause permanent damage, decreased public trust, and financial hardship.

### **Our Department**

I wanted to talk a bit about my department and how we have implemented some of these without the need for regulation changes and the benefits we have realized. I would also like to discuss our challenges.

Our department is one of the fortunate departments in many ways; and like many other departments in other ways. The key to our department's success has been the ability to look out 10 – 20 years and anticipate coming challenges. This is not an easy task and requires the ability to work with the elected officials that govern our area. Twenty years ago the department had a shaky relationship with our elected township officials. After years of work we now have a great relationship with them. This is mainly due to the fact that the elected officials we have today are educated on the services which we provide. Additionally, we have implemented a policy in which we report monthly to the township regarding calls we have responded to at the public meeting, provide a method to receive and answer questions from the public, and our participation in local government.

We have a 1 mil fire tax that was implemented in 2015. This was not a new revenue stream it was simply making the annual donation the township gave us a formal funding stream. Our township purchased a new ladder truck and new engine 10 years ago. They also take an interest in our well being as a company. Our relationship is such that we can take any reasonable request to them and they will

listen and provide assistance. We have accepted that sometimes the answer is no and don't undermine our relationship by playing politics with them for saying no. The township formally appoints our executive and firematic officers at their reorganization meeting as a means of further resolving their commitment of support.

Our department has many needs today and in the coming years. Some of which the township can help with; but others that need some assistance from the larger community. In Monroe County we are one of a handful of departments that follows the OSHA requirements for respiratory protection. This is a large expense for our department, as it requires physicals, medical questionnaires, and fit testing. We are one of a handful of departments that don't allow our Chief to provide a driver card for our apparatus. Instead we require a Class B CDL with a tank and air brake endorsement. Again this is a cost that we bear. Our fleet is getting older; our air packs are at an age where they need to be replaced; our hose is going out of date; our station is falling apart and in dire need of being replaced; and our gear needs to be replaced every 10 years. All of this adds up to a lot of money.

In our department we implemented minimum training requirements. You might say to yourself "the state doesn't have any minimum training requirements." You are correct. However, OSHA has some minimum training requirements. We adopted them as well as a basic firefighting or fire police course to become an active member. To be an officer we have more advanced training requirements. With that said we have not lost members due to meeting these requirements. Our firefighters understand that this job will kill you if you are not educated to a minimum level. This is proven when we look at how poorly the Commonwealth fares in the national

rankings for line of duty deaths (LODD) each year. Why the state refuses to adopt a minimum training requirement is beyond my comprehension. Furthermore, management training is another area that the Commonwealth needs to focus on. When reading the LODD reports, far too many times the report points out the lack of experience and education of the officer.

In my department we require two hours of "Drill" aka training per month, six business meetings per year (unless you are excused), and an average of three hours of fundraising per month. Our requirements are not unlike many other fire departments in the Commonwealth. We demand that the members not only volunteer their time for car accidents, brush fires, house fires, other types of fires, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescue incidents, and other things that people call for when they don't know who else to call; we also demand that they stay educated and up-to-date on the latest science so they know what to do in these incidents. Finally, we demand that they raise all of the money to do it. In my department we require twelve hours a year more of fundraising time than we do of training. This is in a field that can get you killed if you are not up-to-speed on what is happening. It makes one wonder why we have any volunteers left at all.

### **Future of the fire service**

As I travel this country, I speak to other fire departments. It is amazing to me how big a problem recruitment and retention is in this great nation. I spend time at the National Fire Academy almost every year; sometimes more than once per year. I sit with my peers and they all have the same issues no matter what state they are from. This seems to be an epidemic. If we do not do something about it today we are

at risk of an entire service disappearing. I don't need to tell you what the financial impact would be just to the Commonwealth; let alone the country. We are at a breaking point and the pressure has been applied for years. We need action and we need it fast. I know this is a foreign concept in politics but if we don't do something; pardon the pun; you will be firefighting the problem.

I applaud your efforts to date. While some of the things done have been undone and others haven't been touched, you showed an effort. My hope is that when you do the next round of study you consider this; it is not enough to study a problem; you need to take actions on the recommendations before you have a catastrophe. In the private sector they call this Paralysis by Analysis. We don't need this. We need action at all levels of government. The Fire Service needs to get on board and participate in their own future as well. This problem is not going to go away by itself.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this matter. Additionally, if you are looking for volunteers on the next round of study, do not hesitate to contact me. I would be more than happy to assist with this important matter.

Respectfully Submitted,

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