

**Statement for the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness
Committee**

February 11, 2019

OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Bruce Trego, State Fire Commissioner

Chairman Regan, Chairman Williams, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato, and Members of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, I am Bruce Trego, the State Fire Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement and discuss priorities for the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) in 2019.

In my time in this position I have observed that Governor Wolf and his administration maintains a very strong commitment to the fire service -- both paid and volunteer -- across the commonwealth. As a volunteer firefighter for 48 years, I have served as a Vice- President, Firefighter, Lieutenant, Captain, and Assistant Chief. In these positions, I experienced firsthand the importance of the grants and loans that this office administers. For the last 25 years, I have served as part of the staff for the OSFC. The first 8 years as a part-time Adjunct Instructor and the last 17 years in various positions that include Homeland Security Training Coordinator, State Incident Management Team Manager, State Fire Academy Assistant Administrator, Administrator, Acting State Fire Commissioner and now Commissioner. My experience in the fire service and the OSFC has provided me with opportunities to realize the benefits of the excellent

training and the low interest loans and grants provided by the OSFC, that are so important to the firefighters in the Commonwealth.

The Fire Company, Emergency Medical Service Grant Program (FCEMSGP) is one of the most important programs for the fire service. The program will be up for re-authorization in 2020, so we will need to begin working with the standing committees to address the needs of the program.

The grant program has been very successful since its inception and this year is no exception. This past year we awarded 1,973 grants to fire companies and 512 grants to volunteer ambulance services. The average grant to a fire department was \$13,380 and the grants provided to ambulance services averaged \$7,037.

In addition to the grant program, a second major program that assists the fire services is the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP). The VLAP is one of the major sources of funding for our volunteer fire companies and volunteer ambulance services. The VLAP continues to provide essential help with construction of new buildings, acquisition of apparatus, and the purchase of equipment. Changes made to the law in 2013 increased the loan amounts and extended the repayment period which was greatly appreciated by the volunteer fire services. OSFC provides an average of \$2 million in low interest loans in addition to managing the loans that have already been approved. While the VLAP has been successful, we would like the General Assembly to consider expanding the program to include fire service and ambulance services in third class

cities while also increasing the amount of loans to be reflective of the current costs of equipment and facilities.

There are several matters that the Office of the State Fire Commissioner is looking to discuss with the General Assembly this year. One of our top priorities is improving recruitment and retention in the volunteer fire service. The issue has reached a crisis in the Commonwealth. The number of volunteers continues to decline year after year. Since the 1980's, the number of volunteers has shrunk from approximately 300,000 to around 38,000 today.

We all need to consider how we can best address this issue. In November 2018, the SR 6 Commission released its report which developed recommendations to the General Assembly on ways to improve the fire services in the Commonwealth. In total, 27 recommendations were developed by the 39-member group include expanding tax credits for Fire/EMS personnel, length of service awards programs (LOSAP), free community college or state university system tuition funding basic fire and emergency medical technician training for all firefighters and EMS personnel to address the challenges of recruiting and retaining members. Many of the recommendations in the SR 6 Commission report will require legislative changes to implement. The Office of State Fire Commissioner looks forward to working with the General Assembly on finding solutions to increase volunteerism in the fire services.

One program that is currently gaining traction is local tax credit program established in Act 172 of 2016. The law provides for the creation of a local tax credit program for Volunteer Firefighters and EMS. Each municipality now has the option to implement a program if they feel that it is appropriate for their community. To date, 47 municipalities have implemented such programs.

While concentrating on our efforts on recruitment, we must not neglect retention. In 2017 we lost more firefighters to suicide than to line of duty deaths. The cancer rate for firefighters is steadily climbing. Firefighters are at a minimum of 30% higher risk of contracting cancer than the public they serve. My focus is to improve Behavioral Health and Cancer Awareness is paramount to improve our ability to recruit and retain first responders in the Commonwealth.

Another priority is to update the Firefighter Relief Fund law which has not been updated in for several years. At the end of last session, we met with the Department of Revenue, Insurance Department and committee chairs to get a sense of why there has been a decline in relief funds. The discussion revealed the antiquity of the Firefighter Relief Fund law. Current terminology does not align with that which is used by the Insurance Companies. It is difficult to determine the amount of insurance that is truly “fire” due to the fact this term is no longer used by the Companies. Another question that seems difficult to answer is how to address those who are self-insuring. It would be in the best

interest to update this law as soon as possible. This is a conversation that we would like to continue this session.

As Governor Wolf has said -- public safety is core function of government. My office plays a very important role in ensuring that the fire service is prepared to provide this crucial public safety service to all the citizens of the commonwealth. Governor Wolf is committed to providing the necessary resources for this core governmental function.

Chairman Regan, Chairman Williams, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Governor Wolf and the twelve million Pennsylvanians we serve, I thank for your continued support of OSFC and the Pennsylvania fire service. I believe that with Governor Wolf's commitment and your continued support of our mission, the Pennsylvania fire service will continue to be one of the preeminent fire services in the nation.

I am happy to answer any questions that you might have.