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Senate of Pennsylvania

Remarks on Senate Bill 1274 – County Public Safety Authorities
Senator Tim Kearney
Senate Veteran Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing
August 24, 2020

Thank you Chairman Regan for the opportunity to speak with the committee about this legislation, Senate Bill 1274.

I represent parts of Delaware and Chester counties, and like many regions in the state, our EMS system is close to a breaking point due to lack of proper reimbursement for their costs. As well, our fire companies are struggling with the endless burden of fundraising, administration, recruiting, ensuring coverage, and keeping up with the Jones', if you will.

Most of our companies were not interested in the idea of regional cooperation 10 years ago. Today they have come to terms with some of the irreversible generational changes that have rocked the industry. We need a service model to ensure public safety for all.

As you know, one of the SR 6 report recommendations was to simplify the process of regionalization for both fire and EMS. This recommendation pointed towards the model of "service districts". In Pennsylvania, we know them as authorities. Pennsylvania's Municipalities Authorities Act provides for the creation, governance, and management of many types of authorities, from sewer and water authorities to transportation and even swimming pools, but it does not explicitly provide for Fire and EMS. Rather than reinvent the wheel, this legislation makes minimal tweaks to the Municipalities Authorities Act to authorize counties to create public safety authorities, which could support fire and EMS providers.

Specifically, Senate Bill 1274:

- Authorizes counties to incorporate authorities to provide EMS, fire, and related supportive services,
- It gives municipalities the absolute right to choose to participate or to keep their fire and EMS as they are,
- It instructs state agencies to provide technical assistance to counties exploring whether to start a public safety authority,
- And it provides an option for municipalities within a county to create a regional joint public safety authority if the county government chooses not to form one.

This approach allows county communities to decide what kind of organization is right for them, if any. Instead of a one size fits all model, each region will have the choice to design the specific function and purpose of a public safety authority. For one county, that could be an authority that just supports its fire companies by helping with fundraising and recruitment. For another county, it could be an EMS

Authority that covers areas where there is no EMS coverage at all currently. We want this to be a flexible tool that can be customized to a community's needs.

To be clear, the legislation would not allow for a new public safety authority to hostilely "take over" existing companies, or even compete with them where they are active. It would allow for authorities to be created to *support* existing companies.

Mainly, I envision public safety authorities as shared service providers for fire and EMS, who can support and strengthen our longstanding companies. If an authority can build a strong balance sheet pool procurement, it can get more affordable financing terms for new assets and equipment. If we can take away the burden of business administration, grant writing, reporting and paperwork, and other tasks, then they can focus on saving lives. I believe this will help make the industry more attractive to volunteers, and more affordable in the long term than paying for fire and EMS service individually in every municipality.

Importantly, if a county decides to create a public safety authority, it would be optional for municipalities to work with the authority, and the authority would not provide services for or assess fees in any municipality unless the municipality chose to contract with the authority. If a municipality's fire company is working well currently, the creation of a public safety authority would not compel them to join or change anything. But for municipality who might have lost their EMS provider, or whose company needs more support than the municipality can give on its own, working with a resourced regional authority might be just what the doctor ordered.

Senate Bill 1274 provides options for all, because as we know here in Pennsylvania, one size does not fit all. With that said, we know countywide authorities won't be the right solution in every county, but they will be helpful for many counties.

I believe it could be helpful in Pike County, where leaders like Commissioner Tim Knapp have been working to solve the EMS crisis for a long time. I believe the legislation could apply to rural counties and suburban counties is responsive to the needs of the EMS and fire companies while being responsible for residents. Most importantly, I believe public safety authorities will help improve the life saving services that our communities depend, make first responders' lives easier, and will help keep Pennsylvanians safe.

Again, I want to thank Senator Regan and Senator Iovino for the invitation to address the committee and for their staff for organizing this hearing.