

PIKE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

PIKE COUNTY ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

506 BROAD STREET
MILFORD, PA 18337
570-296-7613
FAX: 570-296-6055

MATTHEW M. OSTERBERG
RONALD R. SCHMALZLE
STEVEN R. GUCCINI

COMMISSIONERS



GARY R. ORBEN
CHIEF CLERK

THOMAS F. FARLEY, ESQ.
COUNTY SOLICITOR

Good morning. I'm Matt Osterberg, Chairman of the Pike County Commissioners. On behalf of my fellow Commissioners, Ronald Schmalzle and Steven Guccini, who are here with us this morning, I am pleased to welcome you all to the Pike County Training Center, a state-of-the-art facility that is the site of hands-on, realistic and safe training programs for Emergency Medical and Fire Service responders, law enforcement, county departments, and other agencies. The facility also houses our 911 Call Center.

As well, on behalf of myself and my fellow Commissioners, I thank Senators Lisa Baker and Mike Regan for selecting this site for today's hearing. We are grateful for your leadership on the issue of Public Safety. We are also thankful to Senator Baker and Senators Timothy Kearney and Thomas Killion for their co-sponsorship of SB #1274, an Amendment to Title 53 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, which would provide counties with the option to create Public Safety Authorities. We also thank the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania for being an advocate on this issue.

In Pike County, as in many other rural communities, the existing foundation of Public Safety, including Emergency Medical and Fire Protection Services, has consisted predominantly of volunteers who donate their time, energy, and skills to benefit their communities.

However, increased call volume, long transport times, and economic factors have caused many volunteers to cut back their time or to stop volunteering. This has forced local Emergency Medical Services agencies to explore paid services or a combination of paid/volunteer services.

So, while volunteers are still the backbone of our EMS and Fire Services, this crisis is making counties and municipalities more dependent on paid services in some capacity.

Pike County is not alone in the decline in EMS volunteerism. National numbers for fire departments and medical services have drastically declined over the past decade, causing a shortage in staffing. This decline has contributed to Pike County's proactive approach to Emergency Medical Services.

We recognized the looming EMS crisis in 2017. The Commissioners convened a meeting of county and municipal officials, and leaders from local Emergency Response agencies, to identify EMS needs and potential solutions.

As an immediate follow up, the Pike County Office of Community Planning and Department of Public Safety compiled an Assessment of Emergency Medical Services study, which outlined strengths and weaknesses and made recommendations.

A major challenge in implementing solutions to the crisis, however, is funding. Under current Pennsylvania legislation, municipalities hold the sole responsibility of ensuring that local Fire and Emergency Medical Services are adequately provided, including the provision of financial and administrative assistance for these services. But, many small municipalities cannot provide adequate services with limited taxable properties.

Senators Baker, Kearney and Killion, along with their fellow sponsors of SB #1274, have the vision to clearly understand that this challenge is simply not a local issue; it is a Commonwealth issue. And, addressing it through this flexible piece of legislation that would amend Title 53 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes would allow counties to work together with the municipalities and by the sheer economy of scale create the funds necessary for Countywide public safety services for residents and visitors.

As Pike County residents, we expect that we will have adequate and prompt Emergency Medical and Fire Services when we need them. But if our municipalities cannot afford to provide those services, that expectation can be compromised, and the consequences could be serious.

Residents are not the only ones affected by this crisis. Visitors to our county also require proper Emergency Medical and Fire Services.

If those services are not adequately available for our visitors, it will not only have devastating effects in the event of an emergency, it will also negatively impact our county's economy since tourism is our primary industry, with visitor spending supporting almost 25% of all jobs in the Pocono Mountains according to the Pocono Mountains Visitors Bureau.

If visitors believe that we are underserved with EMS, they may likely choose to go elsewhere.

And again, this is not only a local issue, it is a statewide issue. Whenever people travel somewhere in Pennsylvania, they assume that there are adequate Emergency Medical and Fire Services if ever something were to happen to them.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the need to build Public Safety services that can continue to meet the community's needs during the most challenging times. This requires the foresight and planning to properly fund and sustain necessities such as training, equipment, and salaries.

That is why we need to work together to solve this crisis. We need a partnership among municipal, county and commonwealth leadership, which is exactly what SB #1274 would provide. This Amendment to Title 53 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes would allow, but not mandate, the creation of a county public safety authority with municipal representation, which can assess fees to support countywide Emergency Medical and Fire Services.

Our local service providers, by mutual aid, protect every one. And so each and every one of us should share in the cost of these critically necessary services.

While we support SB #1274, at the county level we have also been continuing to work on public and private partnerships that address the EMS crisis. For example:

- The Pike County Training Center recently became an Emergency Medical Services Educational Training Accredited Facility in the Commonwealth. The Training Center now holds Educational Training Agency status with the State Fire Academy and Department of Health. This allows EMS professionals to gain top-notch training locally and more economically.
- Currently, the Pike County Training Center is hosting an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) course through January 2021, and due to a waiting list of students a second course is under consideration to meet the need. The course is in accordance with a state-approved COVID-19 protection plan.
- The EMT course includes 189 hours of training covering segments such as: Foundation, Medical, Trauma, Capstone, and National Preparation.
- Of the current EMT course registrants, 16 are supported by scholarship assistance through the Pike County Emergency Services Initiative Fund (PCESI), which the Pike County Commissioners, and our Public Safety Department helped to establish along with generous donations from the law firm of Weinstein, Zimmerman & Ohliger; and William Lovejoy. The Fund is administered by the Greater Pike Community Foundation.
- Those 16 individuals who were able to take the EMT course with financial assistance through the PCESI Fund represent the following local agencies:
 - o Blooming Grove Fire Department
 - o Delaware EMS
 - o Hemlock Farms Fire Department
 - o Greeley Fire Department
 - o Milford Fire Department
 - o Lackawaxen EMS
 - o Matamoras Fire Department
 - o Westfall Fire Department
- For this round of training, PCESI Funds have saved local emergency services agencies \$10,400 in EMT course fees.
- The PCESI Fund was made possible by founding gifts from the law firm of Weinstein, Zimmerman & Ohliger; William Lovejoy; and individuals who generously supported the recent NEPA Gives day of philanthropy. Gifts to the fund can be made

online at www.greaterpike.org or checks can be made payable to GPCF/PCESI and mailed to P.O. Box 992, Milford, PA 18337.

Donor William Lovejoy was motivated to help create this fund because of his own personal experience with a gap in local Emergency Medical Services.

Last Christmas, Lovejoy had what one might describe as a rude awakening. He was hit with the truth that where he lives in rural Pike County, there is no local emergency medical service, local ambulance, or local police.

In his own words, he said: “I was spreading salt to melt the ice in front of my home for family arriving that day, and slipped. I knew I had broken my ankle. My wife could never have helped me up. I was lucky that my two grandsons were there to help put me into an SUV and drive me to the hospital. I started thinking, if I had a heart attack or stroke, I probably would be dead.”

This was the catalyst Lovejoy needed to help create the Pike County Emergency Services Initiative Fund at Greater Pike Community Foundation. His generous donation now helps to provide training to new and existing emergency responders.

While we are making progress at the county level, work remains to be done statewide to continue to address the EMS crisis.

A reasonable change to existing legislation may be the answer, such as SB # 1274, a proposed Amendment to Title 53 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes that would provide counties the option to create Public Safety Authorities.

In closing, on behalf of myself and my fellow Commissioners Ronald Schmalzle and Steven Guccini, I thank everyone for their participation this morning. And I especially want to highlight the great work being done by frontline individuals such as our dedicated local Emergency Medical Service and Fire Responders. Our Department of Public Safety does an excellent job in service to our residents and visitors.

Finally, thank you Senators Baker, Kearney and Killion for your co-sponsorship of SB #1274. We appreciate your leadership on the issue of Public Safety, and your vision, which recognizes it as a Commonwealth challenge that can be solved through a partnership among state, county, and municipal leaders.