



Office of the State Fire Commissioner

Testimony

Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency
Preparedness Committee

April 28, 2021

Chairpersons Stefano, Muth and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, I am Bruce Trego, the State Fire Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today regarding fire & EMS Accomplishments, Implementation & Next Steps.

By way of background, the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) had its beginning in 1976 with Governor Milton Shapp's appointment of the state's first fire commissioner. In 1981, Governor Richard Thornburgh reorganized the then-separate Fire Commissioner's Office, State Fire School, and Volunteer Loan Assistance Program as the Office of Fire Safety Services under the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). In 1995, Governor Ridge established the OSFC as an independent office which receives administrative support from PEMA.

The role of OSFC is to oversee the development and operation of Pennsylvania's emergency service training program, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP) that provides low-interest loans to volunteer fire and emergency services organizations, the state's fire safety education program, the Fire Company and Emergency Service, and Act 13 grants. In addition, the commissioner is responsible for the development of a comprehensive fire incident reporting system.

As you know, in 2018, the Senate Resolution 6 Commission issued their recommendations to improve Fire and EMS services in the Commonwealth. OSFC appreciates the commitment shown by the General Assembly to the fire community following the 2018 release of SR6 and the enactment of ACT 91 of 2020 from HB 1673 – Omnibus Fire and EMS legislation.

Before addressing the implementation of Act 91, it is important to recognize the struggles that were created due to the COVID pandemic. Financial hardships were and are still a struggle for all levels of government and particularly difficult for Fire and EMS agencies.

Act 26 of 2020 was a critical program that utilized CARES Act money to assist the Fire, Rescue and EMS community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after Act 26's enactment, federal guidance changed the way the CARES Act money could be spent. Although the intent of Act 26 was to permit applicants to use the funds to replace revenue, as that is the backbone of many volunteer companies' budgets, and it was OSFC's desire to adhere to that intent to allow such expenditures, federal guidance prohibited these funds from being utilized to replace revenue. However, the Federal guidelines did relax in September of 2020 to permit Program funds to be used to supplement operational expenses incurred by the lack of opportunities for fund raising and the inability to create revenue due to compliance with measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The timing to initiate this grant conflicted with our current FCEMS grant which prevented us from utilizing our normal grant program. With the assistance of PEMA and DCED we eventually were successful in delivering over 90% of the 50 million dollars allotted to this special grant.

Act 91 provides a plethora of opportunities for OSFC. Just like all other agencies the financial situation created by the pandemic has impacted our ability to complete all the requirements of Act 91. Our entire staff is diligently working to comply with as many of the mandates as possible with no increase to our budget. We are at various stages of implementation of the major mandates that can be addressed without additional funding.

The Act requires OSFC to administer additional programs, supervise additional personnel, and implement new initiatives. A few examples of these responsibilities are to oversee a statewide recruitment and retention coordinator, oversee a technical advisor for each of nine geographic regions, conduct inspections of fire companies, and administer the firefighters' relief funds. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner does not currently possess the resources and personnel to take on all these initiatives.

Creation of the new Fire Safety Advisory Board is underway with our intent to have the first meeting late May or early June. We are receiving suggestions from each of the nine geographic regions to present to the Governor to make the appointments to the board.

Fire relief transition meetings have resulted in the transfer of PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) responsibilities. The information and links to the eligible uses of funds that are currently housed on the DCED web site are scheduled to be completely migrated to OSFC by the first week of May. Coordination meetings with the Auditor General were initiated recently and we expect little or no additional changes for this calendar year. The new Advisory Board will be tasked with delivery of recommended updates to the General Assembly by November of 2022.

The Volunteer Loan Assistance Program saw a name change to the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Loan Fund. The voters will have an opportunity on May 18th via ballot referendum to expand the program to include municipal fire departments. The loan amounts were increased in Act 91 and will be adjusted to the consumer price index in the future.

Act 91 reauthorized the Fire and EMS Grant Program until June 30, 2024. The reauthorization enhanced the program by authorizing Fire and EMS companies to use the grant funding for revenue loss for the 2012 and 2022 grant cycles as well as recruitment and retention. Airport fire companies are now eligible entities to apply for grant funding. A new project authorizes the application for construction for up to five years with funding to be placed in a dedicated fund in the Treasury. Grant year 20-21 agreements are now available, and the 21-22 Grant Application will open in September.

In summary, we are diligently addressing the Act 91 mandates with specific attention to those that are reachable without the availability of necessary funding. Thank you, Chairpersons Stefano, Muth and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee for your support of OSFC and the fire services across the state. I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today and I will try to answer any questions you might have.