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Senate Committee on Veteran’s Affairs and Emergency Preparedness

Remarks by Chief Tim Hileman, Secretary, PACFCA on September 13, 2021

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Pennsylvania Senate Committee Members,

My name is Tim Hileman and I am the Fire Chief in the City of Altoona in Blair County. I am here today in the capacity of Secretary of the Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association. Thank you for the privilege of talking with you today about the future needs of the Fire Service in Pennsylvania. After a quarter century in the fire service, I have seen many changes in how we are dispatched, respond, conduct fire suppression, and educate our community on fire safety. There is one common thread in all of these areas and it is data. Data as we move forward will be what the fire service leverages for all of its operations and administration.

For Example, in my Department in the City of Altoona, we use data to communicate on the fireground by using wireless technology. We can monitor every firefighter’s air supply and we use command software to keep accountability and document events on the incident. Firefighters use RFID technology to “login” to their air pack so that we have all of their personal data available in our command software. None of this was available 20 years ago and our training is still using curriculum that hasn’t been updated in some cases since then.

Technology is changing dramatically fast. Every few months we see upgrades to the technology we are using now. This creates a huge gap in our abilities to train our new firefighters. Especially when our State Fire Academy can’t keep up with the changes in the way we fight fires. Every Fire Chief agrees that we will be using data even more in the future. For example, there are applications already being used that harness artificial intelligence in decisions on how to attack fires. Using data inputted into databases based on historical run data, algorithms will recommend strategies based on its knowledge of what works and what doesn’t.

The problem comes in where there is not a clear understanding of what this data does for Fire Chiefs. Our first line and company officers leave data out of the reports and our fire marshals are reluctant to put cause and origin because of litigation causing a gap in our reporting. This leaves fire chiefs in the dark when it comes to operational enhancements like previously discussed, but also when it comes to budgeting and staffing. The days of getting funding for fire departments simply on emotion are over.

Fire Chiefs need to be able to interpret data and apply data to all of the decisions they make on and off the fire ground. The answer is train like we fight. We need to integrate all of the data and digital information at our finger tips. Our firefighters need the knowledge of tapping into these tools. Fire education is difficult to change because the number of hours that are required makes it nearly impossible to add hours. Municipal Career Departments are faced with expensive academies requiring housing and sustainment costs away from their jurisdictions and volunteers needing almost 200 of hours of training in addition to working a fulltime job. We need to leverage the lessons learned during the pandemic to embrace hybrid online training. Online classes will never fully be the answer. However, the online academics can free up time for instructors to spend on hands on performance-oriented tasks. This will also enable instructors to spend more time integrating those applications of the future that leverage data on the fire ground.

One solution for making the changes necessary to our training curriculums would be to have our Fire Chiefs, Union Leaders, and Volunteer Leaders meet and make consensus on recommendations to the State Fire Academy and its Educational Training Agencies. While the State Fire Academy does outreach and listens to our needs, rarely is any action taken. This is not because of any ineptitude on the State Fire Academy's behalf, it is simply because of the different stances from the field that makes it difficult to impossible to please everyone causing stagnation. It is true the State Fire Commissioners Office is grossly understaffed and lacking the power to effect real change. This training committee would develop consensus and help drive the changes needed in our educational programs to see to fruition more effectiveness and flexibility to meet the challenges of the future. We have proven that we can work together and make the recommendations necessary to effect change. The biggest example is the SR-6 Commission and the recommendations made to the State Senate. Over 92 recommendations were approved in a bipartisan way that gave everyone a seat at the table. This kind of cooperation is what we need to move the fire service into the future with the resources needed for training.

SR-6 attempted to address many of the issues that all fire departments face in regards to recruiting and retention. One of the issues that smaller career departments face is the cost to equip and train new recruits. This cost makes it prohibitive for municipalities to raise staffing levels on diminishing tax rolls. Recommendations of SR 6 addressed this by requesting reimbursement to cities for career staff Fire and EMS training. This program will, like the similar law enforcement program, establish training standards of performance for the cities affected, while training their staff for domestic response capabilities. There is a \$2,000,000 cost associated with this proposal. This monetary commitment combined with the training enhancements in technology would position career departments to be more progressive across the Commonwealth.

While this may sound like just a problem for career departments, it effects much more. As the number of volunteers has dropped from nearly 300,000 volunteers in the 1970's to less than 30,000 today, career and volunteer departments are combining and using mutual aid agreements to provide the services that our communities are accustomed to and deserve. So, providing the ever so needed funds for training will benefit all of our communities.

Thank you for your concerns with the needs of the next generation of firefighters pertaining to technology, education, and recruiting and retention.

I am grateful to the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee for the opportunity to express my voice and the voice of the Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association.