



The Challenges of

FIREFIGHTING TODAY

A SPECIAL REPORT

from the

Senate Veterans Affairs and
Emergency Preparedness Committee

Senator Lisa Baker, Chair

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SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM

The biggest challenges crippling the complement and morale of firefighters today spring from many factors, which frequently fan the flames of other, closely-connected issues. These challenges have escalated to emergency status in recent years.



MONEY

The first hurdle is a lack of money, which spawns a seemingly incessant quest to fundraise through bingo nights, chicken barbecues, raffles and other time-consuming revenue-generators. Although Acts 7, 8 and 9 of 2008 placed the financial burden of providing fire and emergency medical service (EMS) service squarely at the feet of local governments, studies show that volunteer firefighters spend 60 percent or more of their available hours on fundraising. And less than 20 percent of today's citizens donate to their fire company. The resultant money chase occurs while the cost of equipment continues to skyrocket. In 1984, a self-contained breathing apparatus cost \$900; today, \$5,000. A pumper truck cost \$100,000. Today, it costs \$525,000—more than five times as much. While costs have skyrocketed, loan limits remained frozen at 1980 levels until this session, when the General Assembly passed House Bill 1706, now Act 129 of 2013. While this new law allowed loan limits to double in most categories, the increase still does not keep pace with inflation.

VOLUNTEERS

The second challenge facing fire companies is a lack of volunteers, which often springs from frustration over shoestring budgets and the incessant need to fundraise. Ninety-six percent of all fire companies in Pennsylvania—about 2,300—are fully staffed by volunteers. This percentage is higher than nearly every other state. Approximately 50,000 to 70,000 men and women volunteer to fight fires today. Compare that number to 1976, when 300,000 volunteers were ready to answer the call.

TIME

Another issue is lack of time, which is fueled not only by fundraising and membership challenges, but by today's hectic lifestyle and the prevalence of double-income families. Today's fire hall is no longer the hub of the family social scene, as it was decades ago. A decline in volunteerism, often attributed to the lackluster economy, is affecting numerous other sectors of the economy as well.

TRAINING

Finally, the need for ongoing training, while necessary for firefighter and citizen safety, is problematic and closely linked to shortages in time, money and manpower. Because today's fires burn hotter and faster—a by-product of the highly flammable and explosive nature of many of today's construction materials—training is essential to prevent injuries and deaths among first responders and citizens. A retired city fire chief said that flashover occurs 10 times faster than before, with open floor plans in newer homes accelerating the spread of flames. Lightweight beams and

stairs result in very early and often fatal structural collapse. Many so-called “fire calls” are also unrelated to fires, and range from drug overdoses and animals on the highway to haz-mat spills, water rescues and trapped children. All require specialized training.

According to testimony offered by a dozen experts at an October 25, 2013, hearing hosted by the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee and the Majority Policy Committee, these problems have reached critical mass. Although the shortage of volunteers, money, equipment and training existed 40 years ago, these challenges have reached “emergency” status. Some experts predict that the problems are hitting such a feverish level that volunteer firefighting will go the way of the dinosaur by 2020.

Many firefighters call it the “perfect storm:” while the number of firefighters has dwindled by 75 percent, call volume and the complexity of incoming emergency calls have increased, along with the costs of equipment and training. With the prevalence of cell phones, one incident alone can generate 200 cell phone calls.

Many of these issues were explored in a seminal report called “Pennsylvania Burning” released in 1975 by the Governor’s Commission on Fire Prevention and Control under Governor Milton Shapp. They were studied further in the Senate Resolution 60 report in 2004, which issued 23 recommendations; a 2005 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee report on fire department consolidations (the House Resolution 148 report); the 2006 Center for Rural Pennsylvania study; the Firemen’s Association of Pennsylvania’s Recruitment and Retention Strategic Plan of 2013; and the 2013 Adams County Council of Governments report, “Financing Fire Service for Adams County.” Related studies analyzed today’s EMS and 911 systems.

Fire experts agree: study after study has shown what the challenges are. And we know many of the solutions. The difficulty is in finding the will and resources to implement change. Although we have been successful in renewing and expanding the volunteer loan program (House Bill 1706 of 2013) and the grant program (Senate Bill 866 of 2012), much work remains.

The Firemen’s Association report found that the main reasons firefighters leave the fire company or become inactive—besides moving out of the area—stem from job and family commitments or personality conflicts. These issues cannot be legislated away.

Fire Commissioner Ed Mann summarized the need for urgent action by cautioning that if Pennsylvania fails to fix the problems facing firefighters today, it will be far more costly to fix them in the future. If each municipality in the Commonwealth had to pay its volunteer firefighters, it would cost taxpayers \$6 billion a year. Yet many Pennsylvanians, and especially those who hail from outside the state originally, do not understand that our firefighters are nearly all volunteers. Commissioner Mann has repeatedly warned: “A public safety crisis” is looming. “We simply cannot sit by and do nothing at all.”



SOLUTIONS

Testifiers stated that Pennsylvania needs a holistic approach to these multi-pronged challenges, not just a “throw-money-at-the-problem” response, or a piecemeal effort. And most of the tools needed to meet fire and EMS challenges already exist, said one expert. We merely need more cooperation, local leadership, and the will to work together. Additionally, a working group of key stakeholders is being developed to tie suggested strategies to legislative solutions.

Among those offered are the following:

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

A vast majority of the solutions offered to combat recruitment and retention challenges do not entail legislative changes at the state level, but local changes, such as better marketing, improved follow-up with new volunteers, and stronger leadership to resolve conflicts. Fire experts have often noted that retention is a fire chiefs’ issue, while recruitment is more of a municipal issue.



- Extend tax credits to volunteers. Provide a local option to forgive the local \$52 tax and/or the local Earned Income Tax, or provide a credit against property taxes. Reinstating the state income tax deduction for volunteer first responders, as enacted in 2008. Remedy those problems related to processing of returns for married firefighters filing jointly.
- Extend tax credits to businesses who allow their firefighter-employees to respond during the workday. The most difficult time to secure and dispatch volunteer firefighters is during the 9 to 5 workday.
- Award college credits/tuition assistance to volunteers. For example, Allegheny County Community College offers a popular program for firefighters attending community college.
- Offer length of service awards. Townships and boroughs have the power to set up a length of service award program. Legislation may be needed to authorize the use of fire relief association funds for this purpose.
- Promote better leadership at the local level. Offer leadership training. The fire company president must cultivate members, reach out to families, and respond to local concerns.
- Engage in better marketing to potential volunteers and taxpayers. Educate taxpayers so they know firefighters are, in fact, volunteers. Give annual tours of fire facilities to local elected officials and the community. Provide fire and EMS training in high schools during school hours as part of an enhanced junior firefighter program. Adopt the successful strategies of military recruiters. Enlist active recruiters to work with citizens who are in-

terested in joining. Use public and social media to conduct a communitywide recruitment campaign. Signs, billboards, Facebook, and public service announcements can all be utilized. Even go door-to-door.

- Allow volunteer fire and EMS members to contribute to and benefit from state health insurance programs. Give them free physicals. Enable funding for benefit programs to assist members with incentives to join.
- Allow certified individuals from other states to be recognized here in Pennsylvania.
- Increase fire association relief funding to allow for opportunities to improve retention of volunteers.
- Reach out to members in the community who may not be able to fight fires, but who will perform administrative duties and/or help with fundraising. For example, commission a volunteer to enlist merchants for a merchant discount card. Reach out to service organizations to help with AEDs, new fire apparatus, and other urgent needs.
- Provide volunteer discounts for driver's licenses and/or vehicle registrations.

EQUIPMENT/MONEY

The skyrocketing cost of firefighting equipment has driven the need for money, with some costs rising fivefold in 30 years. This upward trajectory has led to an increased need to raise funds.

- Expand state loan and grant programs. Act 129 of 2013 (Matt Baker) doubles the amount of money fire companies can access for equipment through the state's Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP). Act 78 of 2012 (Ward) gives grants to firefighters for equipment. The new law increased the amount of grants available (from \$25 million to \$30 million) and added career firefighters (35 departments) to the list of eligible recipients.
- Maximize fundraising opportunities through small games of chance and other avenues. Acts 90 and 92 of 2013 should help ease some regulatory burdens. In a related move, consider exempting fire companies from the most burdensome "small games of chance" regulations.
- Pursue partnerships and shared services at the local level. Create incentives to encourage realistic mergers, consolidations and the development of fire/EMS authorities and districts. Use mutual aid agreements more effectively. Tap into the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) to help fire companies form alliances. Adams County is



even looking to buy worker's compensation insurance for their firefighters as one unit to save money. DCED leads a regionalization technical assistance process, but lacks authority and resources to carry it statewide. Between 1997 and 2004, Pennsylvania saw 20 successful mergers and consolidations of fire companies. DCED is putting together a Best Practices manual for fire companies to follow.

- Allow and authorize local public safety service fees. Give counties and third class cities the ability to levy a per capita tax or service/user fee tax, and exempt firefighters from paying.
- Permit fire companies to charge fees for false alarms, and for other services provided, such as pumping water from basements.
- Allow billing for incidents occurring on non-local highways.
- Permit direct reimbursement to fire and EMS agencies by insurers.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of local tax enabling legislation and offer new options.

TRAINING

As new construction trends lead to taller buildings and more open floor plans built with more flammable and increasingly toxic materials than ever before, training becomes a critical issue. Firefighters are also being called to a host of emergencies that extend far beyond the scope of the traditional "kitchen fire" call, to include hazardous materials spills, vehicle extractions, river rescues, missing persons and more.



- Provide better training that conforms to young people's busy lifestyles, including web-based training.
- Add 0.5% (one-half percent) fire insurance tax to insurance policies to fund firefighter training and/or length of service awards and to allow for the development and delivery of more online training and to provide state and local tax breaks to volunteer first responders.
- Levy a pyrotechnics tax (on out-of-state residents who buy fireworks in Pennsylvania) to fund firefighter training or equipment costs.
- Encourage counties to provide free training at county expense, as Schuylkill County does.
- Have first responders take administrative courses through partners such as Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) and Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations (PANO). HACC offers a Fire and Administrative Officer Course.

- Revisit Act 46 of 2005, which changed the funding formula for community colleges and eliminated the reimbursement for non-credit public safety training and full-time equivalency, which means colleges had to start charging fees to firefighters.

PENDING LEGISLATION RELATING TO VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

- House Bill 171 (Burns) would give \$2 million to PHEAA for a recruitment scholarship program for volunteer fire companies.
- House Bill 280 (Matt Baker) provides a tax credit of up to \$500 for firefighters who buy equipment with their own personal funds.
- House Bill 379 (Goodman) allows municipalities or school districts that levy an earned income tax to pass a resolution giving a tax credit to active volunteer firefighters. Counties can also give a tax credit against property taxes, which should be no more than 20 percent of the firefighter's tax liability.
- House Bill 535 (Kortz) allows municipalities to enact a tax credit against active volunteers' earned income and property tax liability as a financial incentive. The tax credit can be no more than 20 percent of the firefighter's tax liability.
- House Bill 574 (Haluska) excludes the purchase of fire equipment from sales tax when a firefighter uses personal funds.
- House Bill 1632 (Knowles) gives tax credits to employers of firefighter-employees who respond to fires during work time.
- Senate Bills 97 and 98 (Greenleaf) set up a tuition credit program for volunteer fire companies and provide for a Loan Forgiveness Program for volunteer emergency services personnel. Firefighters can get tuition credit of up to \$600 a year, not to exceed an aggregate amount of \$2,400 over a four-year period. They must volunteer as a firefighter for a minimum of four years. No more than \$2,000 can be forgiven in any year, and no more than \$10,000 shall be forgiven for an applicant over a five-year period.
- Senate Bill 641 (Waugh) offers a Postsecondary Education Tuition Reimbursement Program for Volunteer Firefighters. PHEAA would reimburse community colleges or state-owned and state-related universities an amount equal to half of the cost of a course credit for each course when tuition reimbursement is granted. For private colleges, PHEAA would reimburse institutions up to 50 percent of the average tuition cost.



- Senate Bill 642 (Waugh) provides for a pyrotechnics tax. Seventy-five percent would be distributed to the Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services Retention Program Fund to be used to support a volunteer retention program, fifteen percent would be devoted to the county fire technical school where the licensee is located, and ten percent would be given in local shares to the local fire departments where the licensee is located.
- Senate Bill 787 (Boscola) would require all political subdivisions to train its members, and the Office of State Fire Commissioner to pay for municipal firefighter training.
- Senate Bill 911 (Waugh) enacts a 25 percent pyrotechnics tax and gives it to a firefighter grant program.

