

**Senate Veterans Affairs &
Emergency Preparedness and the
House Veterans Affairs &
Emergency Preparedness
Committee Joint Hearing**

Monroe County Safety Center

Tuesday, August 23rd 7:00 p.m.

Comments by: Thomas Barnowski

From the perspective of an emergency manager and assistant fire chief the state of the Commonwealth emergency response system appears to be challenged. I have seen the evolution of the emergency response system over my three decades of service. Some in this room have experienced even more decades than me. The world has certainly changed over those years. All the speakers that have preceded me have all made cogent points as they offered discussion and awareness from their various perspectives. Clearly the intention this evening is to review our current response status while offering predictions of the future and for the most part re-discovering the various aspects and concerns as offered in the 2004 version of Senate Report 60. Hard to believe that in 3 short months the report will be twelve years old.

So what has been discovered so far? I would suspect that no one in this room will argue that the number of volunteers over the past 12 years continues to decline. Some may even suggest we have fallen below fifty thousand volunteers statewide. The discussion this evening has offered a number of concerns as it relates to those numbers. It has discussed and suggested some possible remedies ...but the reality is we are working with less people. I can clearly state that the actual number of calls over my tenure has...and... will likely continue to rise. Over my time we have grown from a small township of 3000 to a population over 8500. As technology has influenced building structures and automobiles the

subsequent exposures and hazards with these technological advancements offer their own unique challenges. It is an age of manufactured insulated building components and motor vehicles that run on a variety of energy sources. The simplicity of consistency is no more. The variations encountered are many and I do not think any will argue that the challenge to provide adequate response is an ongoing concern. I know the intention to provide that service to our respective communities is still the overarching motivation for performance. But one has to ask...who is providing that service and at what costs? From hearings like this one the questions will hopefully have clarity and resolution. So the discussion is about resources.

As an emergency manager I am tasked to constantly assess my resources. I quote from the original 2004 report ... “since 1985, according to the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, the number of volunteer firefighters has shrunk by more than half -- from about 152,000 to about 70,000 or fewer today. And yet, Pennsylvania and its communities continue to rely in large measure on volunteers to perform this critical emergency response and public safety service.” I suggest to you with awareness of 2016 estimated numbers and the declining trends we seem to be headed towards the inability to meet response requirements.

As I assess our purpose here tonight...we are here to consider realities and options...and hopefully discover some insights as to the paths we should consider

as we address the variety of concerns associated with adequate and functional emergency response. From this point forward I am going to offer my personal reflections. Not the views of any organization or affiliation...but rather the view of a seasoned emergency responder and emergency management coordinator. One who has been there...and understands the gravity of the topics we are discussing this evening. Suffice it to say we need to begin with the unvarnished truth. We live in the time and place of political correctness...but we must completely discuss the concerns in atmosphere of reality.

The reality as I see it:

- **Incentive programs are nice.** Tuition free college, tax credits, and healthcare options are indeed good things to consider but I contend that emergency responders are there by choice and not incentives. Emergency responders are called to service. They are not there because of perceived financial advantage. I know of no first responder in law, fire or EMS who made millions while on the job. No...Incentives may attract attention...but they are not the reason one joins and continues within an organization.
- **The culture of emergency responders is unique.** It is a culture that is sometimes rude and crude. It requires a resiliency that transcends

the horrors and challenges encountered. It is not for everyone. So any recruitment must consider who is being recruited and are they able to withstand the rigors within that environment.

- **Leadership comes in many forms.** Too often leadership within a variety of organizations has been less challenged to inspire and motivate. But I wonder who is educating leaders to lead? I have seen many inconsistencies that result in frustration and failures. Egos and lines in the sand that result in stalemates. For the newly recruited there is often dismay and confusion. Retention is a concern when the environment is perceived as intolerable. This is an area that will require attention if there is to be attainment of desired outcomes.
- **Local Government and emergency response delivery systems** are interconnected and dependent on each other. Unfortunately, not all subscribe to this reality. If you attend the annual PSATS convention and hear the conversations of disconnect for a significant number of municipalities...one has to wonder...how did we get to the point of antagonism. Annual meetings that are implicit of awareness and cooperation are not necessarily being accommodated. On this point...I am not sure that elected officials have complete awareness of the response capabilities of their respective organizations. I can recall a

township supervisor quipping that so long as an engine made it out of the firehouse that was the end of his responsibility. What the responders did upon arrival did not concern him. Complete understanding and awareness is something that should be pursued from all sides.

- **Capabilities** are always a concern. With a volunteer response agency capability varies with the time of day and available responders. There are some who lament training is too long. There are too many courses and that is contributory to the decline in emergency responders...but as a fire commander...I would rather have ten who are well trained and know what to do than 20 who aren't sure.
- **Clearly there are areas to be addressed.** I would prefer to avoid the doom and gloom aspects of this discussion but I must focus on the reality of the day. Our culture has changed. The days of community identity are for the most part in my memory. Community support for emergency services is modest at best. A significant number of constituents feel their tax dollars totally fund the various response organizations in their municipality. While some municipalities can offer significant support to their agencies...the vast number raise of responders generate their own funds to stay in business. For the sheer

delight of risking life and limb to save people we likely do not know...we are asked to pay admission. The commitment to pay the bills with fund raising efforts fills at least half of all volunteer hours.

- **Commitment, resources and the future must be part of this conversation.** The predictions of where we are going are revealed in the way of the volunteer EMS providers. For the most part the volunteer aspect of EMS is slowly disappearing. Augmenting remaining volunteers with paid staff is evident everywhere in Northampton County. I suspect other counties as well. Generations view things differently and I as deal with Gen Xers and Millennials I can see the variations of value and interests. I am not sure younger folks have an interest in volunteering as emergency responders...at least not in the numbers that would be needed to offset the current decline. What I do see is the trend towards paid-on-call responders across all disciplines. As such I sense that revenues will need to be generated to offset those costs.
- **The outcomes must be based on clear assessments of reality.** In a time of political correctness and attention to image we cannot allow glaring issues to go unaddressed. This hearing and the subsequent meetings to follow must clearly address the concerns with viable

considerations and solutions. There are a number of existing resources that can be employed to that end...but the beginning must be based on clear attainable objectives. Objectives that must be congruent with the desired outcomes that provide effective functional emergency response across all disciplines for the benefit of all constituents for now and into the future.