

Benjamin F. Thomas, Jr. (Ben)
Manager, Cumberland Township, Adams County, Pennsylvania

Testimony before the Pennsylvania Senate Veterans' Affairs and Emergency
Preparedness Committee
"Challenges of firefighting today!"
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Good morning. I'm Ben Thomas, Jr., Manager of Cumberland Township, Adams County where our elected Supervisors have been pro-active in meeting and supporting our Volunteer Fire Companies. Supervisors that don't just want to throw money at these challenges, but agree with my research and a holistic approach. Regarding CHALLENGES OF FIREFIGHTING TODAY, I've been active with the Adams County COG Legislative Committee and the Franklin County Emergency Services Alliance, a consortium of emergency service organizations and municipalities where I am a founding member. Both Adams and Franklin Counties have joined efforts in support of our vital emergency services. I'm also a volunteer firefighter (apparatus operator) and Pa. Certified Emergency Medical Technician serving my 40th year at a busy Fire / EMS Department in near-by Franklin County where I am past President, past EMS Chief, past Fire Dept. Administrator. I continue to serve in my 25th year as Treasurer of a Firefighter's Relief Association.

Since I first became active there has been an estimated 75% decline in volunteer first responders in Pennsylvania...A HUGE CHALLENGE! Call volumes have significantly increased that includes unfounded automatic alarms. Many hours of training is needed. Cell phone calls that generate up to 200 phone calls for one interstate related incident; and extensive EMS (ambulance) calls from the illegal and prescription drug use epidemic; to mental distress calls that were pretty much unheard of when I was first certified as an EMT in the early 1970s'. Back then my Department had 40 volunteer EMTs.

I direct your attention to what may be solutions to what I believe is the "building perfect storm..." the lack of active volunteer personnel in the Pennsylvania fire / EMS service. This potential "perfect storm" would significantly challenge future costs, not only of the volunteer fire departments, but the Boroughs and Townships in Pennsylvania that

may be called upon to operate and pay a much greater amount than what they fund today for these vital public safety services in the future. I call upon a team effort INVESTING IN OUR VOLUNTEERS...YES *INVESTMENTS* by COMMUNITIES, MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS, FIRE DEPARTMENTS, AND THE PENNSYLVANIA LEGISLATURE:

TEAM ONE – COMMUNITIES:

- Search for new volunteers that only desire to help with Fire Department non-emergency details such as administrative duties and fund raising responsibilities.
- Assign a volunteer to work on a merchant discount card system in the community that provides the **active** member a discount at local stores, services, and restaurants.
- Service organizations and Homeowners' Associations provide volunteers and financial support for capital expense projects (from AEDs' to new fire apparatus.)

TEAM TWO – TOWNSHIPS AND BOROUGHES:

- With legislative assistance utilize a portion of Pennsylvania Firefighter's Relief Association Act for a "Length of Service Award Program." This would require Pennsylvania legislation authorizing this expenditure of funds from foreign fire insurance proceeds and consider increasing the current insurance fee by ½ percent.
- Also with legislative assistance, provide incentives for local income tax breaks and forgiveness of a municipal fire tax for "active members" with an equitable definition for "active member."
- Help Fire / EMS department educate citizens regarding what the volunteers do; the costs; the savings by volunteer efforts, and how citizens can help!

TEAM THREE – To my Brother and Sister Volunteers; FIRE DEPARTMENTS

(items already in limited practice):

- Provide organizational leadership training for officers and members and provide a positive, supportive, team environment for all fire / EMS volunteers.
- Provide an annual tour of your facilities and operations by local elected officials (Mayors, Council-members, Township Supervisors) and the community.
- Provide fire / EMS training in high schools during school hours as a part of an enhanced JUNIOR FIREFIGHTER / EMT PROGRAM.
- Offer on-line training courses.

Learn from our military recruiters. Fire / EMS Departments should have ACTIVE RECRUITERS that works with citizens interested in joining and support them during their new or probationary period so they feel welcome and part of the team and organization! If there is such a plan in place, do an area wide community recruitment saturation campaign using public and social media, and even consider the old fashioned DOOR TO DOOR campaign.

TEAM FOUR – THE PENNSYLVANIA LEGISLATURE:

- Enlist our friends from DCED to author a “best practices manual” for municipalities, communities, and Fire / EMS organizations regarding recruitment and retention.
- Support House Bill 1632 “Volunteer emergency responder tax credit for business” that would provide state tax credits for employers that permit employees to leave work in response to emergency calls and training.
- Support legislation adding ½ percent to the foreign fire insurance fee for web-based training and a length of service award program as previously stated.

- Support legislation for tax break incentives providing for a local (municipal) option to forgive the local services tax, earned income tax, or municipal fire tax.
- Provide active volunteer tuition credits for personnel who are continuing higher education at a facility of the State University System or Community College System.
- Provide active volunteer discounts for driver's licenses and/or vehicle registrations for one vehicle owned by the volunteer.
- Reinstate a Pennsylvania Personal Income Tax credit as enacted in 2008. At that time the credit was \$100.00. Senate Resolution 60 Commission recommended \$250.
- Research 911 phone charges to see if income is keeping up with county costs to operate emergency communications centers given the call volume generated by cell phones. The \$1.24 fee (more or less) does not keep up with the costs. As citizens remove their "land line" phones from their homes, funding has decreased in some Counties. Consider expanding this user fee to cell phones as well.

Let us become research partners with this holistic approach that incorporates much of the Senate Resolution 60 Committee Report issued nearly ten years ago utilizing teams of communities, municipalities, fire/EMS services, and the Pennsylvania Legislature. Consider setting date sensitive goals to accomplish a 'BEST FIRE / EMS VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PRACTICES ACTION PLAN.'

I stand ready to assist. Help us rescue the volunteer fire / EMS service in Pennsylvania.

Thank-you for joining us this morning regarding this vitally important public safety concern!

CONTACT INFORMATION:
 Ben Thomas, Jr. Manager
 Cumberland Township, Adams County, Pennsylvania
 1370 Fairfield Road
 Gettysburg, PA 17325
 717.334.6485 Ext. 2200
 E-mail: bthomas@cumberlandtownship.com
 Cell Phone #: 240.469.9509