



**TESTIMONY BY
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF
TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE**

ON

**VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER
RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

PRESENTED BY

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Chairmen Vulakovich and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee:

Good evening. My name is Scott Coburn and I am the general counsel for the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the 1,454 townships in Pennsylvania represented by the Association.

Townships comprise 95 percent of the Commonwealth's land area and are home to over 5.5 million Pennsylvanians — 44 percent of the state's population. These townships are diverse, ranging from rural communities with fewer than 200 residents to more populated communities with more than 60,000 residents. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an issue that impacts every township across the state.

The Association believes that state, federal, and local government are partners in providing public safety services for our residents, including emergency management, fire protection, police protection, and ambulance and rescue response. As the first responder, local government plays a critical role in ensuring the delivery of these vital services.

Volunteer fire departments and volunteer firefighters are the primary providers of fire protection in townships. We strongly support our volunteers for providing a valuable service, one that the government would need to provide if there weren't volunteers willing to prepare for and respond to incidents requiring rescue, fire suppression, and hazardous materials cleanup. The cost to replace our volunteer firefighters with paid fire service statewide has been estimated at nearly \$6 billion annually, which is why it is important to provide recruitment and retention incentives for volunteer emergency responders throughout the Commonwealth.

The responsibilities of these first responders have expanded over the years to include rescue, hazardous materials response, and terrorism prevention, which has significantly increased the training needed by these volunteers and, in turn, led to the reduction in willing volunteers.

Volunteer fire departments struggle with adequate funding sources and, according to the Department of Community and Economic Development's Municipal Statistic reports, 97 percent of townships of the second class reported contributing a total of \$142 million to help their volunteer fire departments in 2012. In fact, 81 percent of reporting townships reported spending more than \$10,000 for fire protection and 37 percent reported spending more than \$50,000. These expenses ranged from \$268 from our smallest township, East Keating Township, Clinton County, to the largest reported expenditure of \$2.43 million from Manchester Township, York County.

We encourage our members to work with their volunteer fire companies and to be proactive in discussing the needs, current and future, to make sure that our volunteers will remain active well into the future and can spend their time training and responding, not fundraising. This is a requirement that was added to all of the municipal codes several

years ago. We have also suggested that townships consider paying directly for needed equipment and vehicles, as well as making the township the owner of large equipment and vehicles in the unfortunate event that a volunteer fire company becomes unsustainable in the future. The more taxpayer funding is needed to support our volunteer fire departments, which appears to be our future, the more accountability will be needed to ensure that these funds are used properly.

A recent Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board ruling in a fact-specific case found that members of a volunteer fire company which provided service to the Borough of Emmaus were actually borough employees. This ruling is on appeal to the Commonwealth Court and its outcome could impact townships' relationships with their volunteer fire companies.

While the commonwealth has taken important steps to improve public safety by implementing the recommendations of legislative task forces that studied emergency response, additional action is needed. The most urgent need is for the adoption of statewide volunteer benefit programs to strongly encourage the recruitment and retention of emergency service volunteers.

It has been 10 years since Senate Resolution 60 was passed, which provided recommendations to help municipalities and volunteer firefighters in their quest to provide fire protection services for their communities. The Association supports the recommendations of this report which would help recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and emergency service personnel and strongly urges the General Assembly to implement the following:

- ♦ state tax credits or deductions for active volunteer emergency service providers;
- ♦ state tax credits or deductions for businesses that support volunteer emergency service providers;
- ♦ educational tuition credits for volunteer emergency service providers enrolled in undergraduate-level courses at a Pennsylvania university or community college; and
- ♦ permissible benefits spending programs that could be customized by volunteer emergency service providers to recruit and retain volunteers, such as a defined contribution plan or participation in a credit union.

In accordance with the SR 60 recommendations, the Volunteer Firemen's Relief Association program should be restructured to return to the original program goal of providing equipment and material, including basic personal protection equipment, to all emergency responders. In addition, legislation is needed to establish criteria consistent with the intent of the act that would allow volunteer fire departments to use fire relief funds for the recruitment and retention of volunteers under the oversight of the state fire commissioner.

The Association has long supported legislation that would authorize fire companies to collect reimbursement from insurance companies for expenses incurred while responding to and cleaning up automobile accidents and other emergency incidents as an additional means of support, however, this reimbursement remains voluntary by

insurance companies. Another recommendation is that the state should provide incentives to encourage cooperative purchasing among volunteer fire companies, such as grants and low-interest loans in order to reduce the costs of purchasing equipment. In addition, unnecessary administrative requirements should be eliminated for volunteer fire departments, which should be exempt from all state and federal taxes.

Further, the General Assembly should give townships additional tools for funding public safety services, such as authorization for municipalities to assess emergency services impact fees on all new subdivisions and land development. In addition, townships should be authorized to collect a municipal services fee for state and federal facilities located within their boundaries to offset the costs of public safety services provided to these facilities.

Our Association is also urging Congress to provide incentives for volunteerism at the federal level by amending the U.S. tax code to authorize the use of defined-contribution length-of-service appreciation programs for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; providing a federal income tax deduction for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; and offering a federal income tax deduction for employers who allow active volunteer firefighters and fire police to respond to emergencies during work hours.

While the safety of our volunteer firefighters is paramount, the administration and the General Assembly should be careful not to impose overly stringent equipment standards or excessive training recommendations or requirements that may dampen interest by potential volunteers.

Finally, the General Assembly should be careful to avoid benefits for a few of our volunteers that may unintentionally cause a significant increase in expenses and create an unfunded mandate, such as Act 46 of 2011 (*workers' compensation cancer presumption for firefighters*). Instead, the costs and benefits of all of the proposals should be examined carefully to ensure that we maximize our return for the taxpayer's dollar and create incentives that truly benefit our volunteer firefighters and other volunteer emergency responders.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment today and I will attempt to answer any questions that you may have.