

DEC 06 2010

MEMO



Senate of Pennsylvania

December 2, 2010

TO: ALL SENATORS

FROM: Stewart J. Greenleaf

*Stewart*

SUBJECT: Cosponsorship -- **Volunteer firefighters and emergency service personnel**

I am reintroducing a package of bills to promote recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters as well as other emergency service personnel. Volunteers are a crucial part of our fire and emergency medical service delivery system in Pennsylvania. A 2004 report issued by the Senate Resolution 60 Commission, established to formulate legislative initiatives designed to enhance emergency service delivery in the Commonwealth, stated the following: "Of Pennsylvania's 2,462 fire companies, more than 90 percent are volunteer companies." In addition, a 2001 study by the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute estimated that the service provided by our volunteer firefighters is valued at \$6 billion annually.

Sadly, however, the number of volunteer firefighters has decreased from 152,000 in 1985 to 70,000 in 2005. The drop in the number of volunteers can be attributed to the fact that they have to raise funds as well as fight fires. This downward trend in emergency service volunteers is so disconcerting that members of the Senate Resolution 60 Commission agreed that a "public safety crisis looms." Over 75 percent of the fire chiefs who responded to a 2001 survey performed by the Institute indicated that recruitment and retention are the two most urgent matters facing their fire companies. Given the fact that volunteer firefighters and other emergency service personnel risk their lives each day to preserve and protect the safety and welfare of others, with little or no recompense, it is incumbent upon us to enact incentives that help volunteer companies recruit new members and support current members.

Senate Bill 77 is the Volunteer Emergency Service Tuition Credit Program Act. The legislation establishes a tuition credit program for members of a volunteer fire company, volunteer ambulance service or voluntary rescue squad who are active and in good standing. Volunteer members, including their dependent children and spouse, may enroll in postsecondary education courses on a tuition credit basis in a community college. Each volunteer is eligible to receive tuition credit of up to \$600 per year, not to exceed a maximum of \$2,400 over a four year service period, provided that available classroom space permits and that tuition paying students constitute the minimum number required for courses.

In order to be eligible to receive tuition credit, a volunteer shall agree to serve as a member of a volunteer fire company, volunteer ambulance service or voluntary rescue squad for a minimum of four years. Following each year of volunteer service performed, the captain or chief of the volunteer organization must provide the State Fire Commissioner with a letter verifying that the volunteer has been a member in good standing. Upon verification, the Commissioner shall issue a certificate of authorization that may be presented to the community college by the volunteer or eligible family member during the enrollment period. The volunteer or the dependent child or spouse must maintain a "C" grade average in order to continue eligibility for the tuition credit program. This proposal is modeled after a New Jersey tuition credit program for certain volunteers. In addition, my legislation reflects Recommendation #11 in the Senate Resolution 60 Commission report calling for an education tuition credit program.

**Senate Bill 78** amends the Police Officer, Firefighter, Correction Employee and National Guard Member Child Beneficiary Education Act to expand the tuition waiver program to include surviving spouses of deceased firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, state parole agents, and county probation and parole officers. Pennsylvania, like many states, has a tuition free program for children of deceased firefighters and other individuals (i.e., police officers, National Guard members). According to information from the National Volunteer Fire Council, 29 states (i.e., New Jersey, New York, Maryland and Ohio) have laws that extend their tuition waiver program to surviving spouses of the firefighters who are killed while acting in the performance of their duties.

By amending the act, the benefits of the tuition free program will also apply to surviving spouses of police officers, correction employees, sheriffs, deputy sheriffs, National Guard members and certain other individuals on active military duty who are killed in the line of duty. According to officials at the PHEAA, 33 individuals have graduated from college under the Postsecondary Education Gratuity Program since the start of the program in 1999.

**Senate Bill 79** is the Volunteer Emergency Service Personnel Educational Assistance and Loan Forgiveness Act. The legislation establishes an educational assistance and loan forgiveness program for volunteer emergency service personnel. In order to be eligible for a grant, an applicant must: (1) be a resident of this Commonwealth; (2) be an active member of a volunteer fire company, emergency service team or rescue team for a period of at least one year; (3) be enrolled in an approved program of education at an approved institution of higher learning; and (4) provide the learning institution with an official statement that he or she is a member in good standing of the volunteer fire company, emergency service team or rescue team. Grants under this program shall not exceed \$3,700 per academic year.

An applicant shall also be eligible to receive loan forgiveness payments. For each year that the applicant is a member of a volunteer fire company, emergency service team or rescue team, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) may forgive a proportional part of the applicant's loan so that the loan may be entirely forgiven over a maximum period of five years in which the applicant is attending an approved institution of higher learning. No more than \$2,000 shall be forgiven in any year, and no more than \$10,000 shall be forgiven for any applicant over a five-year period. No grant payments or loan forgiveness payments shall be made under this act except during the eligible member's term of service as an active member of a volunteer fire company, emergency service team or rescue team.

*If you would like to cosponsor any or all of these bills, please contact Pat Snively of my office by e-mailing her at [psnively@pasen.gov](mailto:psnively@pasen.gov) and providing her with the bill number(s) from last session.*