

Statement for the
House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

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OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Edward A. Mann, State Fire Commissioner

Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak at this hearing today. I am State Fire Commissioner Ed Mann.

Pennsylvania has a very strong and proud tradition of volunteer fire services. In Pennsylvania, about 96 percent of all fire companies are staffed by volunteers. They are a community's first line of response when a serious incident happens. We owe these volunteers our deep thanks and gratitude for their service to our communities. In March 1976, a lengthy written report from the Governor's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control entitled "Pennsylvania Burning" was issued. The report spelled out several recommendations regarding our volunteer fire services as well as pointing out the issues the volunteer fire service faced. Many of the issues identified in 1977 continue to confront the fire service today. The most telling fact from that report is that there were 300,000 volunteers involved with the Pennsylvania Fire Service in 1977. In the late 1990's, another report estimated the number of active volunteers to be 70,000. Today, I believe that number is closer to 50,000. With the dramatic drop over the

years in volunteer firefighters, there is concern that there may be a public safety crisis in coming years.

While many reports and studies have been completed since 1977, there does not seem to be any single reason for the decline of volunteers, including those individuals who wish to become volunteer firefighters ("recruitment") and those who decide to leave the fire services ("retention"). I often hear that the reason the fire service has so much trouble recruiting and retaining firefighters is because of the mandated state training requirements. Nothing could be further from the truth, simply because there are no "mandated state training requirements." It is the local fire chief who decides the necessary level of training for the personnel in that particular fire company.

In all honesty, I never had a former volunteer firefighter tell me they quit because there was too much training. Rather, I hear one of the following reasons why people leave: they grew tired of the lack of leadership in the firehouse, or they spent more time doing work to raise funds to support the fire company than actually responding to emergencies. Some have said the state does not do enough to help the fire service. I strongly disagree. The Commonwealth provides in excess of \$150 million each year to the volunteer fire service. This is done through the Fire Company-Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), and the Fireman's Relief Fund. Thanks to Governor Corbett's strong commitment to public safety and the support of the General Assembly, the Fire Company-Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program was increased from \$25 million to \$30 million and,

for the first time ever, the grant now includes our career fire departments. This was accomplished with the passage of Senate Bill 866 in June 2012. Another important step to help our volunteer fire companies is Act 29 of 2013, originally House Bill 1706 sponsored by Representative Matt Baker, which amended the VLAP. This legislation doubled the current loan amounts offered through the VLAP and marked the first major changes to the program since 1984. The bill was signed into law by Governor Corbett on December 23, 2013.

With Governor Corbett's leadership and passage of Senate Bill 866, my office had \$500,000 in critical funding restored to our budget. These funds have been used to directly support the fire service through: the restarting of our popular Academy on the Road Program, returning to a full complement of Resident Training Programs, restoring Instructor Workshops; the ability to offer Professional Development Workshops; enabling the State Fire Academy to upgrade curriculum used in the Local Level Training System, and updating and adding hands-on instructional tools at the State Fire Academy.

While the additional funding has enabled my office to restore Academy on the Road Programs and Resident Training Programs, the Local Level Training System by far has always been the most popular method for our firefighters and officers to receive the training they need. For years these programs were offered for free or very inexpensively through a system of community colleges and county-operated fire training facilities. However, Act 46 of 2005 changed the funding method to our community colleges and eliminated the reimbursement for non-credit public safety training and full time equivalency (FTE). As a result, the fire training

entities at the colleges had to start charging fees for students. I am concerned these fees could reach levels many of our firefighters and fire departments simply will not be able to afford. This means training could become non-existent in some areas of the state. We all understand that the current fiscal constraints of the nation, state, and local governments make it difficult to identify new funding for training programs.

While I do not have any specific solutions to the problems facing the Pennsylvania Fire Service, I do believe many of the answers might be found in any number of the reports and studies that have been completed since 1977 when "Pennsylvania Burning" first addressed many of the same issues. You may wish to review the Senate Resolution 60 Report that was issued in November 2004. Senate Resolution 60 established a special bipartisan legislative commission to "develop legislation to provide direct and indirect assistance for the purpose of improving the delivery of emergency services in the Commonwealth." In addition, you may wish to review the June 2005 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee Report entitled "The Feasibility of Regionalizing Pennsylvania's Volunteer Fire Companies." These reports coupled with all of the previous reports might be a great place to start as we search for answers to the complex challenges confronting our volunteer fire services. I also want to express my appreciation to the General Assembly for supporting Act 13 of 2012, the Marcellus Shale law. This legislation is providing \$750,000 annually to the Office of the State Fire Commissioner, and an additional \$750,000 to the PA Emergency Management Agency, out of the impact fee to help our first responders prepare, train and respond to issues that may arise related to natural gas

development. Additionally, counties have tens of millions of dollars in new revenue that comes directly to them which can be allocated to fire and emergency response efforts.

In closing, I want to stress something that I believe is of utmost importance in trying to address the challenges facing Pennsylvania's fire services -- there must be a true partnership between state and local governments and the fire service, including the paid/career departments, in order to develop a comprehensive "tool-box" of solutions to the issues facing the Pennsylvania fire service today and in the future. The safety of our citizens depends on it. We simply cannot sit by and do nothing at all.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.