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Good morning Representatives,

For some time now, I'm sure you've been made aware of the volunteer firefighter crisis in Pennsylvania, as well as across the country. No longer can we say this is a looming crisis. It is very much a real crisis and one that is especially affecting those of us in rural settings. There are many times when I sit at work and see a call come in and turn on the scanner and hear only one of our pieces of apparatus respond and with only 2 firefighters. I hear other companies struggle to get out as well and it seems like there is no help for those who volunteer to help others. The time to talk about doing something about this crisis has past, the crisis is here and the time to act is now.

The fire company I am with is fortunate enough to have had progressive leaders in the past that worked with our boro and township to enact a fire tax that has become our sole source of funding and eliminated the antiquated notion of begging for money for protecting our citizens. This is one of, if not, the main purposes of government as stated in our Constitution. Many other rural fire companies are not as fortunate and still rely on fundraisers of all kinds whether it be chicken BBQs, carnivals, raffles or any number of other methods. Some departments in my area could be in dire straits if a bad weather week strikes during their annual carnival which is their sole source of funding for the year. This is unacceptable in the 21st century.

House Bill 759 could help some of our rural departments that aren't as fortunate as my department. This bill could provide a means for them to provide the service that we are tasked with which is just about anything. When people are in need, they want someone to show up in a quick and competent fashion whether they are volunteer or not. It doesn't matter to Mrs. Smith if the person coming to their aid is getting a paycheck or is responding out of the goodness of their heart.

Is HB 759 the best way of funding our fire departments? No, but it certainly is better than making volunteers who never signed up to sell chickens be able to do their jobs. I would see that this bill allowing for fire companies to bill for services rendered being a possible supplement to the funds we already receive. I don't foresee this replacing any of those sources at this time. Concerns I have fielded regarding this bill are pointed towards very rural areas. How would the billing be administered? If a fire company answers 50 calls a year, that company may get cancelled on several or arrive and go in service immediately without incurring expense. How would billing work on a tree down or wires down incident where there is no individual to bill? Would we bill Verizon or PPL? I know of one company that tried a billing scenario and found that the return wasn't worth the attempt. Many times the insurance would not pay nor would the individual. Regarding Section 79B03(d), I would like to see more clarification on how billing would work in mutual aid situations and multiple fire company responses. Would separate billing for each company be a result of automatic aid or mutual aid. It states that a single bill would be created if the IC requests the apparatus or it comes from a public safety answering point. How would that be defined? These would be some questions that would need to be addressed in a potential amended bill.

I thank the members of the committee and the sponsors of this bill for introducing legislation that looks to assist us as we try and maintain the volunteer fire service in the Commonwealth. I and others like me appreciate your support and look forward to further support in the future.