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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

VETERANS AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE

INDIANA AREA FIRE ASSOCIATION
WHITE TOWNSHIP STATION (IFA WEST)
1555 INDIAN SPRINGS ROAD, INDIANA, PA 15701

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2019
10:00 A.M.

PUBLIC HEARING ON
COLLEGE TUITION CREDITS AND LOAN FORGIVENESS
FOR EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

BEFORE: REPRESENTATIVE FRANK A. FARRY
MAJORITY CHAIRMAN
REPRESENTATIVE JIM RIGBY
REPRESENTATIVE TORREN ECKER
REPRESENTATIVE LEE R. JAMES
REPRESENTATIVE MATT GABLER
REPRESENTATIVE TIMOTHY O'NEAL
REPRESENTATIVE CRIS DUSH
REPRESENTATIVE CHRIS SAINATO
MINORITY CHAIRMAN
REPRESENTATIVE JENNIFER O'MARA
REPRESENTATIVE DAN K. WILLIAMS

ALSO PRESENT:
REPRESENTATIVE JAMES B. STRUZZI, II

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COMMITTEE STAFF PRESENT:
RICK O'LEARY
REPUBLICAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SEAN E. HARRIS
MAJORITY RESEARCH ANALYST

HAYLIN FABB
RESEARCH ANALYST

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CHAIRMAN FARRY: Good morning. My name is Frank Farry, State Representative from Bucks County. I also serve as the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Security and Emergency Response. I'm standing in for the Majority Chairman, Steve Barrar, who cannot be here with us today.

We're going to call this public hearing to order. I'm going to ask everyone to please silence their cell phones. Leave your fire pagers on, of course, for those that are local to here. And I'm going to ask Representative Struzzi to lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance.

(WHEREUPON, THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE WAS RECITED.)

CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you.

First of all, I want to thank Representative Struzzi and his staff for helping organize the event today and hosting us.

I would also like to thank the Indiana Area Fire Association and members of the White Township Station for providing us this great venue. We appreciate your efforts. And a special thanks to Bill Simon (sic).

1 Where's Bill at?

2 MR. SIMMONS: Simmons.

3 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Simmons. Excuse me.

4 Thank you very much for all your efforts to put this
5 together.

6 I'd like to have the members introduce
7 themselves. So let's start to my left.

8 REPRESENTATIVE O'MARA: Good morning,
9 everyone. Representative Jennifer O'Mara, from
10 Delaware County.

11 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: Representative
12 Jim Rigby, Cambria/Somerset Counties.

13 REPRESENTATIVE ECKER: Good morning,
14 everybody. I am Representative Torren Ecker from the
15 193rd District, which is parts of Adams and Cumberland
16 County.

17 MS. FABB: Haylin Fabb, Research
18 Analyst.

19 REPRESENTATIVE SAINATO: Representative
20 Chris Sainato. I am the Democratic Chairman of the
21 Committee.

22 MR. O'LEARY: Rick O'Leary, Executive
23 Director for the Committee.

24 MR. HARRIS: Sean Harris, Research
25 Analyst for the Committee.

1 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Good morning. My
2 name is Lee James. I represent all of Venango County
3 and Western PA, plus a little bit of Northeast Butler
4 County.

5 REPRESENTATIVE GABLER: Good morning.
6 Matt Gabler, 75th District, representing Elk and
7 Clearfield Counties.

8 REPRESENTATIVE WILLIAMS: Good morning.
9 Dan Williams, representing the 74th District, Chester
10 County, Coatesville, Downingtown, Thorndale and
11 Parkesburg. It's good to be here this morning.

12 REPRESENTATIVE O'NEAL: Good morning.
13 Tim O'Neal. I represent the 48th District out of
14 Washington County. I will say I'm an IUP alum, so it's
15 great to make it back to Indiana.

16 CHAIRMAN FARRY: And I believe we're
17 also joined by our Representative Dush, who is in the
18 back of the room here. Cris, you're from Punxsutawney.
19 Is that correct?

20 REPRESENTATIVE DUSH: No, Brookville.

21 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Brookville, okay. What
22 county is that?

23 REPRESENTATIVE DUSH: It's Jefferson
24 County.

25 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Jefferson County.

1 REPRESENTATIVE DUSH: But I also have
2 the ten townships in the northern part of Indiana
3 County.

4 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Okay.

5 Good. Well, thank you for joining us
6 here as well.

7 Let me thank the members and the staff
8 for taking the time to be here. As you can see, a lot
9 of us travel from different parts of the Commonwealth.

10 I also want to thank this committee for
11 their efforts moving forward with the SR 6 reports.
12 Today's hearing is part of the process as we work to
13 advance those pieces of legislation.

14 And I have to give a shout-out to
15 Pittsburgh Firefighters Local 1, who actually hosted us
16 yesterday. We did some live burning and some various
17 other exercises.

18 I'm a 30-year volunteer firefighter
19 myself, so it was like old home week. But for some of
20 my colleagues and the staff here it was their first
21 time getting experience in - it was quite an
22 experience. And yeah, as Rick said, a few people are a
23 little sore here from wearing the air packs most of the
24 day.

25 So Chairman Sainato, do you have any

1 opening remarks?

2 CHAIRMAN SAINATO: Thank you,
3 Representative Farry. I would like also - I would like
4 to thank all of our members for being here today.
5 We've had a very busy, busy week with the Veterans
6 Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. We
7 actually started at the airfield in Pittsburgh. We
8 were up in a flight refueling mission.

9 And what we did yesterday I think was
10 extremely important for all of our members. Many
11 members had never been there before to see what our
12 firefighters go through in a fire. And I think after
13 yesterday - and we had a lot of members, many that
14 weren't even on our committee. We had Senators come in
15 from all over the state.

16 I think that's a testament to the
17 support we have for our firefighters and EMS. And if
18 you look at us at our table today, as you see, we have
19 members from all over the State of Pennsylvania here.
20 And that shows you our commitment and our - how much we
21 value this type of legislation.

22 We have a very active committee and we
23 have a very bipartisan committee. We work together for
24 what's best for our state. And I think if you look at
25 this table, you'll understand what we do.

1 We look forward to the testimony today.
2 I'm from Lawrence County, so I'm probably a little less
3 than two hours from here. So I've been to Indiana, the
4 town, many times, and it's a beautiful area up here.
5 And we wish you - and I'd like to thank you also for
6 hosting us today. So let's start the testimony.

7 Oh, yes, I should comment on my Bill,
8 because me and representative Struzzi both have two
9 legislations. That is very important. And
10 Representative Struzzi will give you a little synopsis
11 of his Bill.

12 My Bill deals with loan forgiveness.
13 And what we're trying to do is - you hear talk right
14 now or people saying, you know, we should give free
15 college. I'm not on that tune of free college for
16 everybody. I'm for rewarding people who do certain
17 things.

18 This year we did something that's the
19 first in the country with the National Guard Loan
20 Scholarship Program. We're the first state to do it.
21 Chairman Barrar and myself led that legislation and
22 it's the model for the country now. So we're going to
23 give free - but it's not really free. They're going to
24 earn it through six years of an extension.

25 And the Loan Forgiveness Program I have

1 is maybe a little bit similar to that. You can go to
2 trade school. You can go to college. And then you
3 stay in Pennsylvania and then you can qualify for loan
4 forgiveness.

5 The longer you're at that fire company,
6 the more loan is going to be forgiven. So I believe
7 it's a win-win. It helps our state - and trade
8 schools.

9 It's not just for higher education.
10 Many of our people who want to get into the trade
11 schools - that's my version of free, because you earn
12 it. And that's just a nutshell of what I'd like to see
13 happen.

14 That's all part of - this is our sixth
15 Commission report. So we're hoping to draw attention
16 to that, Representative Struzzi's legislation and many
17 of the other recommendations.

18 A lot of stuff is going to be happening
19 this fall. I know Chairman Barrar is committed. I'm
20 committed. So that's where we're at right now.

21 So Chairman Farry.

22 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you, Chairman.

23 We'll turn the floor over to our host to
24 talk about a piece of legislation.

25 Representative Struzzi.

1 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Thank you, Mr.
2 Chairman. Good morning, everyone. I am truly honored
3 and thrilled that you are all able to be here today in
4 Indiana County, so welcome. I know him and many others
5 have been to the university, but I would encourage you
6 before you leave to take a trip through town, see the
7 beautiful IUP campus, if you have time, because it is
8 truly remarkable.

9 I appreciate that you're here talking
10 about this very important subject. I appreciate many
11 of the Fire Chiefs and emergency responders who are
12 here today as well. This is a crucial subject we're
13 talking about today. My legislation, House Bill 1773,
14 I have some written comments here that I'll submit to
15 you. I'm going to cover a few highlights, but I wanted
16 to emphasize how important this is.

17 And I know you all are well aware, but
18 since I took office and before I took office I've met
19 with all the chiefs that are here, attended various
20 functions. And it is critical that we have volunteers
21 that serve our volunteer fire companies and emergency
22 response providers, because if we don't have
23 volunteers, what do we have? We have a crisis or we're
24 going to have to pay volunteers.

25 And that's - you know, that would be

1 detrimental to our municipalities and our local
2 boroughs. So anything that we can do to entice
3 volunteers to serve - and those are the people that
4 really sacrifice. Day in, day out, they have to work
5 to - so my thought is anything we can do to reward and
6 incentivize volunteers, we have to do. And that's how
7 we arrived at today's hearing on House Bill 1773.

8 And I do want to thank Representative
9 Farry for helping me with this. I came to Frank right
10 away, as soon as I took office. And I said, what can
11 we do to help volunteer firefighters and emergency
12 responders? And so Frank and I, you know, we had some
13 discussions, and that's how this Bill came about. It
14 was in the SR 6 report.

15 So basically House Bill 1773 would
16 create a Tuition Assistance Program for active
17 volunteers. The program - through the program an
18 active member of a volunteer fire company or EMS agency
19 who attends an approved institution of higher learning
20 would be eligible to receive tuition assistance. The
21 program is modeled after a very successful Pennsylvania
22 National Guard Education Assistance Program, a
23 tried-and-true program that provides similar benefits
24 to our National Guardsmen.

25 So this is recommendation number one, as

1 I mentioned, from Senate Report 6, basically to
2 strengthen the recruitment and retention needs of our
3 first responders. So I'll just cover a few of the
4 eligibility requirements because I think it's important
5 to emphasize that, you know, these have to be active
6 volunteers. They can't just be a member of the fire
7 company, but not show up and participate. So that's
8 important that they are active.

9 So what does active mean? It means that
10 they have to participate in at least 30 percent of the
11 organization's activities in a one-year period.
12 Obviously, they must be an active volunteer. They must
13 be a resident of the Commonwealth. And then, of
14 course, they must be enrolled in an approved education
15 program at an institute of higher learning.

16 The applicant must accept the obligation
17 to serve as an active volunteer for at least one year
18 prior to enrollment and for at least five years after
19 graduation. So that's important. Not only does it
20 help the volunteer fire companies and emergency
21 responders, but it keeps young people in
22 Pennsylvania.

23 And I think that's important as well, as
24 we see a lot of our intellectual assets, as we educate
25 young people, leave Pennsylvania. This is again

1 another incentive to not only help volunteer fire
2 companies but keep young people in Pennsylvania and
3 hopefully increase enrollment in some of our state
4 system schools as well.

5 So the applicant then would need to sign
6 and submit an application to their chief or supervisor
7 to attest that they are, in fact, an active volunteer.
8 If the volunteer is injured while acting as a volunteer
9 and can no longer serve because of that injury, they
10 would be - they would still be eligible for the program
11 to receive tuition assistance for five years from the
12 date of the injury.

13 Once eligibility has been determined,
14 the payment shall be determined by the agency, and
15 full-time students may not exceed a tuition rate
16 charged by the university for the number of credit
17 hours per semester or the annual tuition rate charged
18 by the institution within the Pennsylvania State System
19 of Higher Education or one academic year, whichever is
20 less.

21 Part-time students' payments may not
22 exceed the tuition rate charged by the university for
23 the number of credit hours per semester or the annual
24 tuition rate charged by an institution within the State
25 System. So again, they have to continue to serve as a

1 volunteer for five years, which - which I think is a
2 key factor.

3 The program will be funded through the
4 Active Volunteer Tuition Assistance Program Fund, which
5 will be established as a non-lapsing restricted
6 receipt, account in the State Treasury. Money
7 deposited into the fund, including accrued interest, is
8 appropriated to the agency on a continuing basis. No
9 administrative action shall prevent the deposit or
10 transfer of money to the fund. And this money may not
11 be diverted or moved from the program for any other
12 purpose by administrative action.

13 The administrative costs of the program
14 for the fiscal year beginning on July 1st, 2020, and
15 each subsequent fiscal year shall not exceed 3.5
16 percent of the total amount of money appropriated to
17 the agency to implement the program.

18 That's some of the highlights. I know
19 that you can all read the legislation for yourselves.
20 But you know, to conclude, I think I'm really honored
21 to be able to introduce this legislation. I know that
22 the men and women who serve our local fire companies
23 here in Indiana County, in the 62nd District, truly
24 care deeply about the communities that they serve.

25 Our fire companies are the town hall.

1 You know, they're where people gather. They're where
2 people give. And if we don't have volunteers helping
3 to keep our communities safe, we're all in trouble.

4 So I hope that you will support this
5 legislation and I hope that we can move it forward here
6 in the coming session. And my hat goes off to everyone
7 who volunteers and serves our local communities.

8 So I'd be happy to answer any questions,
9 but thank you again for being here today. It's truly
10 an honor to host you here in Indiana County. So thank
11 you.

12 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Does anybody have any
13 questions for the prime sponsor of the legislation?

14 Representative Rigby?

15 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: Thank you.

16 Representative Struzzi, I think this is
17 a great program you're looking to initiate. I know
18 3SR6 and with meeting with the other firefighters in
19 other hearings we've discussed volunteer, slash,
20 professional. And we're addressing them all now as
21 professionals.

22 With this Bill we go back to addressing
23 them as a volunteer. And my only question is, as a
24 volunteer and I get into this and I have to stay
25 committed five years, a lot of our volunteers end up

1 being paid, are professional firefighters.

2 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Uh-huh (yes).

3 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: So if they take
4 that - accept that position, do they then lose that
5 tuition assistance? I just think - you know, we're -
6 we're crying for help -

7 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Right.

8 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: - both on the
9 volunteer and even on the paying, it's harder and
10 harder to get people into it. And I'm wondering if
11 this would roll into it, if they're staying in that
12 line of business as a first responder at the
13 professional level, if this tuition can continue?

14 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Representative
15 Rigby, I think that's a great question. My definition
16 would be, you know, professional is a paid firefighter.

17 I think that's something that we would
18 have to consider if that does, in fact, occur. And I
19 know that it does occur often. Many young
20 firefighters, you know, do their teething in the
21 volunteer basis and then move on to be a paid
22 firefighter.

23 But I guess I would perhaps - Rick, if
24 you want to comment.

25 MR. O'LEARY: Yeah. I mean, that's

1 something we can move forward with. I know for the
2 volunteers in the room, we're all professionals, so -
3 be that career versus volunteer, submit to that
4 terminology. But I think that's something - because I
5 mean, if somebody is continuing to serve or if they've
6 got somebody that's volunteering as an EMT and then
7 they become a paid paramedic, you know, they could
8 obviously still benefit from that tuition.

9 So I think that's a very fair point.
10 And I think that's something that we can look to amend
11 in the Billing Committee down the road and include that
12 if the prime sponsor is okay with it -

13 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Absolutely.

14 MR. O'LEARY: - and obviously the
15 majority of the Committee.

16 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: I think this
17 legislation is one step in the right direction. Anyone
18 who serves, risks their life, their livelihood to help
19 others I think should be given some sort of reward and
20 incentive. So I definitely think that's something we
21 should consider, not just for volunteers but for paid,
22 professional emergency responders as well. So thank
23 you.

24 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Before I move on to
25 Representative James with his question, I do want to

1 let everybody know that this hearing is being recorded,
2 both video and audio. I'm sure Representative Struzzi
3 will probably have it up on his website.
4 Representative, if we can get that to Harrisburg and
5 get that - oh, it's live right now? We're streaming
6 it.

7 There we go. But I'm sure you'll be
8 able to watch a replay of this later, in case you have
9 any further questions. But I did want the audience
10 members to know that it is being recorded.

11 Representative James?

12 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Thank you, Mr.
13 Chairman. Representative Struzzi, good presentation.
14 I have a related question to Representative Rigby's.
15 So I'd just like to get into the weeds with you for a
16 minute.

17 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: But let me
18 assure you, I'm all in. I'm going to support your
19 Bill.

20 I'm curious about the timing of the cash
21 flow, however. And I was trying to listen carefully.
22 I don't think I heard that.

23 If I'm a young guy and maybe I'm
24 attending President Driscoll's university and I'm
25 participating in that program, it's going to take me

1 several years to get my degree.

2 Right?

3 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Right.

4 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: So what is the
5 timing of the cash flow? Are you going to pay
6 everything upfront, in which case I might hightail it
7 when I graduate or are you going to do this over a
8 graduated period of years?

9 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Yes. That is
10 the five-year commitment. So for every year that you
11 serve, my understanding is that a portion of your
12 tuition will be forgiven, that's the five-year
13 commitment, after you graduate.

14 That keeps you here in Pennsylvania.
15 They have to be a Pennsylvania resident. And then that
16 keeps you volunteering and serving for at least five
17 years. So if they want to see that - that tuition
18 forgiveness, they have to remain an active volunteer
19 for five years.

20 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: So I will front
21 the money and be reimbursed over that period of time?

22 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Essentially you
23 will be forgiven, yes.

24 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Okay.

25 Thank you. That clarifies.

1 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Okay.

3 So if there's no further questions,
4 Representative Struzzi, if you'd like to join us up
5 here, in case there are any -

6 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Yes.

7 CHAIRMAN FARRY: - comments on any of
8 the panelists and then we'll move to our first panel.

9 I apologize in advance that I already
10 messed up Mr. Simmons's name today. So sorry about
11 that. But if I butcher your name, I apologize.

12 But the first panel can come forward
13 together. We have Mr. Jerry Ozog, the Executive
14 Director of the Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services
15 Institute; Jason Yarosik, Monroeville Volunteer Fire
16 Company Number 4, Allegheny County; Ms. Tina Cook,
17 Munhall Volunteer Fire Company in Allegheny County and
18 Mr. Jerry Brant, from the Patton Volunteer Fire Company
19 in Cambria County.

20 In whatever order you would like to
21 begin, please feel free.

22 MR. OZOG: Okay.

23 Thank you very much, Chairman Farry and
24 Chairman Sainato and all members. Thank you very much
25 for the continued education and awareness of our issues

1 facing volunteer firefighting in the State of
2 Pennsylvania.

3 Firefighting and volunteers are critical
4 to the public safety of Pennsylvania. I am the
5 Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency
6 Services Institute. For those in the room who are not
7 familiar with the institute, we're a statewide advocacy
8 and education organization that works with members of
9 the General Assembly, administration, county government
10 and local government to improve and enhance the
11 emergency services system in Pennsylvania.

12 I'm also very proud to be back to the
13 Indiana area. I grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.
14 And in the late '80s I was very privileged to be part
15 of the Citizens Ambulance Service in Indiana County,
16 serving as a paramedic, which Citizens has been a
17 leader in emergency medical services from the '60s and
18 to today. And I was also a member of the Indiana Fire
19 Association in 1986, '87 and '88, when Chief Kelly was
20 the Chief.

21 I've assembled a panel of experts to
22 talk about the Bill. And again, I will turn it over to
23 the experts and they'll start talking.

24 MR. YAROSIK: All right.

25 Thanks, Mr. Farry. You got my name

1 right, Jason Yarosik. You pronounced it right. No one
2 ever does that.

3 Another proud IUP grad here. I
4 graduated in 2001 from the nursing program. I'm a
5 resident of Irwin, which is Westmoreland County, and
6 I'm a volunteer firefighter in Monroeville, which is
7 across the border, in Allegheny County. I'd also like
8 to thank President Driscoll for being here. I read IUP
9 Magazine all the time and I'm a very proud IUP alum.

10 So I'm a firefighter/paramedic from the
11 Monroeville Fire Company Number 4. Before I expound on
12 my department's operations and why I think this tuition
13 program - reimbursement program is very important, I'd
14 like to thank the Indiana Fire Association for hosting
15 us.

16 As I said, I'm a nursing grad from 2001.
17 I obtained my EMT training right on campus, at Keith
18 Hall, which I'm told is - is it still there? Not
19 there. But I'm up here every year for football games
20 and wings at Coney, so I'm very proud of the town and
21 the - I was telling these guys I follow the fire
22 department on Facebook and they do a great job of
23 promoting their organization here.

24 Whenever I had spoke - I'm sorry. I've
25 been a firefighter for the past 15 years. I've also

1 served as the Treasurer for eight years in Monroeville.
2 I've overseen a \$3 million building project, multiple
3 vehicle purchases, EMS billing operations. And
4 unfortunately, I'm very attuned with the financial
5 struggles that all the fire and EMS agencies across the
6 Commonwealth have experienced.

7 If any of you glanced at the 2018 SR 6
8 Report, you're aware of these struggles. The 2004
9 report was very similar. And unfortunately, I don't
10 think there were tons of changes that came out of that,
11 but by evidence of this panel being here today, I think
12 that we're on the right path with that.

13 One thing from the SR 6 Report, it
14 talked about hats and T-shirts and license plates and
15 those kind of things to attract volunteers. And I
16 think everybody here would agree that we're way past
17 that. That's not - not really going to attract the
18 younger population that we're looking for.

19 After I graduated from IUP, I went to
20 the University of North Carolina and worked as an ICU
21 nurse, then relocated back to Pittsburgh. I was a
22 flight nurse with STAT MedEvac for nine years.
23 Volunteered at the firehouse in Monroeville. And then
24 I went to nurse anesthetist school full time. I've
25 been a nurse anesthetist for the last 14 years. The

1 last four have been very rewarding. I've been working
2 at the VA Hospital in Pittsburgh.

3 I was much more fortunate than many
4 students in that I graduated IUP with about \$30,000 in
5 student loan debt. My parents worked extremely hard to
6 pay off the other half. When I finished CRNA school, I
7 had \$100,000 in student loan debt. I'm very fortunate,
8 again, that I have a job that allows me to pay on that.

9 It's no secret that the students today
10 are saddled with student loan debt that forces them to
11 work several jobs, leaving little or no time to
12 volunteer, much less obtaining the countless hours of
13 training that requires for both fire and EMS.

14 Once again, the SR 6 Report cites many
15 additional reasons for the lack of volunteering. I'll
16 be happy to interject on any of those reasons if you
17 should so desire.

18 Now that you've seen my background, I
19 think it's important to stress I'm 1 of 60 members in
20 the Monroeville Volunteer Fire Company, and we're one
21 of five fire companies in the municipality located 12
22 miles east of Pittsburgh. We're very unique, in that
23 we provide fire rescue and EMS all together. So
24 everybody is cross trained as firefighters, paramedics,
25 EMTs, and that's kind of the culture. We respond to

1 any incident.

2 I can't speak for the eastern side of
3 the state, but it's a unique model for Western
4 Pennsylvania.

5 Our yearly call volume is over 5,000,
6 4,000 of those being EMS calls and 1,000 being fire
7 responses. We cover 19.5 square miles, population of
8 70,000 during the day and 33,000 at night.

9 An additional side note is we have seven
10 nursing facilities in our first due area. So that
11 equates to about 50 cardiac arrests a year that our
12 department goes on. That's an extremely high number,
13 but it provides great training here, which I'll get
14 into.

15 You'll remember that SR 6 Report, that
16 there was 1,645 EMS agencies in 2013. That number
17 dropped significantly in 2017. And our department can
18 certainly attest to an increased call volume as we took
19 over the neighboring town of Pitcairn, which borders
20 us. Several other EMS agencies in our area have gone
21 under during that time frame.

22 Our 60 members come from many different
23 occupations and backgrounds. We have an age range of
24 16 to 72 years old. That's no different than anyone
25 else behind me in any of their departments. All of

1 these departments I'm sure are very diverse. We have
2 pipeline workers, a dentist, life-flight nurses,
3 dispatchers, several police officers and engineers, a
4 medical student, as well as career EMTs and paramedics.

5 And you guys had mentioned about what
6 happens if somebody becomes a career firefighter during
7 that time frame. I can speak on several of my friends
8 have gone to D.C. And our career firefighters in D.C.
9 They live in the suburbs in Maryland and volunteer at
10 their fire departments there. And one of the reasons
11 they do that is there's a small pension program in
12 place in Maryland.

13 So that might be something down the
14 road. I know some municipalities have looked at it,
15 but I don't think - like the goal is for people to have
16 career jobs. And if it happens to be in fire and EMS,
17 you know, I don't think that should preclude them from
18 this program. It doesn't sound like anyone else was
19 leaning that way either.

20 Our funding stream is dominated by EMS
21 where we are, which is different than other places.
22 You know, if we take you to the hospital, you have
23 Highmark, that money comes back to the fire department.
24 So a strict fire base doesn't have that revenue stream,
25 so they rely on other sources of revenue.

1 Fortunately, we don't, but I will tell
2 you that our revenue has gone down. We're tied to
3 government reimbursements and/or the mercy of insurance
4 companies.

5 One thing that I think very - that
6 highlights this is we have several frequent flyers in
7 our area that will call 911, get an ambulance. We'll
8 transport them to the hospital and Highmark - I'm using
9 that as an example, whatever insurance, sends the check
10 to them. Okay? So they, in turn, cash the check, use
11 it for whatever they want. It never goes to the fire
12 department.

13 This has been going on for years. And
14 there's been legislation - we always hear that this has
15 been brought up. And it hasn't been changed, to my
16 knowledge.

17 That's a simple thing that goes on in
18 the City of Pittsburgh. It's well known that, you
19 know, they would - everyone calls an ambulance, takes
20 that money, and it doesn't go to the EMS agencies. So
21 we all have a reason why. Insurance companies are tied
22 in closely and - but that seems like a very simple
23 thing that would help.

24 Ten percent of our company income comes
25 from social hall, bingo, wedding operations, just like

1 you probably see here. We pay people to manage this,
2 as we can't have volunteers with 5,000 calls to come
3 work and do that. We operate three ALS ambulances, a
4 rescue truck, ladder truck, two pumpers. We have seven
5 full-time employees as well that is not
6 municipal- based. It's paid for by the fire company.

7 They cover the ambulances. Typically
8 one ambulance is staffed by a volunteer crew still and
9 then two are staffed by the fire paid staff during the
10 day.

11 The main reason I'm here and we're all
12 here is this Tuition Reimbursement Incentive Program.
13 I feel very strongly about this piece of legislation.
14 My department has operated a live-in program for over
15 35 years and it serves as the backbone of our
16 institution. Each year we attract six to eight college
17 students who come live in our station dormitories,
18 similar to what Indiana has here. They obtain training
19 and voluntarily answer a large volume of calls. We pay
20 for all their training.

21 The stipulations to live in a firehouse,
22 you must either be obtaining a higher level of
23 education, trade, college, EMT, paramedic or you must
24 be employed full time. We have no interest in people
25 loafing, hanging around, that, you know, are using it

1 as a - as a place to just stay. So everybody has
2 training.

3 As of last year, I, along with our
4 Executive Board, started a Tuition Reimbursement
5 Program inhouse out of necessity, really. This was
6 done for - to sustain our EMS operations.

7 Once again, you know, you can reference
8 an SR 6 Report, where total EMS providers has dropped
9 from 30,000 to 17,000. And we in Monroeville have felt
10 this as well.

11 Mr. Farry had mentioned how it's earned.
12 And that's how our program is set up. You know, you
13 earn - you know, we'll pay your paramedic or your EMT.
14 And you know, after you - not just go to class, after
15 you pass it, earn your certificate, you're given half
16 the money. Again, we pay the other half over the next
17 year, should they stay.

18 Many of our members are students, have
19 attended or are attending institutes of higher
20 education in Pennsylvania. We currently have active
21 members who - one just departed from medical school at
22 Penn State, Pitt for emergency medicine, nursing
23 degrees, several other degrees. You know, they're not
24 limited to the healthcare field.

25 And we also have a lot of guys going to

1 law enforcement. They'll go to the Allegheny County
2 Police Academy, which their numbers are dwindling as
3 well.

4 In closing, this is a different
5 generation of volunteers. I think anyone that's in
6 this room did not get into this for tuition
7 reimbursement, money, anything like that. It's a sense
8 of community, a sense of being involved, helping out
9 your neighbor.

10 But as society is changing, you know, I
11 think the younger population is changing. They have
12 many other interests. And it's - any small thing that
13 can be done to attract people into this would be very
14 appreciative, and I think this is a great program.

15 Anyone have any questions?

16 CHAIRMAN FARRY: We'll go to questions
17 after the whole panel testifies.

18 MS. COOK: I don't usually need one of
19 these. So if I need it, let me know. I'm also a
20 graduate of IUP. I graduated a little earlier than
21 some other people in here, but I am an IUP alumni.

22 My name is Tina Cook. I am a member of
23 the Munhall Volunteer Fire Company Number 4 in
24 Allegheny County, currently aligned with the Training
25 Division there. I'm a 22-year student of the fire

1 service and I have 18 years with EMS. I'm one of five
2 female suppression instructors in the Commonwealth of
3 Pennsylvania and I'm one of three female adjuncts at
4 the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy.

5 In my other life I'm the Fire and Life
6 Safety Manager for the U.S. Steel Tower in Downtown
7 Pittsburgh. I'm very lucky that I get to work my job
8 and kind of align it with my life as a volunteer.

9 Munhall is two-and-a-half square miles
10 and we have four volunteer fire companies in our
11 community. Company Number 4 serves approximately
12 11,000 residents. We ran 341 calls last year, which is
13 about average for us. But ten years ago we probably
14 ran half that many.

15 This year we're on pace to beat our 2018
16 numbers. Our top five call types last year were
17 vehicle accident with injury, building fire,
18 unintentional alarm activations, gas leaks and smoke
19 scare or smell of smoke. So our people need to be
20 trained and ready to handle a lot of different things.

21 Target hazards for us in Munhall include
22 nursing homes, schools. We have research facilities
23 and an airport as well as both CSX and Norfolk Southern
24 lines. These are hazards both found in our community
25 and also in our mutual aid areas.

1 The biggest issue, hands down, for our
2 department is recruitment and retention and funding,
3 just like it is for everybody else. Our funding is
4 about 75 percent municipality-funded. We do get the
5 State grant and then the remainder we do ourselves
6 through fundraising.

7 Allegheny County, where I'm from, does
8 actually have a FireVEST Scholarship Program. This is
9 done through the Community College of Allegheny County.
10 It's a two-year program and it requires five years of
11 service to the fire department. That can be during the
12 time. It does not have to be added on at the end.

13 This program gives a full scholarship
14 for either an Associate's degree or a certificate
15 program. I'm familiar with this program because I,
16 myself, did benefit from the program. I got my degree
17 many years ago and wondered about going back to school
18 to kind of catch up and see what was going on these
19 days. But I didn't want to take away from someone who
20 truly needed the scholarship for an education.

21 However, when I heard through the Fire
22 Academy that the FireVEST Program was in danger of
23 ending because of lack of interest, I figured it was a
24 good opportunity to jump on the chance to get an
25 Associate's degree. And I did, in General Study. It

1 was a lot more different than when I went to school 20
2 plus years ago, but it was actually fun to go back and
3 challenge myself again. And I learned a lot.

4 In our fire department we do have people
5 that take advantage of the FireVEST. But in talking to
6 a lot of them, if given the option, they would rather
7 do a four-year program than have to start somewhere
8 with two years and then look somewhere else they can
9 go, see if the credits transfer, see what kind of
10 program that we could get there.

11 So I know that in my fire department,
12 talking to our firefighters, a four-year program would
13 definitely be something of interest to them. For us,
14 FireVEST is a better retention tool, not necessarily as
15 good a recruitment tool.

16 At Munhall we do a great job involving
17 kids in the community. The doors to the fire station
18 are always open. We're right there on Main Street.

19 Kids ride around on their bikes. They
20 can stop by. We show them the fire trucks. We love
21 being able to support the school, sporting events,
22 parades, pub ed, different events. We are a visible
23 presence in the community to the kids as they grow up.

24 The opportunity for us to get young
25 adults involved in the fire service through an offer of

1 tuition assistance within the State System is
2 fantastic.

3 I apologize. This next part that I have
4 written I misread the first time I wrote that - I read
5 that Bill. I have corrected that. But I do have that
6 the department would have a student firefighter for
7 four years, which they would not. They would have them
8 for five years afterward. And then they would stay in
9 the area after graduation, which is great because, as
10 has been said, you know, the big deal right now is due
11 to the debt.

12 A lot of kids are being steered away
13 from college. I have two young sons and people have
14 talked to them a lot about not going to school because
15 of the debt. One of them is an EMT. Something like
16 this would be great for them.

17 For the tuition assistance, for anyone
18 really is the fire service, though, I feel there should
19 be minimum requirements, including the entry-level
20 training or equivalent and a Firefighter I.

21 As an instructor, I teach around the
22 Commonwealth and talk about the need for training any
23 chance I get with anyone who will listen. I've spent a
24 lot of time speaking with firefighters and officers
25 about the different training tracks and opportunities

1 available, as well as certification. There is a lot of
2 interest. They're just looking for the support.

3 The tuition assistance would be a great
4 chance to help with both recruitment and retention, and
5 I urge you to consider it. Thank you.

6 MR. BRANT: I feel this IUP peer
7 pressure. So to start off, President Driscoll, I - my
8 degree is actually from St. Francis University, but my
9 continuing education was done here at IUP. I was here
10 in 1978 as part of the first municipal police officers
11 training class that you held and actually served as its
12 Vice President, so - yes.

13 To those of you who we met a few weeks
14 ago at the State Fire Academy at Lewistown, good to see
15 you again. Thanks for venturing out here into rural
16 Pennsylvania. My home's about 30 miles northeast of
17 here, so welcome.

18 To those of you who this is our first
19 meeting, good morning. My name's Jerry Brant, and I am
20 a member of the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania
21 Fire & Emergency Services Institute. I am also the
22 Second Assistant Chief of Patton Volunteer Fire Company
23 Number 1 of Patton Borough in Cambria County.

24 Three months ago I celebrated 50 years
25 in the volunteer fire service. I am a life member of

1 the Hope Fire Company of Northern Cambria, where I held
2 the office of Chief for 15 years. Last month I was
3 awarded the Leroy C. Focht, Sr. Memorial Award for
4 Outstanding Service to the Central District Firemen's
5 Association.

6 I'm also the founder of the Decoplan
7 Associates, which is a firm focused on planning,
8 consulting and grant writing for emergency services
9 agencies and municipal government. My business takes
10 me across the country, interacting with emergency
11 service providers.

12 Patton Fire Company provides a full
13 complement of fire and rescue services to two boroughs
14 and four townships in rural Northcentral Cambria
15 County. It is home to 7,500 year-round residents. We
16 cover 98.9 square miles from one station, utilizing 42
17 active firefighters to answer approximately 200 alarms
18 per year.

19 We operate an engine rescue, a tanker, a
20 tower and a Quick Attack. We are one of two
21 departments that provides coverage to the Prince
22 Gallitzin State Park, which now attracts over 1.8
23 million visitors annually.

24 When I joined the fire service in 1969,
25 the last thing on any department's agenda was

1 recruiting and retention. In fact, a few years after I
2 joined, my department closed its charter because we had
3 so many members.

4 The times were different then. The
5 local economy was booming. You could graduate one day
6 and have a job in the mines, the steel mills or on the
7 railroad the next day. There were no malls, no
8 iPhones, no iPads, and a tablet consisted of sheets of
9 paper that you wrote on.

10 Today the most important item on every
11 volunteer fire department's list is recruiting and
12 retention. Providing incentives to attract new
13 firefighters and to keep existing members has gained
14 prominence. From 2013 to 2017 my department was part
15 of a regional SAFER Grant that I wrote. For those who
16 aren't familiar with that, SAFER is a federal program
17 that provides funding for recruiting and retention and
18 also for hiring firefighters for career department.

19 Among the incentives included in that
20 grant was an educational benefit of \$10,000. To
21 qualify for the benefit the person had to be a member
22 of one of the 32 departments that were involved in the
23 grant. They had to have attended a PHEAA-eligible
24 institution, pass the course, pay for the course and be
25 Firefighter I certified.

1 My department recruited seven young
2 people during this period, who applied for and received
3 the \$10,000 educational benefit. I am happy to report
4 that, as of today, all seven are still members of a
5 volunteer fire department. Six have stayed with our
6 department, and one left the area but continues to
7 serve as a volunteer with the department in her new
8 community. One person also serves as an EMT and one is
9 a career firefighter.

10 Annually my department attends our
11 school district's Career Fair. The ability to provide
12 potential applicants with an educational benefit has
13 proven to be a powerful tool in attracting new
14 firefighters.

15 I would urge you to support and pass
16 legislation authorizing this benefit for first
17 responders. I would also urge you to include
18 Firefighter I certification as the benchmark for
19 qualifying for this program.

20 Years ago a highly successful
21 businessman once told me, no cost, no value. Our
22 program has proved that someone who invests their time
23 to get Firefighter I certified is not as likely to
24 leave the fire service once the incentive is over.

25 Thank you for this opportunity.

1 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you, ladies and
2 gentlemen. Before I open it up for comments, I do want
3 to follow up on something that Jason said, a couple
4 different things. Speaking on behalf of Chairman
5 Barrar, direct pay for EMS is one of his top issues.

6 We've tried to fix it legislatively.
7 The insurance industry has a pretty strong lobby and
8 actually watered down that. But we're definitely aware
9 of that issue.

10 And then you mentioned about a mini
11 pension for - for the first responders. I have a piece
12 of legislation that will be moving hopefully in the
13 coming weeks that allows relief funds to be used to
14 establish LOSAP Programs, Length of Service Aware
15 Programs.

16 My fire department is sitting on a lot
17 of relief funding, but I'm watching our numbers
18 dwindle. And I could certainly use that as a tool to
19 retain some of our current members. So hopefully
20 that's moving forward as well. So we're trying to
21 tackle some of the many issues that you've pointed to
22 and that the panel pointed to.

23 Do any of our colleagues have any
24 questions for this panel? Yes, Jen?

25 REPRESENTATIVE O'MARA: Thank you,

1 Chairman.

2 So I have more of a comment than a
3 question. First I want to commend our colleagues who
4 have put these Bills together and all of you for
5 joining us today. In addition to being on the
6 committee and serving as a co-chair of the Firefighters
7 Caucus with Frank, I founded the Student Debt Caucus in
8 the State House. Because in Pennsylvania we are
9 graduating students with an average of \$36,000 of
10 student loan debt, highest in the country.

11 And you mentioned, Tina, you know, in
12 the past - or I forget which one you mentioned, you
13 could volunteer and work and get this done. But
14 nowadays it would take 18-and-a-half years to pay
15 tuition if you worked a full-time job getting paid
16 minimum wage.

17 So things are changing. And so I just
18 want to commend all of you for advocating on this. I
19 think it's really important. I signed onto the Bill
20 this week. And I hope we can get this done, because I
21 think having a crisis of firefighters and first
22 responders is - this is a great way to solve two
23 problems that we're facing in Pennsylvania. So thank
24 you for taking the lead in this.

25 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Representative Ecker?

1 REPRESENTATIVE ECKER: Thank you.
2 Again, thanks ladies and gentlemen for being here.
3 Thanks for, you know, taking your time. I'm from the
4 other side of the state myself as well, so I appreciate
5 the opportunity to be here.

6 That being said, two things. Yesterday
7 we heard a lot about training standards and how we
8 don't have good training. We really don't have any
9 required training standards here in Pennsylvania for
10 fire service or - specifically fire service.

11 So do you think this piece of
12 legislation would help that in - or do they kind of
13 work, you know, against each other to some degree in
14 the sense that, you know, we require - we want to have
15 set standards for, you know, what it takes to go into a
16 burning building or whatnot? However, you know,
17 getting - which comes first, the chicken or the egg,
18 you know, kind of dilemma?

19 What are your thoughts on that?

20 MR. BRANT: I got the microphone, so
21 will start. I know that there's a lot - I shouldn't
22 say there's a lot, but I know in going across
23 Pennsylvania from time to time I run into resistance
24 about this idea of training and certification, and
25 we've got to do so much training.

1 Well, first of all, as you're all aware,
2 there really isn't any standard in the state that says
3 that you've got to be trained to this level. You know,
4 we are basically doing it because we know that we need
5 to be, you know, if we're going to continue to answer
6 the type of alarms that we do today.

7 And it's - you know, I come from a very
8 rural area as opposed to people in the urban and
9 suburban area, but I can tell you that we face the same
10 challenges. We may not have the same resources that
11 they have, but we face the same challenges. And as I
12 shared with some of you when we were down at Lewistown,
13 in March of 2013, my department went on a suicide car
14 bombing in rural Clearfield Township, Cambria County.

15 It wasn't in Harrisburg. It wasn't in
16 Pittsburgh. It wasn't in Philadelphia. You know,
17 someone decided to load their pickup truck up with
18 1,600 pounds of ammonium nitrate, drive it into another
19 person's house and detonate it. You better be trained.

20 I can't give a better story than that.
21 And I really think that it would make something like
22 this Tuition Assistance Bill so much easier if you just
23 said, you've got to be Firefighter I certified.
24 Because then they wouldn't have to get a note from
25 their mother and show that they did this and show that

1 they did that. It would simply be, here's my
2 certificate. I've got a number.

3 You can check that with the State Fire
4 Commissioner, because he's got a record of it. It
5 would, to me, simplify things.

6 REPRESENTATIVE ECKER: Just a quick
7 follow up there, speaking of Firefighter I. So you
8 know, one of the dilemmas with Firefighter I is that
9 you have to be 18, I think, to take that certification.

10 Do you see any benefit of lowering that
11 age, so that, you know, that way -? Let's face it,
12 these kids are making decisions in high school before
13 they turn 18. You know, we don't want to lose that
14 opportunity to let them take that course or at least,
15 you know, take some of that training, especially with
16 this tuition.

17 You know, if you're saying that's the
18 standard that we should set, which I don't know that I
19 disagree with that, you know, do you think there's a
20 benefit in reducing that age in Pennsylvania? Because
21 I believe other states have kind of reduced that age.

22 MR. BRANT: You know, as the old,
23 gray-haired guy sitting at this table, I joined when I
24 was 16. And we got, you know, a coat, boots and a
25 helmet. And the next day we could go inside of a

1 burning building.

2 And I mean, when I was in that 16, 17
3 age group, I mean, I was in, you know, some fires that
4 have stuck in my mind because of situations that
5 occurred there. So you know, yes, I could see lowering
6 it, because that would be the main issue. That fourth
7 module that they have to take involves a structure fire
8 class.

9 So if there's some way to address that
10 and still be within the Child Labor Laws, I don't see
11 anything wrong with it.

12 MS. COOK: Okay.

13 I will keep it quick. As far as
14 reducing age, as an instructor, I do teach a lot of the
15 basic classes. And you know, 18 is the age for a
16 structure burn. I know they can do it a little
17 different with the Vo-tech. I'm not sure where the
18 disconnect is there.

19 I can tell you as an instructor each -
20 dealing with 14, 15 and 16-year-olds in the classroom,
21 my opinion, it's not a very popular one, these young
22 men and women are still learning to be adults.

23 At 14 years of age, I don't like the
24 idea of a 14-year-old child being in a class like that
25 with people that are in their 20s and 30s. You know,

1 these kids are still learning to be kids. They're
2 allowed to be kids.

3 The - 16 years old, if we could get that
4 squared away, so we can do it as instructors and it
5 didn't happen at a Vo-tech, it would be very easy to
6 adapt, but it's not, you know, our call to make.

7 I can't agree with Jerry more about the
8 training. You know, the Commonwealth cannot dictate
9 the training that the fire departments have to do. So
10 I feel that a Bill like this that would require them to
11 get the basic training might lead us down that path.
12 Thank you.

13 MR. YAROSIK: I think Firefighter I is a
14 good start. I, for one, don't have it, because I have
15 a wife and kids and everything. So when I went
16 through, I did my four mods and there wasn't this push
17 for Firefighter I. So I've never gone and done it.

18 But you know, people coming through now,
19 they go through four mods and they can take Firefighter
20 I right after. And everything has been taught there.
21 So I think that's a good starting point.

22 And when you look at EMS, you know, we
23 don't let you respond if you're not an EMT or
24 paramedic. You can respond, but you need two people on
25 that ambulance by State Law that are certified, you

1 know.

2 And you don't need anybody certified on
3 a fire truck. You know, our departments don't allow
4 anyone to go interior that hasn't gone through Mod 4
5 and all that. But I think as far as like - I think the
6 older guys at my firehouse that are retirees that are
7 great pump operators, drivers, you know, they're - they
8 don't have Firefighter I, but they get the job done.

9 But when you look at it, they get the
10 job done better than I do, but they don't have student
11 loan debt either. So if you're looking at people in
12 the, you know, early 20s and - so I think Firefighter
13 is a good start.

14 MR. BRANT: Very quickly. As we've
15 talked before, the concept of a risk-based approach to
16 training could be an option in the future and what your
17 target hazards are in your community could - it would
18 require some definite changes.

19 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Representative Gabler
20 and Representative -.

21 REPRESENTATIVE GABLER: Thank you, Mr.
22 Chairman. I apologize. My voice is a little bit rough
23 here, so I wasn't going to talk much, but I really - I
24 did want to pipe up here.

25 Jason, I think that the comments that

1 you just made were very profound, because what I see
2 globally, statewide, pertaining to volunteer service is
3 we need the professionalization, we need the training,
4 but we can't do anything without people.

5 And one of the things I've seen - I'm
6 from DuBois. I represent Elk County. Our volunteer
7 fire department, which we have no paid department, all
8 volunteer, they're traveling 50, 60 miles one way to
9 get to a class that they could maybe do that two days
10 on a Saturday, Sunday. So they're driving a couple
11 hundred miles on a weekend before they have the
12 pleasure of doing 16 hours unpaid.

13 And then they get to do that for a few
14 dozen weekends throughout the year before they might be
15 able to finally finish up the Firefighter I.

16 So the question I kind of want to throw
17 out is, how do we balance the need for more training
18 with the need for more people when time is the precious
19 resource? Now, I think with - when you make it worth
20 somebody's while, as this legislation does - you're
21 giving student loan forgiveness, Firefighter I makes a
22 lot of sense. All of our departments would be better
23 off having more Firefighter I trained personnel.

24 But Jerry, I think this is what you were
25 going for when you were mentioning the risk-based

1 approach. Is there a way that we could balance this to
2 say that there are - there are more than just interior
3 firefighters in a fire department?

4 And Firefighter I is a great baseline to
5 get people ready to be an interior firefighter. But if
6 what you're dealing with are motor-vehicle accidents,
7 you need people that are going to be doing - working on
8 the fire grounds outside the building.

9 Are there other things that we can look
10 at?

11 The thing that I find so frustrating is
12 we have Firefighter I and then anybody else is just not
13 Firefighter I.

14 Is there a second training that we could
15 conceive of that is short of Firefighter I, but is
16 still worth something? And could we give that a name
17 and provide that as a way to bring people into our fire
18 departments so that we're not forcing them to eat the
19 whole apple and the core in one bite?

20 And I'm going to rest my voice and be
21 quiet after that. Thank you.

22 MR. YAROSIK: Absolutely. And that's
23 one of those things that I've been thinking about since
24 we talked about that. And we need to get a bunch of
25 smart people in the room and discuss that exactly. I

1 agree with that.

2 MR. BRANT: Really two comments. I
3 mean, number one, I applaud everything that you're
4 trying to do, but please don't try and get a
5 one-size-fits-all solution to everything in
6 Pennsylvania, because, you know, in Pennsylvania we're
7 actually four states.

8 You know, you've got the Philadelphia,
9 Pittsburgh, Erie, Scranton. You've got the State
10 College, the Washington, PA, suburban areas. Then
11 you've got the small boroughs and townships. And then
12 you've got places out in your area, Representative,
13 where the next fire company is 25 miles away.

14 And to a lot of the issues that we talk
15 about you just can't have one solution that fits
16 everybody. As far as what you were mentioning, as far
17 as other categories, I'm a hundred percent in favor of
18 that.

19 Another thing that departments
20 desperately need is administrative help. This isn't
21 just about putting the wet stuff on the red stuff
22 anymore. These are departments that are going out and
23 borrowing \$500,000 or \$600,000 for a vehicle. And if
24 they have no idea on how they go about finding out
25 what's the best deal, where to go, so they don't

1 themselves in debt -. We have departments every week
2 that you see that are closing up because they're
3 running out of, you know, financial resources.

4 I would like to see, you know, besides
5 Firefighter I, maybe something that's called
6 Administrative Leadership I. And you know, maybe we've
7 got people that just want to come out and help direct
8 traffic or something. Maybe we - maybe a category
9 called Associate Firefighter or something like that.
10 But yeah, definitely I think we need something else.

11 CHAIRMAN FARRY: If I can just follow up
12 before we go to Representative Rigby. I agree a
13 hundred percent with what you're saying. I did
14 recruiting in a 55 and older community in my district.
15 I was targeting two retired Philly firefighters. I
16 didn't get those guys, but I actually got an
17 accountant, a retired account from Exxon Mobil, who
18 became our Treasurer for about ten years.

19 As we all know, if you run a firehouse,
20 if you don't have somebody from the outside coming in
21 that solely wants to help you do your books, one of
22 your folks has to do the books. And they're already
23 stressed and strained from call volume training and
24 everything else.

25 So I think that's dead on. And I think

1 what Representative Gabler brought up is something that
2 warrants further discussion.

3 Representative Rigby?

4 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: Thank you,
5 Chairman.

6 A question with the volunteers. I,
7 myself, started as a junior firefighter. And I spent a
8 year before I could do anything, other than some
9 in-house training. Which is why I think it would be
10 crucial if we could allow - even if we start at 16,
11 allow these gentlemen and these ladies to get their
12 Firefighter I.

13 And I want your take on it, maybe as a
14 ride-along, not allow them into the fire grounds, into
15 the fire, the active fire, but having their Firefighter
16 1, they go on the equipment. And at least be on the
17 ground, so they could help with cleanup or whatever
18 other assistance is needed for when they do turn 18
19 we're not waiting for that annual or semiannual class
20 to get them in and get that certification.

21 I think it's going to better prepare
22 them. It would have certainly helped me.

23 We got a very active department. Ended
24 up with two of our Chiefs were State instructors, so we
25 did a lot inhouse. But there's a lot of departments

1 that don't. And for those departments, I think if we
2 can open that door for the junior firefighters at 16,
3 at least get them that certification and get them a
4 little exposure. Then when they do turn 18, they're
5 ready to go, we don't have that training period.

6 And I think it will spike that interest,
7 as it spiked mine. And you'll see that commitment of
8 these folks who will come onboard and stay.

9 So I just wonder what your thoughts are.
10 Thank you.

11 MR. BRANT: Real short comment. I a
12 hundred percent agree with you, Representative Rigby.
13 I started out as a junior. My department that I
14 currently run with has a cadet program that starts at
15 14. That's the time to get these young people.

16 And you know, with home situations being
17 what they are today, I think it helps them to develop
18 into better young ladies and young men.

19 MS. COOK: I've had the opportunity to
20 belong to a couple of different fire departments, fire
21 departments both that have junior programs and fire
22 departments that won't accept anyone under the age of
23 18.

24 I know there are some great fire
25 departments on the eastern side of the state, some

1 great trained juniors. We need to have a good program
2 in place.

3 You know, you need to be able to give
4 these kids something to do and it's not go wash the
5 trucks or rearrange that shelf. But you still need to
6 fall within the Labor & Industry for the youngsters.

7 So I agree with you a hundred percent.
8 Get them in there, get them doing that stuff, but
9 recognizing that you still have to do that within some
10 parameters. I couldn't agree more.

11 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Any other questions?

12 All right. Thank you very much. We
13 appreciate your testimony.

14 Dr. Driscoll, if it's okay with you, we
15 have somebody that just popped in. So we're going to
16 go a little out of order here.

17 We have a representative from the
18 Pennsylvania State Fire Commissioner's Office, Mark
19 Wineland and he said the State Fire Commissioner had
20 some other commitments.

21 You're not on our agenda, but we
22 certainly want to hear the feedback. And considering
23 we just talked a lot about training, by the way, I'm
24 sure you have a few comments on that.

25 So sir, the floor is yours.

1 MR. WINELAND: First off, I'd like to
2 apologize for the Commissioner. He had five
3 commitments and three people to send to do it, so I got
4 tasked with coming here to speak with you today.

5 He sent me a couple points to make to
6 this committee. First off, he is in support of what
7 you're trying to do with this legislation. He thinks
8 it is a very good idea.

9 His concept is to make training and
10 certification more accessible. Not easier, just easier
11 to get, which goes along with what you're saying about
12 having to travel long distances to get the training and
13 stuff, you know, that we're not requiring but we're
14 encouraging people to get.

15 Obviously, the SRR6 recommendations come
16 back with a lot of these things in it as far as what
17 we're trying to do.

18 The Fireworks Tax that came in is going
19 to allow us to provide some online training, which is
20 hopefully going to allow us to put a position in one of
21 the academies to provide some online training as a step
22 towards providing that easy access of the training, so
23 maybe people aren't going for all those hours. Some of
24 the initial training they can get they can do at home
25 and then just have to go out and do the hands-on

1 training under formal conditions.

2 One thing we looked at and heard it
3 discussed was the Firemen's Relief. Maybe looking at
4 realigning what the Firemen's Relief is capable of
5 doing, what they're allowed to pay out of it to provide
6 some more training opportunities, maybe to extend some
7 more expenses to people to be able to get that
8 formalized training.

9 Last year's budget also allowed us to
10 put on, in the future, a recruitment and retention
11 person out of the Office of the State Fire
12 Commissioner. We don't know what that's going to look
13 like yet as far as what the position is going to entail
14 as far as going out into the Commonwealth and getting
15 these people, but the Commissioner is looking at it
16 from two different points.

17 Recruitment and retention is always said
18 together, but that's not necessarily a good thing. We
19 can recruit people. We can bring them in. We can
20 train them. And after we train them and they do their
21 four years of - get their college degree, they leave.

22 And they leave the state to go get a job
23 someplace else. We did the work. We trained them. We
24 got them prepared. We set them up and then they leave
25 for someplace else and they reap the benefits of what

1 we were able to put in place. So recruitment is one
2 aspect. Retention is another. So how to keep those
3 people here - so some of the ideas of reimbursement of
4 small pensions towards these people is another thing
5 that he's very much in support of and would like to
6 hear more about for - you know, out of the office.

7 He is right in line with everybody here.
8 He agrees with the training, the certifications. He is
9 more than willing to listen and talk with people, but
10 he just wanted to convey to you as a committee that he
11 is 100 percent in support of what's trying to be
12 accomplished.

13 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Great. Thank you very
14 much.

15 Any questions from any members?

16 Okay. Thank you. And thank you for
17 taking the time to be here. We appreciate it.

18 MR. WINELAND: Thank you very much.

19 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Dr. Driscoll, you're
20 up, the President of IUP. So thank you for welcoming
21 us into your area.

22 Ironically, I don't know if you're aware
23 of this, but we have a Mike Driscoll who's a State
24 Representative out of Philadelphia.

25 DR. DRISCOLL: I have met Representative

1 Driscoll, because our staffs colluded, surprised both
2 of us with some discussion about our heritage.

3 CHAIRMAN FARRY: I believe he has a
4 Doctorate, but I don't believe it's the kind of
5 Doctorate you have, so - but we'll turn the floor over
6 to you. Thank you for being here, sir.

7 DR. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

8 Well, thank you, Chair Farry and Chair
9 Sainato, honorable members of the committee and
10 Representative Struzzi, Representative Dush. It's a
11 pleasure to be able to talk to you today on behalf of
12 the State System of Higher Education, Chancellor
13 Greenstein, my colleague Presidents and on behalf of
14 IUP. It's great to be able to do that in our
15 community. So thank you.

16 I'm here today for two reasons. The
17 first is, as President of Indiana University of
18 Pennsylvania, I care deeply for the students who attend
19 my university. And certainly as an educator I am
20 always interested in advocating for any measure that
21 will make obtaining a university education financially
22 easier for Pennsylvanians.

23 But I am also a resident of a rural
24 county, this county, which relies on volunteers to
25 staff our fire departments. Rural Pennsylvania has a

1 problem and I know that comes as no surprise to you.

2 So if you'll indulge me as a professor,
3 let's look at some statistics here. At the national
4 level, of the nation's 29,819 fire departments, 65
5 percent are all volunteer and another 18 percent are
6 mostly volunteer. And nationally, the number of men
7 and women who volunteer to risk their lives as first
8 responders has dropped by 200,000, from 884,600 in 1983
9 to 682,600 in 2017.

10 Of those, in that same time period the
11 number of volunteers who were under the age of 30
12 dropped by 42,104.

13 And here are statistics that hit closer
14 to home. In 2018, Government Technology Magazine
15 reported that 90 percent of Pennsylvania's fire
16 departments were volunteer. And in 40 years the number
17 of volunteers has dropped from around 300,000 to just
18 38,000.

19 I want to emphasize that I deeply
20 appreciate those who face danger and volunteer. They
21 train and plan often. They're on top of all of the
22 risks that you might typically find in rural areas,
23 risks that have increased in recent years. They do so
24 on their own time, because they value their
25 communities, the comradery they experience and the

1 feeling that the work they do is appreciated.

2 The opioid epidemic is rampant in rural
3 areas, as much a problem in our towns and communities
4 as it is in the big cities. And it has brought with it
5 new risks to our first responders.

6 Meanwhile, councils of governments,
7 Chambers of Commerce and other organizations are doing
8 their best to attract new industry to Pennsylvania.
9 And with industry comes new machinery, fuels, textiles
10 and more, all to benefit Pennsylvania's economy, but
11 they present possible danger as well.

12 We all know that even with the best laid
13 safety and hazmat plans, accidents happen. Rural
14 communities and their businesses depend on volunteers
15 to respond, to keep our residents safe, to protect
16 property and to protect the environment. In fact, the
17 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania counts on volunteer first
18 responders to protect its own property.

19 IUP's physical plant is owned by the
20 Commonwealth. When we built our last academic
21 building, we consulted with the Indiana Fire
22 Association to make sure the building didn't exceed the
23 height of the company's aerial bucket truck. We store
24 chemicals for our scientists to use in labs and we
25 house thousands of students on campus overnight. On a

1 working day we could have as many as 13,000 or so
2 people going about their business.

3 And in the event of an emergency, we
4 count on those volunteers to come with one simple phone
5 call to 911 day or night to do what's necessary.

6 PennDOT's District 10 complex is just
7 down the street. The State Police barracks is about a
8 mile away. And on the other side of town SCI-Pine
9 Grove houses about a thousand inmates and has 19
10 operational structures.

11 I've seen Indiana County's volunteer
12 fire companies work very well together through mutual
13 aid agreements. Indiana County covers 834 square
14 miles. We have 27 volunteer departments, 1 HAZMAT team
15 and 1 search and rescue unit. Some of those
16 departments are quite small, but they have, all of
17 them, an incredible amount of responsibility.

18 So while volunteer fire companies train,
19 plan for disasters and respond when called upon, they
20 also must recruit new members and raise their own funds
21 to purchase new equipment. Yes, they do receive annual
22 grants from the Commonwealth, but those grants don't
23 begin to cover all expenses. Fish dinners and
24 spaghetti dinners and cash bashes and Saturday
25 breakfasts abound in rural counties, all to benefit the

1 purchase of new equipment.

2 A department in the southern part of
3 Indiana County recently held a drag queen bingo event
4 with volunteers dressed for the part. On the surface
5 that might seem amusing and fun, and I'm sure it is,
6 but think about how creative these volunteers must be
7 when pancakes and pierogies no longer pay the bills.
8 Their efforts are commendable and constant. All of
9 this is being done with fewer volunteers.

10 Imagine the burden that's already been
11 mentioned of getting up every weekend to train and then
12 fundraise and also be on call seven days a week, to
13 drop whatever you are doing to respond to the 911 call.
14 If we must depend on volunteers, then we need to find a
15 way to attract more. But more important, we owe the
16 volunteers more in recognition of the service they give
17 us.

18 I serve on the Board of the Center for
19 Rural Pennsylvania. One of the center's studies
20 revealed that among a wide range of options to
21 incentivize firefighting, volunteers counted college
22 tuition assistance for themselves, for their dependents
23 among their top four choices. In fact, 82 percent said
24 it would have attracted them to initially volunteer.
25 Eighty-one (81) percent said it would inspire them to

1 become more active. And 89 percent said it would
2 compel them to continue serving.

3 I see evidence of this at my own
4 university. Several years ago five of our county's
5 fire departments worked together to earn a FEMA SAFER
6 Grant - Chief Brant I think mentioned that in his
7 remarks - to create a scholarship for volunteer
8 firefighters to attend IUP.

9 SAFER stands for Staffing for Adequate
10 Fire and Emergency Response. Those five departments
11 placed the grant in the hands of our foundation to
12 manage. And our Financial Aid Office awards the
13 scholarships. It was a great effort and it shows the
14 value they place on offering an educational experience
15 to their volunteers.

16 Unfortunately, the amount of the grant
17 generates only between \$250 and \$700 per student,
18 depending on the number of qualifying applicants each
19 year.

20 If you know anything about college
21 expenses, we know that \$700 doesn't do much at any
22 campus in America, even at the relatively moderate cost
23 of attending State System universities in Pennsylvania.

24 At IUP we've had a great relationship
25 with the Indiana Fire Association and we do what we can

1 to financially support it as well as Punxsutawney's
2 fire department, because of our presence there.

3 In fact, over the years we have imbedded
4 students who also are volunteer firefighters in this
5 station. The students receive free housing in return
6 for being members of the company's team and taking care
7 of the needs of the station. And I've been able to
8 meet many of them. They've been bright and
9 enthusiastic human beings and they deserve recognition
10 for their service to their communities.

11 Digressing slightly from my written
12 testimony, I'd point out that early in my time here,
13 about six years ago, I was able to tour this fire
14 station and meet with some of those students, see where
15 they were sleeping and studying. And also, with
16 appropriate training, I did my first and probably only
17 slide down the fire pole upstairs.

18 I tried to capture all the photos that
19 came from that experience, but one did appear in the
20 Indiana Gazette, taken, I believe, by a member of the
21 company. I believe she also serves as one of the
22 photographers for the Indiana Gazette. So you can find
23 the evidence. And I've received a wonderful meal of
24 firehouse chili right in this very room as part of that
25 tour.

1 But back to my testimony. If our goal
2 is to find a way to recruit more volunteer
3 firefighters, and if those surveyed have said that
4 tuition assistance, loan forgiveness, the other sorts
5 of support would serve as an incentive to become a
6 volunteer and continue to serve, then it seems apparent
7 that amending Title 35 is the right thing to do.

8 I would also offer a couple of words of
9 caution and a point of information, just to get into
10 the details a little bit. As you well know, members of
11 the Pennsylvania National Guard have access to a
12 similar tuition benefit. It's come up already I think
13 in the discussion today.

14 Last year at IUP we had 134 National
15 Guard members on our campus, and the program did not
16 meet the tuition expenses of all of them. We at IUP
17 had to fill in the gap for those students of about
18 \$53,000.

19 Some institutions will be unable to do
20 that and some schools supplement a larger gap than
21 others. It's important to have some additional
22 discussions about these details across the State System
23 and with others to not cause unintended disparities in
24 access to the incentive.

25 We don't all charge the same tuition.

1 We don't all have the same resource base.

2 I would also mention - the question came
3 up in earlier discussion about we have some volunteer
4 firefighters in the county who are also serving in the
5 National Guard and how would those two programs
6 interact. And that may be worth considering, again, in
7 the details of the leads of the legislation in front of
8 you.

9 Just to be very clear, it's a very
10 important investment and we at the State System and I
11 personally in my role applaud you for considering this.
12 Let's make sure, as I know you're trying to do, it's a
13 real investment and not just shifting funds from other
14 opportunities or either rewarding our first responders
15 or for helping students attend college in this
16 Commonwealth.

17 With all that said, I come back to the
18 viewpoint that I support Representative Sainato's House
19 Bill 1786 and Representative Struzzi's House Bill 1773
20 that would amend Title 35. And I urge you to do the
21 same.

22 Thank you again for the opportunity to
23 be with you today.

24 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you.

25 Do we have any questions? Chairman

1 Sainato?

2 CHAIRMAN SAINATO: Thank you.

3 Dr. Driscoll, thank you for your
4 testimony. You do have a very beautiful campus.

5 DR. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

6 CHAIRMAN SAINATO: And I think it's very
7 important. I believe there's a question I took in my
8 notes when you were saying that the Guard doesn't cover
9 all the costs.

10 What does it not cover?

11 DR. DRISCOLL: The key fundamental issue
12 there is that it covers a base tuition rate set across
13 the State System. And because we don't all charge the
14 same tuition rate, some of us would charge more, some
15 less, depending on the circumstance, we end up with a
16 shortfall.

17 So flexibility related to the actual
18 institution the student is attending versus a single
19 way across, in this case, the entire State System,
20 would resolve that issue. And certainly we've worked
21 with PHEAA and others to try to resolve that. But
22 that's the fundamental issue. And I would expect that
23 as we go forward into the future and each of the 14
24 State Systems are working to maximize their impact
25 within their own local circumstances, we'll see more

1 differential in terms of some of the tuition charges.
2 And so that's the fundamental issue, though. It's one
3 size. It's not the same price across the -.

4 CHAIRMAN SAINATO: All right.

5 Thank you, Dr. Driscoll. That's why I
6 think that's important in these types of hearings.
7 You're giving us information that sometimes we don't
8 realize and that's important. Sometimes we may be able
9 to help address it legislatively or work with the whole
10 system.

11 DR. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

12 CHAIRMAN SAINATO: Thank you.

13 MR. O'LEARY: If I could add to that,
14 Mr. Chairman? Back in 1997, I believe, when we created
15 the National Guard Educational Program - the one we
16 just did was for spouses, I think, and children. But
17 when we did the original Bill, at that time, for
18 instance the State System, their tuition was the same.
19 It was all one rate.

20 Now, throughout time, college is
21 changing. A lot of the universities went to per-credit
22 hour. And we've been working with Patsy on that. We
23 tried the last time around. There's a few - maybe a
24 few tweaks we do have to make just for the law there.

25 But the universities have been gracious

1 and working with us, you know, filling in that
2 shortfall, but we are working -.

3 DR. DRISCOLL: Well, I appreciate that.
4 Thank you for supporting that work. And I know that
5 the work is going on with the State System and, again,
6 I point to PHEAA as a partner in that. So thank you
7 for sharing that.

8 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you, Doctor. I
9 appreciate it very much.

10 Our next panel - sorry, hold on.

11 REPRESENTATIVE O'NEAL: Sorry to come in
12 late. I apologize.

13 Dr. Driscoll, I really have one question
14 for you and then more of a question for Representative
15 Struzzi and then eventually Rick. The question really
16 is around the financial aspect. So in your example
17 right now, what is tuition at IUP?

18 DR. DRISCOLL: Depending on, again, the
19 exact program a student is in, we're running about -
20 and let me - let me do it this way. The total cost of
21 attendance is probably the right number to talk about.
22 And so that is running on the order of about 28,000 a
23 year for a typical student.

24 And I say it that way because I think
25 that's the important number. Tuition is somewhere in

1 the order of half or a little less than half of the
2 total cost of attendance. But the Bill that a student
3 receives, and when we talk about student debt, is
4 related to that total cost of attendance.

5 REPRESENTATIVE O'NEAL: Right. Thank
6 you.

7 And then the follow up to that is
8 really, have we -. And Representative Struzzi, I'm not
9 sure if you have the answer to this or not, but have we
10 - have we developed any analysis as to what we think
11 this is going to cost on an annual basis? Do we have
12 any estimates?

13 And ultimately, how will we fund this?
14 Would it be funded similar to the National Guard
15 Program, where you have a trust fund that's drawn from
16 and it gets capped if the money gets used or things
17 along those lines?

18 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Yes,
19 essentially I believe it is structured the same way
20 related to funding.

21 And I do want to clarify something in
22 response to Representative James's question during my
23 testimony, that this is actually - my Bill is not loan
24 forgiveness, but it's more of a deferred payment, where
25 the student actually signs a promissory note agreeing

1 that if they don't serve those five years they're on
2 the hook for those costs. So they don't essentially
3 pay upfront. So I wanted to make sure that that was
4 clear.

5 But I do think that - I believe it's in
6 the Bill that - where the funds would be - would be
7 established. And it is a designated fund for the
8 program. I don't know exactly what - if there's a cap
9 on that. I don't think we've discussed that yet, but -
10 does someone else want -?

11 REPRESENTATIVE O'LEARY: So Sean or
12 Rick, does that mean that essentially what it means -
13 you know, similar to the National Guard process?

14 MR. HARRIS: That's true.

15 REPRESENTATIVE O'LEARY: So basically
16 you'd be capped to the number of participants per year
17 based on the money allocated?

18 MR. HARRIS: Correct. You're right.
19 The money would come from the General Fund, that the
20 General Assembly would have to provide, just like we do
21 with regard to education.

22 REPRESENTATIVE O'LEARY: Okay.

23 So just one last clarification, just so
24 that I'm clear. Please bear with me a second. So
25 essentially what this Bill would do is authorize the

1 program, but it would still require appropriation?

2 MR. HARRIS: Correct.

3 REPRESENTATIVE O'LEARY: Thank you.

4 CHAIRMAN FARRY: All right.

5 Thank you again.

6 Our next first responder panel is Bill
7 Simmons, President of the Indiana Fire Association;
8 Jody Rainey, Fire Chief of Cherryhill Township Fire
9 Company and Principal at Homer-Center High School; from
10 the Blairsville Fire Company, Chief George Burkley; and
11 First Vice President Albert Dettorre.

12 Please come forward, gentlemen. And
13 from the Black Lick Volunteer Fire Company, 2nd
14 Assistant Chief Daniel Shacreaw. Sorry if I butchered
15 any names.

16 And gentlemen, once you're seated,
17 whoever wants to start, please go ahead. Again, just
18 make sure the mic is centered in front of you as you're
19 speaking.

20 MR. SIMMONS: Very good. Thank you.

21 Yes, my name is Bill Simmons and I'm
22 President of the Indiana Fire Association. I joined
23 the department in 1979. Whenever I joined at that
24 time, Pennsylvania did have 300,000 volunteer firemen
25 in the state and today we have 38,000. So that's quite

1 a change over those years. And of course, I think 90
2 percent of the fires are still put out by volunteers.

3 We kept talking about different things
4 that entice people to join. And we've talked a lot
5 about students, but I'd like to also talk about what's
6 required from a training point of view. And what we've
7 always had in years past when I got in was, you had to
8 get 40 hours of training in your first year, which you
9 were on probation.

10 Today that number has gone up to 200
11 hours. So I've talked to many, many people in the past
12 years as to whether or not they would be interested in
13 joining our department. And as soon as you say 200
14 hours, they say, I can't do that.

15 So I think some of the things that came
16 out today about maybe breaking down different
17 responsibilities within a fire company is really a good
18 idea, because you can bring somebody in and maybe focus
19 on one part of it and then kind of develop as you go.

20 The student program has been really good
21 for us because, you know, even though we're a volunteer
22 organization, we respond to 700 calls per year. And
23 that's a lot for a volunteer organization.

24 For years and years we always had 63
25 members. I waited a year before I even got in, because

1 you had to wait until somebody got out or retired.
2 Today we have 43 members of a charter of 84. But the
3 point is that we can't keep those members going.

4 You're in a building that we created and
5 opened in 2006 that has a live-in program. We have
6 seven IUP students that live here now and they do a
7 wonderful job filling that gap of not having the full
8 ranks that we've had in the past.

9 And Dr. Driscoll reminded me of
10 something. You know, we had to go out to the community
11 to raise money to build this building, along with the
12 municipalities that support us. And one of the fellows
13 that I approached said, well, I would like to pay for a
14 fire pole, because every firehouse should have a fire
15 pole.

16 The only stipulation is, I need to be
17 the first person to go down. And so we got the fire
18 pole. And I took him upstairs and I said, okay, you're
19 on. And he looked down and he said, I'm not going down
20 that damn pole. So anyway, he meant well by it.

21 But that administrative part of it that
22 you talked about is very important. And you know, the
23 student thing is great and I'm not saying it isn't.
24 But what happens is, it's like a revolving door,
25 because you get them in and what we do here is it

1 requires that you belong to your hometown fire company.

2 So they come with training and they're
3 on probation, so to speak, for a year before they have
4 the opportunity to be in the live-in program. But
5 then, you know, three years go by and then they
6 graduate.

7 And we've had - since 2006, we've had 40
8 live-in people here, 40 live-in people. How many are
9 in Indiana today? One. I want you to think about that
10 for a while.

11 It's not just - now, yes, granted that,
12 you know, they go on and they get Firefighter I, which
13 everybody seems to be in favor of, but then they say,
14 geez, I want to go on and get paid for this. And so a
15 lot of them go on to paid fire companies.

16 I focus on volunteer fire companies.
17 The volunteer people, how do we keep them here? We
18 don't have the jobs. Safety Science is a very strong
19 curriculum here at IUP, and it ties right into their
20 curriculum that they come here and kind of, you know,
21 learn firefighting and experience things. But then
22 they're gone. And so we don't have the neighborhood
23 guys like myself.

24 When I joined, I had two children. If
25 they'd have told me I had to have 200 hours, I'd say,

1 well, I can't do that. There's no way I can fit that
2 in. So we've got to come up with a way to keep
3 enticing the actual people, population, that will stay
4 here and be the nucleus of volunteer organizations or
5 we will lose that.

6 And again, I think the idea with the
7 students is great. Obviously, we wouldn't have built
8 this building if we didn't think so. And it has worked
9 out. Rustic Lodge is just about a mile from here, and
10 there was a fire in an apartment building behind it.
11 And the guys were, it was like five o'clock in the
12 morning, and they were able to get up and get there in
13 probably two minutes and pull a guy out of bed and save
14 his life.

15 A volunteer getting out of bed, getting
16 dressed, going to the hall, could have never done that.
17 And that was a big deal to obviously the guy they
18 saved, but to the people that got to experience that,
19 it was a big deal, too.

20 So a lot of great stories. Students
21 tell me that it jumps right off their résumé whenever
22 they say, oh, geez, you fought a fire at the home where
23 you - you know, the town where you went to school.
24 That helped a lot for people to get jobs.

25 But they're not getting jobs here.

1 That's something that I think we need to look at. And
2 again, I'm a hundred percent for everything that we can
3 do for students.

4 By living here - when Dr. Driscoll
5 mentioned \$28,000 a year, almost half of that
6 represents housing. So think about what we're saving
7 families by them living here for free. I had a woman
8 call me and she said my son would have never been able
9 to finish, because we didn't have the money. But
10 because he was able to stay here, they finished.

11 All good stories. But you know, we got
12 to keep going back to the communities, to the
13 neighborhoods and figure out how we're going to keep -
14 entice the population itself.

15 Now, one thing, we did create a Length
16 of Service Award Program. It's called LOSAP. We
17 talked about it a little bit. And we started putting
18 money aside on our own and then we were involved in the
19 SAFER Grant and worked with FEMA to come up with some
20 guidelines as to how it could support LOSAP. And we
21 were able to get an injection of funds from that SAFER
22 Grant to allow our LOSAP Program to be what it is
23 today.

24 And it does help with the people that
25 live in the neighborhood, because they say, hey, you

1 know, when I get to be 65, I would have a stipend that
2 I could get. It's not a whole lot of money, but it's
3 something that you work toward. You have so many good
4 years.

5 And we track everybody's good years, so
6 yeah, then you're rewarded for that. That helps with
7 retention. I still think we need to come up with some
8 ideas as to how to keep - or how to entice folks that
9 live in the town to participate. That's why I would
10 probably say to throw out Firefighter I to somebody
11 right off the bat is probably going to an extreme.

12 When I got in you had to be 21 and when
13 you were 60 you had to retire. We obviously lowered
14 that to 18 whenever we got our student programming, but
15 things are different today. Civic-minded - the whole
16 idea of that is different than it was before.

17 But I appreciate your time. Yes, we did
18 create a scholarship from the SAFER Grant for IUP and
19 put \$50,000 into a plan that came from that grant. It
20 helps with tuition, too, but I think the live-in
21 program has been our biggest thing to have right now.

22 So thank you. Appreciate it.

23 MR. BURKLEY: I'm George Burkley, Fire
24 Chief, Blairsville Fire Department. I joined the
25 department in 1989. I've been Chief for 13 years.

1 Whenever I came into the fire service,
2 at that time we had probably a 58, 59-man roster. Now
3 we're down to probably right around 35 members. And
4 they range in age from probably 21, 22 years old to 75,
5 76 year old.

6 You know, it's just - something that
7 occurred with what Bill said here, it's the - to keep
8 the people in. We've had people come in. We've
9 trained them and maybe six months, a year after, for
10 whatever reason, work, whatever, they leave the area,
11 so - but I just want to say as far as anything that can
12 be done, I think it's a good start.

13 Representative Struzzi, thank you for
14 taking this on and the other Representatives here. But
15 you know, jus like I said, it's a good place to start.
16 And Al's my Vice President. He's going to - of the
17 department, he's going to touch on some other things.

18 So Al, you have the floor.

19 MR. DETTORRE: Thanks, Turk. And I'm
20 going to be a lot shorter in my delivery here because a
21 lot of these things have already been mentioned.
22 There's no sense beating it into the ground.

23 I've been a member of the Blairsville
24 Fire Department for 43 years. I'm still a completely
25 active, full-time member. I also - everybody touches

1 on IUP. Everything that's good that's happened in my
2 life started at IUP, from the football end of it to the
3 academic end to my career as an educator, as a coach,
4 my family.

5 Everything started there. And those are
6 the most important things to me.

7 I think the second most important thing
8 and decision I made was becoming a volunteer fireman.
9 And that happened in 1977. My first call ever was the
10 Johnstown Flood recovery. It left a mark on me that
11 has never left. And it's something that we try to
12 instill all the time.

13 Our job primarily is to save life and
14 prevent property damage, but it's basically getting
15 somebody's loved one out of a position that they don't
16 want them to be in. I've always lived by that.

17 I love the comradery. I never really
18 thought of it anymore as an economic gain. I mean,
19 Turk and I and probably a lot of these guys here grew
20 up in a generation and a time where the greatest
21 generation passed on a lot of wisdom. John F. Kennedy
22 taught us to not look for what our government can do
23 for us, but what we can do for our government, our
24 community, our neighbor. And growing up in that
25 atmosphere, you've just kind of always lived by it,

1 whether it was becoming a Little League umpire some
2 day, and I did that, and still do, because somebody did
3 it so I could play.

4 I've kind of always lived by those
5 things. But I do fully understand because I saw our
6 ranks dwindling.

7 Unlike George, when I joined, there was
8 a waiting list. We had 64 men in our charter. I had
9 to wait to get in. I was 23. I had to wait about a
10 year. And when I got asked it was just, yeah, I want
11 to do that.

12 But the training, everything has changed
13 so much. I went to my first structure fire knowing
14 zero, pretty much zero, other than you can get hurt.
15 And we did have masks on, but a lot of our guys didn't
16 wear them. All of that has changed, all of that, for
17 the better.

18 I think we have some interesting
19 statistics. And I started to look into this when I saw
20 the numbers going down. And what a lot of people don't
21 realize, the average firefighter provides - and again,
22 an active fireman - his community with about \$18,000
23 worth of benefit a year. So our department, with
24 30-some - 30-plus members, mid 30s, Blairsville Borough
25 could not handle that, that debt. Nationally, it's

1 about \$140 billion a year that volunteer firefighters
2 provide in service.

3 I think one of the biggest things that
4 we have to look at - and believe me, I'm in favor of
5 anything that we can do to enhance our membership.
6 Jobs are always an issue, especially sustainable jobs
7 to keep people in the area. Everybody talks about
8 well, they're trained and leave.

9 We need things to keep them here, to
10 keep them employed. The more employees we have staying
11 here - and again, it's not strictly a blue collar type
12 situation, but many of these guys are blue collar.

13 You know, one of the greatest things
14 about being a volunteer fireman, and I can only speak
15 for like Black Lick or Blairsville, because I'm most
16 affiliated with them, it takes all kinds of people to
17 do this, all kinds of thinkers, all kinds of trades,
18 skills, et cetera. And I enjoy so much of that because
19 everybody has a role. We may not always agree every
20 day on everything, but when it comes down to getting a
21 job done, they get it done.

22 So tuition reimbursement, in principle,
23 certainly I agree with that. But if I, as a - if I was
24 35 years old with young children, I'd be looking at
25 maybe something that can help me put them through

1 school, not so much me. I'm done with school. I mean,
2 I put two children, one through Slippery Rock and one
3 through Duquesne. So you can figure out the costs
4 there. I'm sure you've all dealt with that. It's
5 pretty substantial.

6 But something that would have helped
7 them - although, like I said, I'm so foreign to this.
8 This volunteering has always been - like a lot of these
9 guys, it's been part of this. But that's not the way
10 today. I realize that. You have couples that work -
11 one works nightshift, one works dayshift. It'd be kind
12 of hard to be a volunteer fireman. So we need a way to
13 look at that.

14 Perhaps - and I just put down some of
15 these bullets and suggestions - some kind of aid or
16 help with our state and local taxes, something perhaps
17 with a vehicle registration. And again, all these
18 things are contingent upon you have to put the time in.
19 You don't just show up and say, I'm on the list, I get
20 all this. I'm talking about - and this has to be
21 thought out and discussed, too. Years, talking years
22 of involvement.

23 We certainly can use reimbursement for
24 training hours. That might be an incentive, because
25 you can put a lot of hours in. You can put a couple

1 hundred hours. Like I said, I joined with that 40-hour
2 cap. That's all you needed. But since that time
3 certainly a lot has changed. The information is out
4 there. We have great teaching tools. You're a fool if
5 you want to stay in this and not take advantage of it.

6 Some type - and I never really thought
7 about this, but something that was mentioned the other
8 day, some type of a retirement incentive, again, based
9 on years. Sometimes it requires, perhaps, a
10 nonmonetary incentive.

11 One of the things we could consider,
12 too, would be incentives to fire departments that share
13 equipment and manpower. Right now we do this with
14 Black Lick. It's like you go, I go. And we work
15 together very, very well, but it's still expensive.

16 These are all - all these ideas are -
17 they're ideas. And certainly everything we do is going
18 to be subject to audits, as they should be. What we
19 don't need is a lot of paperwork, because we have a lot
20 of paperwork already.

21 If any of this comes to fruition,
22 certainly we need the support of HR Bill 1550. It's
23 the Volunteer Responder Protective Act, or VRIPA.
24 Probably one of the greatest downfalls of anything good
25 that can happen is the Federal Government coming in and

1 taxing it. If you're going to get a little bit of
2 this, we're going to take a little bit of that. So
3 that has to be considered, too.

4 Believe me, I appreciate every effort
5 that you want to make to help our cause. It's very,
6 very near and very dear to my heart and I'm sure
7 everybody up here. And this is a tremendous struggle
8 right now. We have some great members down there. I'm
9 very proud of our fire department and borough
10 government.

11 And I give a fire report every month and
12 I always end it with, we need members. We do need
13 members. And we need help to do that. What we don't
14 need is an emergency situation where nobody responds.
15 And it could come to that some day.

16 Thanks for your time.

17 MR. RAINEY: Good morning. My name is
18 Jody Rainey. I am the Fire Chief of the Cherryhill
19 Township Fire Company stationed in Penn Run. Also,
20 I've been a member for 37 years. I joined when I was
21 14 years old in the Junior Firefighter Program.

22 I've served in the capacity of Fire
23 Chief in the last 14 years. In addition to that, I've
24 served 22 years as our Treasurer.

25 In addition, I am the high school

1 principal for Homer-Center Junior/Senior High School.
2 This is my 12th year at Homer-Center. I also have
3 probably about 16 years of administrative experience,
4 and this is my 27th, I believe, year in education.

5 I just kind of want to give you a short
6 story that's not on my notes. Because when I start
7 moving all over the place, maybe you can kind of bear
8 with me.

9 Homer-Center started school on August
10 the 20th. On August the 19th I was in an in-service
11 training with my staff. I received a call that our
12 fire - our rescue engine responding to a mutual aid
13 call was involved in a vehicle accident. They went
14 over an embankment.

15 And so I talked to my boss. I left
16 work. I went to the scene, because this is - I'm going
17 to come back to this in my notes, because, frankly, I
18 think I'm the only person in our fire department that
19 can handle that from an administrative business side of
20 what happened.

21 You know, there's a lot of things that
22 have transpired since then. They have totaled our
23 vehicle. So I do want to thank you for providing the
24 two percent loan program that you do provide, because
25 our replacement value on that unit was \$400,000.

1 Yesterday my day was getting up at 3:30 in the morning,
2 traveling to McKees Rocks going with an apparatus sale
3 representative to Wooster, Ohio, to look at a twin to
4 what we're looking to replace it with from KME.
5 Driving back to McKees Rocks, driving to Cresson, where
6 I serve on the District VI PIAA Athletic Committee, for
7 a meeting. Leaving that meeting, driving back to my
8 place of work so I could participant in Superintendent
9 interviews, because our Superintendent's retiring. To
10 get home at about nine o'clock last night, to stay up
11 to about 12:30, dealing with just e-mails and things
12 that I missed because I had to take a vacation day to
13 do all those tings.

14 I wrote this probably the day before
15 Representative Struzzi's office asked me to, at about
16 3:46 in the morning. So if it's not punctually correct
17 or I use words - I might have fell asleep on a
18 keyboard. So I apologize for that.

19 But anyway, I just think I have a unique
20 perspective on a lot of this stuff because, as I said,
21 being a Fire Chief, being the Treasurer and those types
22 of things, but I want to come back and talk a little
23 bit about the educational incentive.

24 But I want to focus on the broader
25 concept. Obviously we're talking about recruitment.

1 And I do think that when I joined the fire company - my
2 grandfather was a founding member of our fire company.
3 It was founded in 1951. And it was a family thing. I
4 was born, raised and will die in Penn Run,
5 Pennsylvania, and I'm very proud of that. I'm proud of
6 our community.

7 But I think that one of the things
8 that's hurting recruitment is it's such a transient
9 society. When I grew up I knew everybody who lived in
10 town. Right now I take pride in trying to introduce
11 myself to everybody that moves into our town. But I'll
12 be honest, I probably know about 50 percent of the town
13 of 300 people.

14 But anyway, so I think that anything
15 that you can do to create an incentive for people to
16 join the fire service is important. But I think that
17 there has to be three things, accountability, there has
18 to be integrity and there has to be effective oversight
19 of whatever it is that we're trying to do.

20 So I think that one of the questions
21 that I'd pose or I'd ask you to consider would be what
22 defines a firefighter? We've had some conversation
23 about that with the first panel. SR 6 specifically
24 mentioned the idea about fire service is becoming more
25 specialized. You know, we have obviously suppression

1 people that go inside and put out fires. We have
2 driver/operators who drive the vehicle and operate the
3 pumps. We got vehicle rescue technicians. We got
4 HAZMAT specialists. We got traffic control. We've got
5 all of those different things that are just expected
6 out of a firefighter.

7 And so our fire company at one time was
8 down to about 12 people. I was an Assistant Chief.
9 And one of the reasons why I think - that hurts
10 recruitment is time. And at that particular point in
11 time raising funds for our fire department became very
12 difficult, because we had to work two bingos a month.
13 So if you think about working two bingos a month in a
14 12-month period that's 24 nights that you had to commit
15 to be at the firehouse. That doesn't count responding
16 to calls, preparing equipment and all those different
17 types of things.

18 But anyway, I think that whatever we do
19 for an incentive program, to build off of what was said
20 earlier, I think that we need to look at - and the SR 6
21 leads us there, that the fire service has become very
22 specialized. And so to be able to create a solid
23 definition and establish a set of standards that one
24 must meet in order to qualify to receive whatever
25 incentive that is provided I think is essential.

1 You know, I have - our membership right
2 now is 33 senior firefighters and four junior
3 firefighters. And a lot of that is because we took the
4 approach that guys can join and we'll let them
5 specialize. We've got people that are simply
6 driver/operators. We got people that do traffic
7 control. That's what they do.

8 We got a lot of people that are cross
9 trained that can do multiple things. So I do think
10 that that's an important part of - I would emphasize
11 that we do an incentive program, how do we define
12 firefighters? And how do we look at SR 6 and consider
13 the specialization that the fire service now provides?

14 And I do offer some suggestions about
15 looking at pro board certifications, you know, looking
16 at things like there is a Driver/Operator
17 Certification, there's a Firefighter I Certification,
18 which we've talked a lot about. There's a Vehicle
19 Rescue Technician Certification, Hazmat Technician
20 Certification, which would come with a lot of
21 standards.

22 So the standards, I think, are built in.
23 I think it gives them an opportunity to work towards
24 something. And it also encourages members to come to
25 offer what their expertise is for fire service.

1 I believe Bill had talked about earlier
2 - I know Bill's a lead administrator for the Indiana
3 Fire Association. And I mentioned about leaving and
4 going to that alarm that involved our fire unit,
5 because I really just felt like I was the only one that
6 was capable, administratively, to handle all the
7 different tasks that needed to be handled.

8 I did not take command of that scene. I
9 went out there to make sure, first and foremost - and,
10 thank God, my firefighters were okay and then just
11 handled all the other aspects of that, that become
12 involved with that.

13 And so I do think that when you - I'll
14 go backwards and talk a little bit about the time and
15 about the bingos and things like that.

16 Our fire company also has a social
17 member opportunity. Social member, by definition in
18 our bylaws, is someone who helps meet the mission of
19 the fire company through fundraising and other means.
20 I would ask the committee to consider when you're
21 looking at these specialized definitions to find a
22 definition that could include those types of people.

23 The value they bring - we still have two
24 bingo games a week. We do not - our firefighters do
25 not work them. These people manage that. They handle

1 that for us, which frees up our guys to, A, train more,
2 to do other things at the firehouse or simply be with
3 their families, you know, meet their other
4 responsibilities.

5 I think SR 6 also referenced that the
6 training requirements are chasing candidates away. We
7 heard some testimony earlier today about 88 hours for
8 entry-level - or a hundred and some hours - I mean I'm
9 sorry, for the entry-level program, the basic modules.

10 I don't know that I completely agree
11 with that opinion. I think that we have too many fire
12 companies that have not considered if we're
13 specialized. And instead of - when someone walks in
14 our doors, instead of saying you have to do this, you
15 have to do this, you have to do this - the last thing
16 I'm looking for in my life is more have tos. I've got
17 a whole bunch of those. I'm sure you all do, too.

18 So we started by asking the question,
19 what is it that you think you can bring to our
20 community and how can you help us? And we let them -
21 like what do you want to do? And then we build off of
22 that conversation. In order to do that, then what do
23 you have to do? What type of training or what type of
24 background do you think you need in order to do the job
25 that you want to do to give to your community?

1 Since then, between our firefighters and
2 our social members, our Ladies Auxiliary, we have about
3 70 members in our fire company right now, which we're a
4 very small community. It's I think very impressive and
5 it is a sense of community.

6 But when you're talking about how do we
7 incentive - what type of training do we do - people
8 talked about leadership. I took a course at the State
9 Fire Academy in fire administration. It was offered by
10 PANO. And it was very eye-opening. It talked not only
11 about administrating like as a Fire Chief, but also the
12 administrative end as a part of the business - you
13 know, the business operations of the house as well.

14 So just to kind of - not to - I told you
15 I'd be all over the place, and I apologize. But I
16 think that to look back and say how do we bring
17 accountability to this program? How can we make sure
18 that the people that are giving the time, as
19 Representative Struzzi had mentioned, are rewarded for
20 that time?

21 And I think that by looking at
22 specialization and considering that there's different
23 types of people that can help us in many different
24 things I think is the place to start. But that all has
25 to go to standards and accountability.

1 Specifically for educational incentives,
2 I do think that it's obvious that the goal is to
3 enhance recruitment and retention. I believe
4 educational incentives is one possibility. And SR 6
5 does provide a whole menu list of different incentives
6 that we can offer potentially to entice people to join
7 our ranks. I don't know if that's the starting point
8 in my mind.

9 I do think that if we explore the
10 recommendations of SR 6 and provide the credit for
11 Emergency Service Preparedness Programs for high school
12 students, keeping in mind I'm a high school principal,
13 that it's best suited probably through our career and
14 technical schools.

15 My concern - I'm at a junior/senior high
16 school, grades 7 through 12. We have approximately 400
17 students. Our Career and Technology Center in Indiana
18 County is among one of the premier technology centers
19 in the Commonwealth. And one of the things I do know
20 is a lot of the kids that attend from Homer-Center walk
21 out of there with industry-level certifications, ready
22 to work with the skills. In order to get those
23 certifications, they have to take NOCTI Exams. The
24 NOCTI Exam is very similar to Firefighter I. It's a
25 written exam and it's also a practical skills exam,

1 where you have to demonstrate your knowledge.

2 So if we look at how can we - we had a
3 conversation earlier today about 16-year-olds. I would
4 propose that if we do go that route, that we run that
5 through the Career and Technology Centers, that we
6 would - we'd have to look closely at the Child Labor
7 Laws. But I also agree with the concept that I don't
8 think a 16 or 17-year-old is ready to go into a burning
9 building.

10 But in training, under training
11 circumstances, a controlled environment, I do think
12 that that would be permissible, in my mind, that we
13 would give them that opportunity, so when they do
14 graduate from high school and if they went to the
15 Technology Center, they're graduating with a
16 certification - a Firefighter I Certification.

17 I do think that that's possible. That
18 would require a lot of work to check out the legalities
19 between the Child Labor Laws and how do we provide that
20 training to Career and Technology students that desire
21 that type of training.

22 I think the other obstacle for us, in
23 Indiana County at least, our Career and Technology
24 Center students go half a day and then they go back to
25 our schools or they go to our schools and then go up to

1 the ICTC in the afternoon. But what they do is they
2 come back to us, obviously, for math, science, social
3 studies and those types of courses.

4 But they would have to probably travel
5 to the Indiana County Public Safety Training Academy
6 down by Homer City, where I work, and so the challenge
7 to that would be the requirement of transportation to
8 get them there. What does that do? Because, remember,
9 they only go half a day. So how do they get back to
10 their sending school? How would they get there, get
11 back? Those things are all challenges.

12 And the other thing, too, is also the
13 idea of how do we - and who is the instructor for a
14 program like that? That does run at a cost. Our
15 Career and Technology Center runs with - we have seven
16 sending schools that all pay a portion of those share
17 for those students to attend ICTC.

18 So I do think that if we looked at ICTC,
19 some considerations we would need to think about are
20 transportation, the Child Labor Laws, instructor and
21 the cost associated with all those different types of
22 things. Because, you know, obviously, you all know
23 that the last thing that schools can take right now is,
24 you know, I'll say the dirty word, more property taxes
25 and things of that nature. And the schools cannot

1 handle more unfunded mandates either. So that's things
2 for you to consider.

3 I guess - I guess that kind of concludes
4 what I have to say, other than just, again,
5 Representative Struzzi, I appreciate you bringing us
6 together and the opportunity. And for the committee,
7 thank you for - you know, for at least looking into
8 this and seeing what we can do as a Commonwealth to
9 help support the emergency services. It's greatly
10 appreciated.

11 MR. SHACREAW: I'm going to try not to
12 be too loud. First of all, I'd like to introduce
13 myself and say good morning. My name is Dan Shacreaw.
14 I'm 30 years old, 2nd Assistant Chief at the Black Lick
15 Volunteer Fire Company. I'm also a Burrell Township
16 Supervisor, about 15 minutes south of here.

17 I also served eight years in the
18 Pennsylvania Army National Guard. During that time I
19 was in the 252nd Engineering Company out of Johnstown.
20 But two years I worked in Harrisburg, worked Fort
21 Indiantown Gap. I ran with the Annville Volunteer Fire
22 Company out there. I also served with the CBRN, CERF,
23 Pennsylvania CERF, which is now the HRF Program, if any
24 of you have heard about that. I just wanted to go over
25 that and let you guys know, because I've been

1 throughout the state. I saw the difficult challenges
2 between fire companies.

3 Actually in 2014 we deployed. And I had
4 actually moved with my mom and stepdad to save some
5 money and ran with Crabtree's Fire Company in
6 Westmoreland County. So I saw the things - the ins and
7 outs of the fire service thing, and I want to hit on
8 some of those today.

9 First of all, I'd like to thank
10 Representative Sainato. Is that how you say it?
11 Sainato and Representative Struzzi and also the Board
12 for allowing me the opportunity to speak. I've talked
13 with Representative Struzzi on multiple occasions with
14 issues that - you know, that we are observing or facing
15 as a volunteer crisis, as I would call it, is
16 happening.

17 During the day there's times where we're
18 lucky if we get two people, which is why we started
19 doing the dual dispatch with Blairsville. One of the
20 things I believe it's going to come down to is mergers.
21 And like I said, I'll go over that.

22 For two years, though, I did work at
23 Indiana County PennDOT. And during that time I was
24 picked to be an operator instructor, and I went down to
25 WPTA, which is the Western Pennsylvania Training

1 Academy. It's down right outside of New Kensington.

2 One of the things they taught us during
3 that time was something called active thinking. And
4 there is a chart on the back, if you guys flip over,
5 what I prepared. So basically what that taught us at
6 that time was no two people think alike.

7 So with that in the center in the red, I
8 have the main topic, which in my opinion is the
9 firefighter epidemic. Off that I branch into four
10 categories, volunteers, training, funding and time.
11 Now, you can link all those together or you can
12 separate them, which I did.

13 With volunteers, I broke those down into
14 categories, training categories, funding, time. I
15 broke everything down into separate categories.

16 One of the things I want to key on is
17 the junior firefighters, which I started as a junior
18 firefighter with Black Lick Fire Company when I was 16
19 years old.

20 I went to IUP. Didn't graduate from
21 IUP. I went to IUP for my EMT, which Ricky Kopnicky
22 was teaching through Citizens Ambulance Service. I did
23 that when I was 16 because I couldn't take some of the
24 required training.

25 So one of the things that I wanted to

1 discuss today with this -. And I know I'm kind of
2 getting off the script here. You know, whenever I got
3 into the fire service in 2005, my sister and some of
4 the other guys that I'm still in the fire service,
5 their training was about 60 hours. Nowadays it is 180
6 hours.

7 If you want to know why we're having an
8 issue, look at the time, time of the training. A lot
9 of people can't afford to do it.

10 So let's talk about junior firefighters
11 and how we can try to solve that. I would present you
12 all with a technical school program that Central
13 Westmoreland Career and Technology Center does offer.
14 It is called Protective Services. I was actually given
15 some certificates from Crabtree. It was a junior
16 firefighter that attended this. His name was Zach
17 Saflin. Their Fire Chief, Bill Watkins, had provided
18 me with this.

19 They are actually looking to expand the
20 program because they have a waiting list of students
21 that cannot attend the program because it is full. You
22 know, they are combatting the issue of where you have
23 it, how you have it, how do you pay for it.

24 And they were talking a little bit about
25 the FEMA SAFER Grant earlier. I think that's a good

1 way to look at spending \$345 million instead of giving
2 it out for me, which like they said, I didn't join the
3 fire company for an incentive. I joined to help, you
4 know, protect property and whatnot in my area. So I
5 think that would be one thing to do.

6 Now, with that being said, Central
7 Westmoreland Career and Technology Center offers a
8 total of around 484 hours of training, which
9 equivalent to 60.5 days or eight - that would be
10 eight-hour training days, almost two months and a day
11 of training for the average person who has a job, kids,
12 anything else on that aspect.

13 So Zach - like I said, I can pass these
14 around if any of you would like to take a look at them.

15 Now, where does that count? We had a
16 gentleman with us this morning, I want to thank him for
17 what he does here in Indiana. He actually came down
18 and trained with us. He's from Coudersport. He's from
19 Coudersport. He is one of their live-ins here. We've
20 had a training program.

21 It's a great way to, you know, meet with
22 these other firefighters from throughout the state.
23 And the live-in program is one of those great ways. I
24 know guys have done it out in Progress, in Dauphin
25 County. I know different places, Lebanon County, that

1 offered it, Palmyra. That is a huge thing to look
2 into, if there is a way to help out with mergers and
3 start putting some of these live-in programs into
4 place. It's a huge benefit.

5 One of the other benefits to having this
6 technology program would be that these kids come out
7 certified to a certain level. They now do the live-in
8 program. I found a study here off of college data.
9 The average room and board, as they had spoke about
10 earlier, is anywhere from \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year.
11 So if you want to look into a way to help these
12 students with their college education at the same time,
13 that is a good way. Let's get them introduced to it at
14 a high school level. They can carry it through to
15 college, help out the towns where they serve as
16 live-ins, and they can save theirselves money with
17 continuing education.

18 One of the other things I wanted to tal
19 about, like I said, I served with the Pennsylvania Army
20 National Guard, is I have a stack of certificates
21 that's about this thick (indicating), honest to God. I
22 have done training with water rescue with Blairsville,
23 they specialize in it, one of the only ones in the
24 county. I've done confined space, search and
25 extraction. They actually put a helicopter 30 feet up

1 in a tree, put two people in it and told us to go get
2 them at one of our training exercises out in Oklahoma.
3 That's something out of the box, but it's something
4 that they trained us to do.

5 For me, they were talking - Turk and Ab
6 had talked a little bit about, you know, what incentive
7 does this have for people that have - I don't have a
8 college education. I never did have a college
9 education, because I was a military, blue collar kind
10 of guy. But if there was a way that IUP or
11 Westmoreland County Community College could somehow
12 recognize that thick section of certifications that I
13 have, maybe not all of them, but some of them, we're
14 talking the Firefighter I, the Firefighter II, Pro
15 Board Certifications, to where they would recognize
16 that as college credit, maybe that would help better me
17 to go get a different job. Maybe that would better me
18 to follow dreams that I wanted to do.

19 At the same time, maybe somebody ran
20 into an issue where they couldn't finish college, and
21 that would be a benefit to them to join the fire
22 service to say, hey, you know, I can't go back to
23 college full time because of kids and a job and
24 everything else, but what about joining the fire
25 service and be able to take a training here and then

1 get that Firefighter I Certification, Firefighter II
2 Certification. And potentially swing that now into
3 completing their degree if that college would recognize
4 those credits.

5 I think that's something that should be
6 looked into to help out statewide. I don't know how it
7 would be done, but I think that that would be one way
8 for an incentive to help with the members that have the
9 10, the 15, the 20 years of service in.

10 That's all I have. I want to thank you
11 all for your time and consideration. Like Coach said -
12 I call him Coach because he was our high school coach,
13 Coach Dettore. You know, hopefully the day never comes
14 where we don't have anybody show up to an emergency
15 situation.

16 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Gentlemen, thank you.
17 Thank you for your military service as well. So Coach,
18 I think we should send you to every high school in the
19 Commonwealth to talk about civics because maybe we'll
20 get one person from every high school. It'd help out.

21 MR. DETTORE: It's not a bad thought. I
22 mean -.

23 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Really true.

24 MR. DETTORE: If you think about it, you
25 know, I feel fortunate, and a lot of these guys do,

1 that we grew up in that atmosphere. I still feel that
2 way.

3 CHAIRMAN FARRY: I'm a third-generation
4 firefighter, both my grandfathers, my dad and myself, a
5 lot of cousins. And we're in a hustle and bustle area.
6 We're evolving into career staffing Monday through
7 Friday, during the daytime hours. That's what's
8 happening in the communities that I cover.

9 We're up to 685 calls as we get back
10 here. When I joined in '90 we did 237. So our numbers
11 - it's tough when our fire pagers go off twice a day,
12 basically. But I appreciate the work you guys have
13 done.

14 You mentioned about parents - or excuse
15 me, spouses and children - or children being able to
16 get this tuition assistance. I think what we need to
17 do, and it's something I talked to Representative
18 Struzzi about, is let's get this program off the
19 ground. Let's get it funded.

20 And just like we moved the National
21 Guard to include spouses, now we can let that program
22 evolve once we get it off the ground, but we'll store
23 it in the back of our mind. So I'm glad you actually
24 highlighted that point.

25 The reason I needed to get up, and I

1 didn't mean to be rude, the Auditor General has just
2 called a press conference and announced he thinks there
3 needs to be changes to the Relief Funding Program,
4 which is ironic because that's a piece of legislation
5 we're moving in a couple weeks, when we talk about
6 LOSAP and enhancing what relief funds can be used for
7 recruitment and retention. So I've been e-mailing his
8 staff to find out what his recommendations are.

9 MR. BURKLEY: The Relief Association's -
10 the amounts that we've been getting over the last three
11 years have gone down substantially. And the SR 6
12 indicates that there's six to seven million policies
13 that haven't been assessed like they were in 2013. And
14 it's because it's self-imposed. In other words, the
15 insurance company sits back and says, oh, you know
16 what, maybe I'm not going to contribute to the fire
17 insurance this year.

18 How can that happen.

19 CHAIRMAN FARRY: They're self-regulated.
20 So can you imagine the insurance industry is
21 self-regulated?

22 I can tell you we've been working on
23 that, myself, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato, our
24 staff. We had a meeting with the Department of Revenue
25 a couple weeks ago. The good news is, if my numbers

1 are correct, last year the certified number was 68
2 million. It's going up to 74 million now. So at least
3 there's going to be a bit of a backfilling in those
4 reductions.

5 I'm hearing it from all my firefighters
6 in Bucks - or fire departments in Bucks County as well.
7 We're trying to get to the bottom of what exactly is
8 going on. That's what initiated my conversation with
9 the Auditor General's Office, which they went radio
10 silent a few weeks ago.

11 And I guess it was because they were
12 prepping for the press conference. So - but we're
13 continuing to work with the Department of Insurance,
14 Department of Revenue and Auditor General's Office to
15 try and get to the bottom of it. And we're trying to
16 make sure the money is landing in the right bucket,
17 quite frankly.

18 Because the police pension allotment has
19 been going up while the fire service one is going down.
20 One of the answers we got was more people are
21 self-insuring. Think about it. There's a two percent
22 tax on premiums. Do the math on how many people would
23 have to start self-insuring their businesses, would
24 have to start self-insuring to actually have the \$5
25 million dip one year, the \$8 million dip the next year.

1 I mean, it would be an astronomical
2 number of premiums that would have to be now
3 self-insured. So we are working at trying to get to
4 the bottom of it.

5 MR. BURKLEY: And what happens is you
6 set your budgets maybe five years ago based upon what
7 you've been getting. And then all of a sudden, that
8 goes away. You know, you end up in the red.

9 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Yeah. And I know a lot
10 of the rural departments, you know, they're getting
11 less than \$10,000. I mean, it's very limited what you
12 can do with that. And then when you're seeing a
13 further drop in that, you know, that's significant.

14 MR. RAINEY: That was the point I wanted
15 to make is I know our fire department, we totally -
16 Cherryhill Township totally encompasses Clymer Borough,
17 and so Clymer Borough covers about 25 percent of our
18 municipality. It's what we've determined.

19 And so not only do we get less relief
20 money, we split that 75/25 with Clymer. We get maybe
21 \$10,000 a year. I can tell you that goes almost
22 exclusively to training.

23 There was a point I wanted to make when
24 we talked about - I said about maybe specialization and
25 looking at different things is we have local fire

1 companies - you know, we're fortunate in Cherryhill
2 Township. We're very - we're very solvent, but I've -
3 personally we have lent other fire departments money so
4 they could make the decision -.

5 If you have - if you think about the
6 cost of Firefighter I for the prep program and for the
7 testing, you're looking at about \$200 a firefighter.
8 So if you have five or ten members, say ten members of
9 your department that does desire to get Firefighter I,
10 that's going to cost that department \$2,000.

11 And when you have to make that decision
12 between that \$2,000 or we're going to pay our utility
13 bills, you know, you got to pay utility bills to be
14 open. And so I think that, you know, one of the things
15 that we're looking at that we can say that these are
16 the firefighters that, you know, we have to have
17 standards, which I believe we should have. I do think
18 Firefighter I is a good place to start. But I also
19 think there needs to be some consideration on how do we
20 reimburse or how do we provide incentives to fire
21 companies to pay for that training for those people.

22 We're talking about education, as Dan
23 said, you know, being able to recognize those
24 certificates, but you know, that's a layout for a fire
25 company - many fire companies in Indiana County.

1 CHAIRMAN FARRY: And while our focus is
2 intended to be on Representative Struzzi's Bill and
3 Chairman Sainato's Bill, obviously we talked about a
4 lot of the other SR 6 recommendations and a lot of the
5 other issues.

6 As we mentioned, we're going to be
7 moving several Bills over the coming weeks and
8 hopefully out of the House sometime in October. So one
9 of my suggestions is some of the recommendations you've
10 made or some of the things you think should be
11 prioritized from SR 6, please contact the
12 Representatives and Senators and let them know and
13 spread the word amongst the other members in your
14 association and the other departments in your counties,
15 including our friends in EMS.

16 Because we want to make sure - you know,
17 we targeted SR 6 to be a cafeteria plan, right, is what
18 - Langhorne Middletown Fire Company needs off the menu
19 may be a different menu item for you. It may be a
20 different menu item for you.

21 So you know, please let us know what
22 those priorities are, so that we can make sure we're
23 addressing those needs.

24 Representative O'Mara?

25 REPRESENTATIVE O'MARA: Thank you,

1 Chairman. And thank you all. You presented some
2 really great ideas. I especially loved the idea of
3 getting high school kids involved. They do that at
4 Chester County - and they're doing a great job.

5 But I have a question about training.
6 And I wanted to just throw it to the panel, because we
7 have a few Chiefs sitting on the panel. Is there any
8 specific requirement or training requirements for
9 Chiefs? And as we talk about new firefighters, maybe -
10 or people interested, they might not have the means to
11 complete those hours, but would - and you can tell me
12 no, don't go down this path.

13 But would it be something that we should
14 consider by setting a standard for the Chiefs who will
15 then sort of, you know, set the whole standard for the
16 department that they are overseeing? And they can help
17 us when we have, you know, a Bill like this and we need
18 to verify we're doing the right thing. I'm just
19 wondering if that's the place to start, because they're
20 already so committed in the fire service.

21 MR. DETTORRE: Yeah, I think that would
22 be. I know in our department, coming up through, we
23 took line officer classes, incident command classes,
24 which, you know, the - it escapes my mind now, but it
25 became a NIMS course, kind of patterned after. Things

1 like that is what we try to do.

2 I come up through being a rescue person,
3 being an interior firefighter, whatever. I'm kind of -
4 being 60 years old now, I kind of got away from that,
5 but I'll do it if I need to. But it's just something
6 that we come up through knowing what, you know, our
7 interior firefighters want to do. We have some good
8 captains, lieutenants, line officers that carries the
9 training on. They've gone across state to different
10 training events and everything and they bring things
11 back. And they're very good at putting it out to the
12 people.

13 Just with our lack of manpower, in the
14 last three or four years it's gone down. We have - at
15 one time we did have three - three companies, which -
16 like three captains, three lieutenants. We cut that
17 down to two, because, at that time, we just felt that
18 te experience - the people maybe didn't have the
19 experience. So we had two captains, two lieutenants,
20 we'd still have obviously the Chief and three
21 Assistants.

22 But this is just something that we just
23 didn't feel some of those, you know, individuals were
24 ready. So get a little bit more experience and
25 hopefully, you know, maybe get some more manpower and

1 get them trained to the level and that. But yeah, I
2 think that might be something to look at, some criteria
3 for company officer, Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs.

4 And also, you know, you touched on the
5 administrative end of it. And I think that's a -
6 that's a very good - with the paperwork, you know,
7 doing the loan applications and the grant applications,
8 everything, it just kind of, you know, I think it would
9 help us.

10 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Representative James
11 and then Representative Struzzi.

12 MR. SHACREAW: Just real quick, last
13 year we actually - we did our bylaws in our fire
14 company. We went to the point system to simplify what
15 we consider a firefighter. We don't have - we used to
16 have active and inactive.

17 And we actually have I don't want to say
18 dropped our standard, because we have - to be a Fire
19 Chief you have to have seven years of commitment. You
20 have to have interior firefighter, basic vehicle
21 rescue, HAZMAT, the NIMS 300 classes. And then every
22 year you have to take at least 24 hours of outside
23 certified training.

24 That is our standard for our fire
25 company. Because if you want to be an officer, you

1 need to lead by example and you need to set the
2 example.

3 So it's different throughout the
4 departments. I don't know if you would ever have a
5 standard. And the only reason I say that is because,
6 as Jerry Brant I believe said earlier, is Black Lick
7 isn't the same as Harrisburg. Black Lick isn't the
8 same as Pittsburgh, you know.

9 So as much as I think there needs to be
10 a standard, I think it should be nationwide. Like I
11 can take my training and go anywhere, like this is a
12 Pro Board. And that would be a good way to set a
13 standard across the state or the nation. But I think
14 that trying to - trying to do that statewide I think
15 would be a difficult challenge, but I think it's
16 something that should be looked into.

17 REPRESENTATIVE O'MARA: Thank you.

18 MR. RAINEY: I just want to add real
19 quick to that. Same as - our company is the same as
20 Dan, the different requirements to be Chief, the
21 training. I would add this is a very proud - it's not
22 a requirement. Every one of the Chief officers and
23 Junior line officers for our department are Firefighter
24 I certified.

25 If you think that - if you look at some

1 type of Pro Board officer, there are officer - Pro
2 Board certifications. What I think that that requires
3 is, you know, looking at potentially providing
4 employers incentives to release their people from work
5 to go attend those types of training so they can serve
6 their communities.

7 So I just wanted to add that in, that I
8 think it's a great concept, but I also think it needs
9 to be considered with I don't know if I'd be able to
10 get that much release time from work in order to
11 complete such a training.

12 REPRESENTATIVE O'MARA: Thank you.

13 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Thank you very
14 much. At least three times today different testifiers
15 have referenced the Junior Firefighter Program. Most
16 recently, Dan, it was you.

17 I went through the military, but I've
18 never fought a fire, maybe a barbecue grill. I wonder
19 if you would expand on that a little bit.

20 Is there a program nationally for that
21 or do you make this up as you go? How does this work?

22 MR. SHACREAW: You mean for like the
23 Junior Firefighting Program?

24 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Yes, sir.

25 MR. SHACREAW: So like I said, what I

1 presented was a technical school class that Central
2 Westmoreland Career and Technology Center has
3 established and could be used as a building block to
4 establish that program throughout the state.

5 As far as Junior Firefighting Programs,
6 they're different everywhere you go. When I came in, I
7 could join the fire company. We actually got away from
8 that now to where you have to be a mentor, so a son, a
9 daughter, a niece and nephew, some kind of family
10 member where that person is responsible for that junior
11 firefighter.

12 These guys can elaborate. I know Jody
13 has a good program in place for the junior
14 firefighters. But our last junior firefighter that
15 came through, she actually stayed. And she's about 22
16 or 23 now. So it's been quite a few years since we've
17 been able to get the interest.

18 MR. RAINEY: There is something from the
19 state. And I don't recall the citation of it, but
20 there is a booklet that gives you suggestions on how to
21 organize and begin a Junior Firefighter Program. For
22 us it's been rather successful, you know. And as long
23 as the people stay and they're able to find employment,
24 we've been able to retain those people.

25 Matter of fact, all three of our Chief

1 officers of our company started in the junior program
2 and are still with our company, 30-plus years of
3 experience from all of us. But there is something that
4 the State has introduced. I can't recall the last time
5 they've revised it, but it does outline how to start
6 and gives you different models to follow to establish a
7 Junior Firefighter Program.

8 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: Perhaps you could
9 give me a little steerage after the meeting here today.
10 I have a six-year-old grandson named Kayson that wants
11 to be an engineer and a firefighter, so I may as well
12 get him started.

13 MR. RAINEY: You want to - you got a
14 place? I can probably hook you up right in Cherryhill
15 Township, too.

16 REPRESENTATIVE JAMES: He lives in North
17 Hills.

18 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Representative Struzzi
19 and then Representative Rigby.

20 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Guys, I really
21 appreciate you being here today. Great - great
22 testimony, great insight.

23 I want to clarify a couple of things.
24 Jody, you mentioned - and you and I have had this
25 discussion in your office about having other people be

1 considered for the program. And that's actually in the
2 Bill itself. And I'll just read that to you. It's
3 under the eligibility category.

4 It says that - and again, this is up to
5 the Fire Chief, fire company, to certify all this to be
6 eligible for the Tuition Assistance Program. But the
7 activities may include but not be limited to training,
8 drills, emergency response calls, administrative and
9 operational support, fundraising or other events and
10 projects that aid the financial viability of a
11 volunteer organization. So that's - that's in the
12 Bill. So that does make the program eligible for
13 anybody that meets those criteria and volunteers for
14 the fire company.

15 And SR 6 has been mentioned throughout
16 the testimony today. We have copies on the corner of
17 the table over there, if someone would like. And we
18 have more copies in our office as well. So please help
19 yourself to those.

20 And if you need additional copies, we
21 can provide them to all the departments. So thank you.

22 REPRESENTATIVE RIGBY: The only thing I
23 would like to add is the training - again, your bylaws
24 require it. And there's a lot of municipalities and
25 fire companies, volunteers that don't require it. And

1 in my years of being an active firefighter, I've been
2 on the fire scene with a Deputy Chief or a Chief that
3 didn't have basic firefighting skills, let alone to run
4 a fire scene. And these are the people that we're
5 relying on, on sending our volunteers into buildings.

6 Unfortunately, a lot of times we see it
7 is a popularity contest to putting a Chief in as
8 opposed to who's the most qualified and trained to hold
9 that position. So do you think it's maybe something we
10 need to look at, at a state level that maybe the bylaws
11 need to be changed with those organizations, to put the
12 right people in place? Or are we in a position now
13 where we just need people and we're willing to take who
14 we can? Thank you.

15 MR. RAINEY: I would say I agree with
16 you. I do think that one of the things we all learn in
17 fire training is the most important person on the fire
18 ground is me. And we're all responsible for our
19 safety.

20 And I would question even the cultural
21 structure of any fire company that would vote somebody
22 in that does not have the experience, who does not have
23 the training. Because ultimately my biggest - as I
24 mentioned earlier about the vehicle accident, my
25 biggest concern when the alarm goes off is I don't want

1 to make a decision that's going to hurt or kill
2 somebody. And I take that as my number one
3 responsibility.

4 We can always replace a vehicle. We can
5 always replace a home. We can't replace people. And
6 so I think that - we talked a lot about Firefighter I.
7 I think that if we started and said at least the
8 minimum standard to be a chief officer in the fire
9 department was Firefighter I, I think that would be a
10 step in the right direction.

11 CHAIRMAN FARRY: No further questions?

12 All right. Thank you, gentlemen. We
13 appreciate it. Thank you for the work you do.

14 Our next presenter is Ms. Elizabeth
15 McCloud, Vice President of State Grants and Special
16 Programs for the Pennsylvania Higher Education
17 Assistance Agency.

18 Thank you for being here.

19 MS. MCCLOUD: Chairman Farry and members
20 of the Committee, on behalf of Jim Steele, PHEAA's
21 President and CEO, as well as the PHEAA Board of
22 Directors, I would like to thank you for the
23 opportunity to speak with you today as you consider
24 these House Bills that will create the First Responder
25 Loan Forgiveness Program and the Active Volunteer

1 Tuition Assistance Program.

2 On a personal note, I'm a proud Indiana
3 native and an IUP alum, as many others here today. So
4 I feel it's especially good to be back home and here
5 with you. And I should add, too, that my mother still
6 lives in the house I grew up in about a mile from here,
7 so this is my fire station, I would say. So it's good
8 to be here.

9 So PHEAA was established 55 years ago
10 with the primary mission of creating affordable access
11 to higher education for Pennsylvania students and
12 families. And since then we've helped generations of
13 Pennsylvanians achieve higher education while helping
14 to strengthen the foundation of our economy with an
15 educated workforce.

16 We do this by administering a variety of
17 Student Aid Programs for the Commonwealth, the largest
18 of which is the Pennsylvania State Grant Program. For
19 the 2018-'19 award year, this need-based program
20 provided grant awards to nearly 144,000 students, with
21 a maximum award of \$4,123.

22 And PHEAA covers all of the costs to
23 administer this and the other State-funded Student Aid
24 Programs, which saves taxpayers nearly \$16 million
25 annually.

1 It also makes Pennsylvania's Student Aid
2 Programs among the most efficient in the nation, since
3 every dollar appropriated to those programs goes
4 directly to benefit the students who need it most.

5 PHEAA has also contributed more than a
6 billion dollars from its business earnings to directly
7 supplement the Student Aid Program, further supporting
8 Pennsylvania students, families and taxpayers.

9 In my capacity as Vice President of
10 State Grant and Special Programs, I work with PHEAA
11 staff and Pennsylvania's financial aid community to
12 ensure that our Student Aid Programs are administered
13 effectively, both in terms of providing meaningful
14 benefits to the recipients and also by maintaining
15 accountability to the General Assembly.

16 We are also mindful of our role in the
17 legislative process, in that PHEAA was established by
18 the General Assembly to administer programs that are
19 created as a result of policy decisions.

20 PHEAA does have prior experience
21 administering Commonwealth-funded Loan Forgiveness
22 Programs. Two such programs were the Agriculture
23 Education Loan Forgiveness Program and the Early
24 Childhood Education Loan Forgiveness Program. Those
25 programs were created in the early 1990s and promised

1 to repay or forgive a set amount of PHEAA-guaranteed
2 student loans for each year the borrower was employed
3 full time in an agriculture-related field or as a
4 childcare professional in Pennsylvania.

5 The Agriculture Education Loan
6 Forgiveness Program provided up to \$2,000 in annual
7 loan forgiveness and the Early Childhood Loan
8 Forgiveness Program provided up to \$2,500. And each of
9 those programs was capped at a maximum of \$10,000 of
10 loan forgiveness per borrower.

11 These programs resembled traditional
12 Loan Forgiveness Programs that were attached to
13 specific employment requirements. So they were
14 designed to attract and retain workers in hard-to-fill
15 positions in Pennsylvania to address policy issues as
16 determined by the Pennsylvania legislature.

17 PHEAA was in a unique position to
18 administer those programs, as they were structured to
19 forgive PHEAA-guaranteed student loan debt. And at the
20 time PHEAA was the federal student loan guarantor for
21 most of the federal student loans made in Pennsylvania.

22 So once employment verifications were
23 made, it was pretty simple for PHEAA to make payments
24 to a participant's federal student loan account with
25 the funds that had been appropriated by the

1 Pennsylvania legislature.

2 So those two Loan Forgiveness Programs
3 were phased out about a decade ago. And the
4 federal-guaranteed student loan program was phased out
5 by Congress in 2010. Today, the U.S. Department of
6 Education originates all federal student loans
7 directly, which are then serviced by other
8 organizations under contract with the Department. And
9 PHEAA is one of those federally-contracted servicers,
10 doing business nationally as FedLoan Servicing.

11 Federal loan servicing is one of PHEAA's
12 business lines that generate revenue to support our
13 operation and also our public service mission for the
14 Commonwealth. But the Department does not allocate
15 servicing volume based on geography. So right now we
16 no longer service the majority of Pennsylvania student
17 loans, nor would we likely be the servicer for the
18 majority of participants in this program if House Bill
19 1786 becomes law.

20 However, that being said, PHEAA does
21 have the ability to make payments to other servicers on
22 behalf of borrowers, so the infrastructure is in place
23 if the program's administrative process would be
24 structured in such a way.

25 PHEAA also has experience administering

1 or servicing other types of Loan Forgiveness Programs.
2 These include the Nursing Loan Forgiveness and the
3 Nurse Educator Loan Forgiveness Programs, which were
4 funded by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Foundation
5 and administered by PHEAA.

6 Those programs were not established or
7 funded by the Pennsylvania legislature. They were
8 created, however, to help reverse the nursing shortage
9 that threatened quality healthcare in Pennsylvania
10 during the mid 2000s. And those programs were phased
11 out later in the 2000s, as more new nurses began
12 graduating and the shortage of working nurses abated.

13 In 2012, PHEAA was awarded an additional
14 federal contract to service the federal Public Service
15 Loan Forgiveness Program. This program requires
16 participants to have worked in an eligible public
17 service job, as defined by the U.S. Department of
18 Education, for a minimum of ten years before debt can
19 be forgiven.

20 As a federally-contracted servicer,
21 PHEAA, operating as FedLoan Servicing, is required to
22 serve that particular program in strict compliance with
23 federal law and program rules.

24 So while each of these loan forgiveness
25 programs that I mentioned is different, they all were

1 created with an intent of increasing and retaining
2 workers in careers that are specific to industries or
3 job roles that support a public policy goal.

4 House Bill 1786 is a little bit
5 different in that, at its core, the new program would
6 encourage volunteerism that advances public safety in
7 communities throughout Pennsylvania. And this is
8 certainly a worthwhile goal, and PHEAA is
9 well-positioned in terms of experience and our
10 infrastructure to administer the program.

11 But administering such a program would
12 not come without challenges. For example, we lack
13 experience in administering programs specifically
14 designed to spur volunteerism. And while we have
15 strong relationships within Pennsylvania's higher
16 education community, we lack a conduit to Fire
17 Commissions and other entities that would be needed to
18 identify eligible participants and to verify the
19 service requirements.

20 As the designated administrator of House
21 Bill 1786, we would need to identify the appropriate
22 entities needed to provide this information to us and
23 help us track eligibility and proof of service.

24 This is important since PHEAA is
25 committed to transparency and accountability,

1 especially to members of the General Assembly who have
2 tasked us with the program's administration. So we
3 would need to be able to accurately report on program
4 activity and track outcomes to ensure that the
5 appropriated funds are being used efficiently and in
6 compliance with the intent of the enabling legislation.

7 And if I could respectfully make a few
8 suggestions relevant to the Bill in its present state.
9 In Section 79A42(b)(2) it states that an applicant must
10 be an active first responder who is certified for at
11 least one year. Then in Section 79A43(3) it states
12 that the applicant must be an active first responder
13 for four consecutive years, which could be confusing
14 for potential volunteers and for the administration of
15 the program.

16 So we'd be happy to continue a
17 conversation with you to amend the definition of an
18 eligible applicant in order to ensure that there's no
19 confusion among either applicants or the agency and to
20 mitigate any unintended consequences.

21 Also, the Bill gives individual fire and
22 rescue companies and emergency services agencies
23 significant discretion in developing a point system
24 related to annual certification. And relevant to the
25 conversation today, I understand that in terms of the

1 difference among fire companies in the various parts of
2 Pennsylvania. However, you know, having said that,
3 administratively it would be preferable for
4 administrative programs if there was a consistent and
5 equitable statewide system to ensure standardization.

6 And then just a personal observation, if
7 I may. Prior to joining PHEAA, I worked in the
8 Pennsylvania higher education community. I was a
9 financial aid administrator for 20 years at
10 Elizabethtown College in Lancaster County, the last ten
11 years as Director of Financial Aid.

12 And I worked with several students
13 during my time at Elizabethtown who had come to the
14 college from other communities but chose to serve as
15 volunteer firefighters with the Elizabethtown Volunteer
16 Fire Company while they were students at the college.
17 And we actually had a scholarship that supported that
18 for students, which is how I became aware of their
19 volunteering.

20 And I mention that because I think even
21 in the loan forgiveness legislation there might be some
22 merit in expanding the eligibility parameters to
23 include current students who may have an interest while
24 they're in school.

25 I recognize Mr. Simmons's comments about

1 students not necessarily staying in the community where
2 they volunteer during college. That was the case in
3 Elizabethtown as well. I don't know of any of the
4 students I worked with who stayed after the four years.

5 So as a community we only had the
6 benefit of their volunteerism for those four years, but
7 I think it kept them engaged in their own identity as
8 volunteer firefighters in a way that probably benefited
9 their home communities or wherever they ended up after
10 college. And so I certainly saw the value in that.

11 The other piece of legislation being
12 discussed today is House Bill 1773, the Active
13 Volunteer Tuition Assistance Program. This legislation
14 would provide tuition assistance to active volunteers
15 who are also students enrolled in approved institutions
16 of higher education in the Commonwealth.

17 The program has several requirements
18 related to volunteerism, such as having participated in
19 a certain percentage of the volunteer organization's
20 activities in the months prior to submitting an
21 application and then accepting an obligation to
22 volunteer, I believe for - in the current version of
23 the legislation, for five years following receipt of
24 the award. And then individuals who fail to satisfy
25 the program requirements would be obligated to repay

1 the full amount of tuition assistance received.

2 As you consider House Bill 1773 and seek
3 input from the community, I'd like to offer a few
4 suggestions based on our lessons learned at the agency
5 with some of the programs we've administered.

6 First of all, while we'd like every
7 participant to experience successful outcomes, all
8 programs that require a work or a service commitment
9 have some participants who fail to meet those
10 commitments. And in those instances PHEAA would need a
11 mechanism to prevent disbursement or to reclaim state
12 tax dollars that were already disbursed.

13 And we have learned that reconciling
14 those instances is much easier if the assistance to
15 students or forgiveness, which is essentially a payment
16 made on behalf of the participant, occurs after the
17 service requirement has been met and verified. It's
18 really difficult to go back out and recapture funds
19 that have already been disbursed.

20 And seeking reimbursement from
21 participants in the program is also problematic, as
22 they often don't have the available financial resources
23 to refund payment, leaving other means like legal
24 action as our only recourse.

25 Those outcomes aren't as desirable in a

1 program that was created as a public service to help
2 citizens and also not administratively efficient with
3 the program considering the limited resources.

4 So while House Bill 1773 contains
5 compliance guidelines to ensure certification of
6 service, PHEAA would need to establish a mechanism for
7 accurately defining, verifying and tracking individual
8 student eligibility and for properly identifying and
9 communicating with eligible volunteer organizations.

10 And that would all be new territory for
11 us with this particular program.

12 This should be done in a way that
13 establishes standards of eligibility and certification
14 across the program while providing a path for efficient
15 financial reconciliation to ensure administrative
16 accountability.

17 So being able to play an administrative
18 role in both of these programs would be especially
19 rewarding for all of us at PHEAA, not just because it
20 aligns so well with our public service mission as an
21 agency but because we are also proud to count many
22 service members among our employees. And I can say the
23 same thing about active volunteers, many of whom I work
24 alongside every day at PHEAA.

25 This concludes my prepared remarks. And

1 I want to thank you again for the opportunity to appear
2 here today.

3 As always, PHEAA stands ready to assist
4 the Commonwealth and this committee in supporting the
5 implementation of any legislation that's supporting
6 Pennsylvania students and their families. And I
7 welcome the opportunity to answer any questions that
8 you have.

9 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you so much. And
10 thank you for your thoughtful testimony. It was very
11 succinct.

12 Representative Gabler.

13 REPRESENTATIVE GABLER: Thank you, Mr.
14 Chairman. And thank you for the testimony. It was
15 very insightful and technical and it really helped us I
16 think to understand what some of the administrative
17 challenges might be in having a program like this.

18 As I was reading your testimony and
19 understanding some of the prior programs that you
20 referenced, the agricultural and nursing programs that
21 worked on kind of a flat dollar figure per year of
22 forgiveness.

23 Do you think that's a better model for
24 us to try to wrap our head around for something like
25 this? And I'm thinking about it for two reasons, one,

1 because then it would allow the payment to be made
2 after the service. And then two, it seems to me that
3 there might be another benefit where we're not just say
4 talking to a volunteer and saying five years is done,
5 but they usually don't put a cap on it, but we say
6 somebody could earn \$2,500, \$3,000, whatever the number
7 is, for as many years as they have outstanding student
8 loans. And that would be a condition of their
9 continued volunteerism with the emergency services of
10 Pennsylvania.

11 Would that be something that would be a
12 little bit more of a familiar concept for PHEAA to work
13 with and maybe deal with some of the challenges that
14 you recognize?

15 MS. MCCLOUD: Yeah. So I'm not a
16 hundred percent sure if your question is if that flat
17 amount per year is better than the tuition assistance
18 model or if it's better than the percentage of
19 outstanding debt being forgiven per year. I would say
20 it's probably preferable to both of those, in that we
21 don't run into the situations where we have to go back
22 to students who have received assistance, and if they
23 don't have the service requirement, then pursue some
24 sort of repayment plan from them. And certainly, the
25 fixed amount of loan forgiveness per year is more clear

1 and understandable for the students who have borrowed
2 funds to express something as a percentage of the
3 amount that they owe.

4 That's get a little more complicated,
5 because so many student loans have interest that's
6 accruing on them and being capitalized. And so is it a
7 percentage of the principle? Or is it a percentage of
8 it a percentage of the principal on a certain date?
9 Et cetera, et cetera. Certainly a flat amount is more
10 straightforward for all parties involved.

11 REPRESENTATIVE GABLER: I appreciate it.
12 I think this helps us work with a few more concepts
13 that maybe we could throw into the mix to discuss. And
14 that's the purpose of these hearings as we gather as a
15 committee, but I think your testimony was exceptionally
16 insightful.

17 So I appreciate it. Thank you.

18 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you very much.

19 Chairman Sainato had a commitment back
20 in his district, so he had to actually get on the road,
21 but we have our final presenter, thankfully.

22 Last but not least, Jerry DiGennaro,
23 Coordinator of Public Safety Training Center,
24 Westmoreland County Community College. Thank you.

25 MR. DIGENNARO: Chairman Barrar,

1 Co-Chairman Farry, Representative Struzzi, members of
2 the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer
3 comments regarding House Bill 1773, establishing the
4 First Responder Loan Forgiveness Program.

5 My name is Jerry DiGennaro and I'm the
6 Coordinator of the Westmoreland County Community
7 College Public Safety Training Center. I am a retired
8 veteran, 28 years active Army with the Army Reserve and
9 the Pennsylvania Air National Guard.

10 Since 2004, I've been a Pennsylvania
11 State Fire Academy local level instructor and I am a
12 past President of the Pennsylvania Association of
13 Hazardous Materials Technicians. I've been a volunteer
14 firefighter for over 26 years, serving in Montgomery,
15 Dauphin and Allegheny Counties.

16 Westmoreland County Community College is
17 in Southwest Pennsylvania, approximately 40 miles from
18 Downtown Pittsburgh. For the 2017-2018 academic year,
19 that's 2017, fall 2018, spring of 2018 summer, 7,701
20 undergraduate students took classes through
21 Westmoreland County Community College.

22 During the 2018 and 2019 school year,
23 the Public Safety Training Center trained over 3,700
24 students in the fire and EMS disciplines. That was a
25 143 percent increase over the 2017-2018 school year.

1 In November 2018, the Senate Resolution
2 6 Commission issued a report detailing the status of
3 EMS and fire services in the Commonwealth. The report
4 recommended that resources, funds and legislative
5 changes be swiftly enacted in order to improve the
6 infrastructure for public safety in the Commonwealth.

7 Westmoreland County Community College as
8 well as the other Pennsylvania community colleges and
9 Educational Training Agencies, such as Indiana
10 University of Pennsylvania, are uniquely positioned and
11 eager to work with policymakers to address this serious
12 threat to the Commonwealth.

13 Emergency services are essential
14 services to Pennsylvania's communities, the same
15 communities the community colleges are dedicated to
16 serving. Westmoreland County Community College is
17 committed to working with our educational partners,
18 local and county and state governments, to ensure that
19 Pennsylvania communities have the emergency services
20 workforce they need.

21 Pennsylvania's 14 publicly-established
22 community colleges organized under Article XIX-A of the
23 Public School Code are collectively the largest
24 provider of post - of public post-secondary education
25 in the Commonwealth. For over 50 years, in a variety

1 of educational settings and across various delivery
2 systems, the colleges have demonstrated agility and
3 flexibility in designing and offering academic and
4 workforce programming to meet the needs of the
5 students, employers and communities they serve.

6 The SR 6 Report correctly noted that
7 prior to 2005 Pennsylvania's community colleges were a
8 significant provider of high-quality, affordable public
9 safety training for emergency services. Under the
10 previous training and funding model, thousands of
11 individuals participated in credit and noncredit
12 programming that qualified them to provide these
13 essential services in their communities.

14 However, in 2005, funding changes
15 significantly increased the cost for community colleges
16 to offer the programs, resulting in declining
17 enrollments and in some cases program closures. While
18 some community colleges have been able to continue
19 offering programs, there are still significant
20 challenges in doing so. Nevertheless, Pennsylvania's
21 community colleges provide training. The Pennsylvania
22 Commission for Community Colleges estimates there were
23 more than 80,000 registrations for firefighting and EMS
24 training at Pennsylvania community colleges in the
25 2017-2018 academic year.

1 House Bill 1773 established a program to
2 provide tuition assistance for emergency services
3 personnel to pursue a postsecondary credential.
4 Eligible students would receive tuition assistance to
5 attend an approved institution of higher education,
6 including community colleges.

7 Westmoreland County Community College
8 supports House Bill 1773. We know that many students
9 who complete our emergency services training would like
10 to be able to attain a postsecondary credential, but
11 cost is a barrier. The program established in House
12 Bill 1773 would provide these individuals with the
13 financial support they need to pursue their
14 postsecondary educational goals.

15 If enacted, Westmoreland County
16 Community College is committed to working with the
17 agency to ensure full and efficient implementation of
18 the program. Based on our experience, we believe a
19 program such as this could be helpful in attracting and
20 retaining individuals to serve the Commonwealth in
21 these critical positions.

22 The mission of Pennsylvania's community
23 colleges is to offer an affordable, accessible
24 environment for all of our students to navigate their
25 postsecondary study and realize their postsecondary

1 educational goals. The colleges are particularly
2 well-equipped to support individuals involved in the
3 First Responder Loan Forgiveness Program through the
4 range of academic and nonacademic support offered by
5 the college.

6 We congratulate the Chairman, the
7 sponsors, the committee, Representative Struzzi for
8 addressing this important issue. We look forward to
9 working with you to ensure a postsecondary education
10 credential and that - ensuring a postsecondary
11 educational - education credential is available and
12 affordable to all, including those in the fire and EMS
13 communities.

14 Thank you. That's my prepared
15 testimony. I'm available for comment.

16 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Questions? Any
17 questions from the committee members?

18 Thank you very much. I actually sit on
19 the Board of Trustees of the Bucks County Community
20 College, so I know the importance that our community
21 colleges serve.

22 So I thank you both for your testimony
23 on this issue and also what you do to further educate
24 the people of the Commonwealth. Thank you very much.

25 I would like to thank Mr. Simon (sic)

1 again for - Simmons, excuse me - for again hosting us
2 here. I want to thank everybody for taking the time to
3 be here.

4 President, thank you for being here as
5 well. I know you have a very busy schedule. I also
6 want to thank Representative Struzzi and his staff for
7 helping organize this hearing. You did a fantastic
8 job. Thank the members and the staff for being here
9 today. I know many of you traveled a great distance.

10 And we will close with closing remarks
11 from Representative Struzzi.

12 REPRESENTATIVE STRUZZI: Thank you.

13 I don't want to keep anyone any longer,
14 but I also appreciate everyone who worked together to
15 make this happen today. I appreciate the committee
16 traveling to Indiana County. Obviously a very
17 important issue.

18 Some of the feedback I think will make
19 both these pieces of legislation better. And I look
20 forward to working with everyone to make sure that we
21 are solving this crisis of volunteerism. I understand
22 it's a cultural crisis as well, but the alternative to
23 not having volunteers is to pay firefighters and
24 emergency responders. And who's going to pay for that
25 but the taxpayers. So I appreciate everything that

1 everyone has done today.

2 I appreciate everyone who volunteers.
3 And I think we have to move this legislation forward,
4 so thank you for support of both these Bills. Safe
5 travels. Thank you.

6 CHAIRMAN FARRY: Thank you. The
7 hearing's adjourned.

8 * * * * *

9 HEARING CONCLUDED AT 12:45 P.M.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify, as the stenographic reporter, that the foregoing proceedings were taken stenographically by me, and thereafter reduced to typewriting by me or under my direction; and that this transcript is a true and accurate record to the best of my ability.

Dated the 27th day of September, 2019



Lacey Scott, Court Reporter