

I am here before you today for two reasons.

As president of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I care deeply for the students who attend my university. And, certainly, as an educator, I am always interested in advocating for any measure that will make obtaining a university education financially easier for Pennsylvanians.

I also am a resident of a rural county—*this* county, which relies on volunteers to staff our fire departments.

Rural Pennsylvania has a problem, and I know that comes as no surprise to you.

Let's look at national statistics. Of the nation's 29,819 fire departments, 65 percent of them are all volunteer, and another 18 percent are mostly volunteer.¹ Nationally, the number of men and women who volunteer to risk their lives as first responders has dropped by 200,000, from 884,600 in 1983 to 682,600 in 2017.²

Of those, in the same time period, the number of volunteers who were under the age of 30 dropped by 42,104.²

Here are statistics that hit closer to home. In 2018, *Government Technology* magazine reported that 90 percent of Pennsylvania's fire departments are volunteer. In 40 years, the number of volunteers has dropped from around 300,000 to just 38,000.³

I want to emphasize that I deeply appreciate those who face danger and volunteer. They train and plan often. They are on top of all the risks that you might typically find in rural areas—risks that have increased in recent years. They do this on their own time, because they value their communities, the camaraderie they experience, and the feeling that the work they do is appreciated.

The opioid epidemic is rampant in rural areas—as much a problem in our country communities as it is in the big cities, and it has brought with it risk to our first responders. Meanwhile, Councils of Governments, Chambers of Commerce, and other organizations are doing their best to attract new industry to Pennsylvania. With industry comes machinery, fuels, textiles, and more—all to benefit Pennsylvania’s economy, but they present possible danger, too. We all know that even with the best-laid safety and hazmat plans, accidents happen. Rural communities and their businesses depend on volunteers to respond. To keep our residents safe. To protect property. To protect the environment.

In fact, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania counts on volunteer first responders to protect its own property. IUP’s physical plant is owned by the commonwealth. When we built our last academic building, we consulted with the Indiana Fire Association to make sure the building didn’t exceed the height of the company’s aerial bucket truck. We store chemicals for our scientists to use in the labs.

We house thousands of students on campus overnight. On a working day, we could have as many as 13,000 or so people going about their business.

In the event of an emergency, we count on those volunteers to come with one simple phone call to 911, day or night.

PennDOT's District 10 complex is just around the corner. The State Police barracks is about a mile away. On the other side of town, SCI Pine Grove houses around a thousand inmates and has 19 operational structures.⁴

I've seen Indiana County's volunteer fire companies work very well together through mutual aid agreements. Indiana County covers 834 square miles. We have 27 volunteer departments, one Hazmat team, and one search and rescue unit. Some of those departments are quite small.⁵ They all have an incredible amount of responsibility.

So, while volunteer fire companies train, plan for disasters, and respond when called upon, they also must recruit new members and raise their own funds to purchase new equipment. Sure, they do receive annual grants from the commonwealth, but those grants don't begin to cover all expenses.

Fish dinners and spaghetti dinners and cash bashes and Saturday breakfasts abound in rural counties, all to benefit the purchase of new equipment.

A department in the southern part of Indiana County recently held a Drag Queen Bingo event, with volunteers dressed for the part. On the surface, that might seem amusing and fun, but think about the how creative these volunteers must be when pancakes and pierogies no longer pay the bills. Their efforts are commendable—and constant.

All of this is being done with *fewer* volunteers. Imagine the burden of giving up every weekend to train and to fundraise and then also be on call seven days a week—to drop whatever you are doing to respond to the 911 call.

If we must depend on volunteers, then we need to find a way to attract more. But, more important, we owe the volunteers more in recognition of the service they give us.

I serve on the board of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. One of the center's studies revealed that among a wide range of options to incentivize firefighting, volunteers counted college tuition assistance for themselves or their dependents among their top four choices.

In fact, 82 percent said it would have attracted them to initially volunteer. 81 percent said it would inspire them to become more active. 89 percent said it would compel them to continue serving.⁶

I see evidence of this on my own campus.

Several years ago, five of our county's fire departments worked together to earn a FEMA SAFER grant⁷ to create a scholarship for volunteer firefighters to attend IUP. SAFER stands for Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response.

Those five departments placed the grant in the hands of our foundation to manage, and our financial aid office awards the scholarships. It was a great effort, and it shows the value they place on offering an educational experience to their volunteers. Unfortunately, the amount of the grant generates only between \$250 and \$700 per student, depending on the number of qualifying applicants each year.

If you know anything about college expenses, you know that \$700 dollars doesn't do much at any campus in America.

At IUP, we've had a great relationship with the Indiana Fire Association, and we do what we can to financially support it, as well as Punxsutawney's Fire Department, because of our presence there. In fact, over the years, we have embedded students who also are volunteer firefighters in this station. The student receives free housing in return for being a member of the company's team and taking care of duties on station.

I've met many of them. They've been bright and enthusiastic human beings, and they deserve recognition for their service to their communities.

If the goal is to find a way to recruit more volunteer firefighters, and if those surveyed have said that tuition assistance would serve as an incentive to become a volunteer and continue to serve, then it seems apparent that amending Title 35 is the right thing to do.

I also offer a word of caution and a point of information. As you know, members of the Pennsylvania National Guard have access to a similar benefit. Last year at IUP, we had 134 National Guard members on our campus, and the program did not meet the tuition expenses of all of them. We filled a gap of about \$53,000. Some institutions are unable to do that—and some schools supplement a larger gap than others. It is important to have additional discussions across the State System and with others to not cause unintended disparities in access to the incentive.

This is a very important investment, but let's make sure it's a real investment and not a shift in funds that creates a burden to the participating institutions or that removes a benefit from other people.

Nonetheless, I support Representative Sainato's House Bill 1786 and Representative Struzzi's House Bill 1773 that would amend Title 35, and I urge you to do the same.

1. National Fire Protection Association via National Volunteer Fire Council website:
<https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/Emergency-Responders/US-fire-department-profile>
2. National Fire Protection Association via National Volunteer Fire Council website:
<https://www.nvfc.org/new-nfpa-report-finds-significant-decline-in-volunteer-firefighter-numbers/>
3. *Government Technology* magazine:
<https://www.govtech.com/em/preparedness/Report-Funding-Support-Needed-to-Fix-Public-Safety-Crisis-Caused-by-Volunteer-Firefighter-EMS-Shortage.html>

4. Department of Corrections website:
<https://www.cor.pa.gov/Facilities/StatePrisons/Pages/Pine-Grove.aspx>
5. Western Pennsylvania Fire News
<http://wpafirenews.com/wp2/features/company-profiles/indiana-county-fire-departments>
6. Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention in Rural Pennsylvania (page 14), Center for Rural Pennsylvania.
7. I found this out through conversations with Financial Aid and the Foundation for IUP. See some background here: <https://www.fema.gov/staffing-adequate-fire-emergency-response-grants>
In case anyone asks you, the VFDs that collaborated on the SAFER grant were Cherry Tree, Creekside, Indiana, Marion Center, and Plumville.