



pennsylvania

OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Office of the State Fire Commissioner

Testimony

**House Veterans Affairs and Emergency
Preparedness Committee**

February 18, 2020

Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and members of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committee, I am Bruce Trego, the State Fire Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 1819, which would amend Title 35 by creating a State Fire Commission which would service as the lead agency for fire services in the Commonwealth.

By way of background, the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) had its beginning in in 1976 with Governor Milton Shapp's appointment of the state's first fire commissioner. In 1981, Governor Richard Thornburgh reorganized the then-separate Fire Commissioner's Office, State Fire School, and Volunteer Loan Assistance Program as the Office of Fire Safety Services under the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). In 1995, under Governor Ridge the established the OSFC as an independent office which received administrative support from PEMA.

Due to the governmental structure in the Commonwealth, the fire service in Pennsylvania is decentralized and primarily governed at the local municipal level. The role of OSFC is to oversees the development and operation of Pennsylvania's emergency service training program, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP) that provides low-interest loans to volunteer fire and emergency services organizations, and the state's fire safety education program. In addition, the commissioner is responsible for the development of a comprehensive fire incident reporting system.

As you know, in 2018, the Senate Resolution 6 Commission issue their recommendations to improve fire and EMS services in the Commonwealth. OSFC appreciates the commitment shown by the General Assembly to the fire community following the release of SR6 and has been working to advance many of the recommendations in the report.

One of the recommendations included in the report was the creation of a State Fire Commission with the goal of establishing OSFC as the lead agency for fire services in the commonwealth.

We have reviewed House Bill 1819 and while we support many of the policy goals in the bill, we have some concerns as it is currently drafted. HB 1819 states that the Commission will hold all of the powers and duties while the State Fire Chief will oversee the office along with the Commission. Additionally, when the Commission votes on the issues related to their powers and duties, the Chief would only vote in the event of a tie.

Empowering the commission to have authority, rather than serving in an advisory role, could create challenging situations for future Commissioners/Chiefs. Having the Commission serve in an advisory capacity would allow the Commissioner to continue serving the Commonwealth's fire service. The Commission would be able to provide the Commissioner with recommendations for the future of the fire service but provide the Commissioner with the authority to decide on the appropriate actions.

Section 7386 of Title 35 already establishes a Fire Safety Advisory Committee, which could serve to fulfill many of the objectives of this legislation. The Fire Safety Advisory Committee has not been utilized in several years due to funding constraints that made it impossible to reimburse the travel and other reasonable expenses of the members, but the Office of the State Fire Commissioner is currently in the process of reestablishing this committee.

As currently constructed, the Fire Safety Advisory Committee consists of the PEMA Director, State Fire Commissioner, two paid fire fighters and one member of the public that are all appointed by the Governor, and four volunteer firefighters. One of the volunteer firefighters are appointed by each of the following individuals: President pro tempore of the Senate, Minority Leader of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Minority Leader of the House of Representatives. The committee would advise the commissioner on matters pertaining to the operation of the State Fire Academy and any other matter that the commissioner may request.

During recent meetings, leaders of the Commonwealth's fire community stated that, if utilized correctly, this committee would provide the voice that they seek on issues related to the fire service. While the composition of the Fire Safety Advisory Committee could be revised to better reflect the current environment of the Commonwealth's fire service. These changes would include representation from the combination fire companies whose presence continues to increase throughout the Commonwealth.

HB 1819 would also shift the responsibility for firefighters' relief from the Department of Community and Economic Development to the State Fire Commission. The issue of relief funds is a major issue that will require additional attention outside of switching agencies. It is our view that we need take a holistic look at the firefighters' relief funds. This legislation needs to be rewritten and retooled so that it can better meet the current needs of the firefighter community. The current program is so far removed from its original purpose, that it is inadequate to meet its current intentions. Switching agencies for relief funds will only shift the problem, not solve the problem.

This bill requires the Office of the State Fire Commissioner to administer additional programs, supervise additional personnel, and implement new initiatives, but the bill provides no additional funding to carry out these responsibilities. A few examples of these responsibilities are to oversee a statewide recruitment and retention coordinator, oversee a technical advisor for each of the eight geographic regions established in this bill, conduct inspections of fire companies, and administer the firefighters' relief funds. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner does not currently possess the resources and personnel to take on all these initiatives.

Using the eight geographic regions that will be used to determine representation on the commission and for the technical advisors should be reexamined. First, some of the geographic regions are far too large and will require excessive amounts of travelling for someone to serve as the technical advisor. An example of this is region III which extends from Franklin County the entire way up to Erie. PEMA uses a regional task force model for providing support to counties

for all-hazards preparedness and resource coordination. We believe that this model could be followed for the Commission.

Tasking the Commission to create a minimum standard of coverage would be beneficial for the Commonwealth fire services. These standards would ensure that all firefighters within the Commonwealth have a basic level of knowledge. This minimum standard of coverage will improve firefighter safety and help incident commanders manage all firefighters that are responding to the scene of a fire.

In summary, with some updates to the current OSFC we believe that we could address many of the issues outlined in the bill. Modification and proper utilization of the current Advisory Board and supplementing funding and increased staffing would have better results. I would like to thank Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato, and members of the Committee, for your support of OFSC and the fire services across the state. I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today and I will try to answer any questions you might have.