

Testimony of Steven W. Bair to the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

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Harrisburg, PA

Good afternoon I am Steve Bair, Chief of the Regional Fire Protection Program of the Centre Region Council of Governments in State College and Board President of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute. I began my fire service career as a volunteer firefighter in suburban Harrisburg in 1975 and in very early 2007 I ended my industrial career to begin my career as a fire chief in State College. Our regional program provides primary protection to 5 municipalities and the University Park Campus of the Pennsylvania State University. With four career personnel and 93 Alpha Fire Company volunteers we protect approximately 93,000 people in an area of 104 square miles and we respond to approximately 1,200 incidents annually. To put our service in some perspective, we are essentially the City of Allentown with a mostly volunteer fire department. In addition to fire protection our program also includes local emergency management, Fire Marshals who focus on investigations, and we manage the Penn State Hazmat Team.

I was honored to represent the Pennsylvania Association of Councils of Government on the SR 6 Commission, and I appreciate this opportunity to offer testimony on efforts to restructure the Office of the State Fire Commissioner. I thank Representative Davis and the co-sponsors of House Bill 1819 for their interest in, and assistance to, the Pennsylvania Fire Service.

My testimony today is focused on three elements of House Bill 1819; the creation of an independent State Fire Commission, the creation of the Fire Safety Advisory Committee, and the nomenclature used to identify the agency executive.

I support the creation of an independent State Fire Commission as recommended in the SR6 Report (Recommendation 5), and I agree its membership should be constructed in such manner to provide voice-of-the-customer from the whole of the Pennsylvania Fire Service. The challenges facing the fire service are complex and understanding these challenges in enough detail to address them can be a daunting task for individual Legislators. The solutions to address these challenges are also daunting as they often involve technical details, resource modeling, ever changing conditions, and specific localized needs. The SR6 Report repeatedly reminds its readers that Pennsylvania is not, nor will become, a one-size-fits-all enterprise.

House Bill 1819 in its current form provides fire service representation from eight geographic regions, with each region including approximately 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the Commonwealth's population. The remaining three voting members of the commission are a representative of business and industry, a certified architect representative, and an insurance industry representative. The scope of the commission's duties as described in this bill are directly focused on fire service performance, training, and administration. They are not focused on related elements such as building codes. Therefore, I believe a better voice-of-the-customer process and hence better outcomes will be achieved by modifying this bill to have all voting members

representing the fire service with those members drawn from ten geographic regions, each region representing approximately 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the Commonwealth's population. Business and industry, design professionals, and the insurance industry are already amply represented to the Legislature. The fire service has considerably less opportunity to participate in the Legislative process, which was the impetus for creating the Office of the State Fire Commissioner.

In addition to the State Fire Commission House Bill 1819 proposes establishment of a Fire Safety Advisory Committee. The stated charge of this committee is to advise the commissioner (or Chief as the defined nomenclature within the bill), on matters pertaining to the operation of the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy. This appears to conflict with the charge of the Commission to "Oversee the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy...." [a.7 (8)]. I am concerned that the fire academy could find itself trying to serve multiple masters, each with differing directives, guidance, and priorities. I believe this bill would be strengthened by eliminating the Fire Safety Advisory Committee component.

My final suggestion to improve this bill is to retain the title of Commissioner rather than adopt the term "Chief" to identify the agency executive. Within the fire service generally, a chief is subordinate to a commissioner and a commissioner usually has a broader scope of duties than those of a chief. I believe the proposed change in nomenclature will create more confusion and uncertainty rather than clarity.

This concludes my testimony on House Bill 1819. Thank you for providing me this opportunity to express my opinions to the Committee.