

**Testimony for the
Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee**

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PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Senator Baker, Senator Solobay, Senator Erickson, and Members of both Committees, I thank you for the opportunity to speak at today's hearing to discuss the challenges Pennsylvania's volunteer fire and emergency services face today. I am going to provide testimony not only on some of those challenges we see daily at the Governor's Center for Local Government Services but also the opportunities and success stories that we have been able to foster state-wide.

The Governor's Center for Local Government Services housed in the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) was established by Act 58 of 1996. The Center, by which we are commonly known, prides itself on providing technical assistance, training and many other resources to local governments across the Commonwealth. We are the One Stop Shop for local governments.

Fire and emergency services, especially the volunteer fire service, have a long history of providing all types of services to the citizens of Pennsylvania. Since 1736, volunteer firefighters have been the first line of defense when an emergency strikes. However, this long tradition of service is faced with many challenges today that could lead to public safety concerns in the coming years.

Although some would say the challenges being faced today are numerous, the two largest challenges are the decreasing number of volunteer firefighter and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) volunteers along with inadequate funding for the services.

Our number one problem is the decreasing numbers of volunteers. In the 1970's, it was estimated that there were approximately 300,000 volunteers in Pennsylvania; today the number is estimated to be 45,000 to 50,000 responders. Two-income families, changing demographics, long-distance commuting and a host of other things have slowly hammered away at the number of active volunteers. If the trend continues and is not reversed, by 2020 there may be no volunteer firefighters left in Pennsylvania or at least in large areas of the state.

The second challenge is inadequate funding. The traditional chicken barbeques, roast beef and oyster dinners, and gun raffles no longer earn adequate funds to pay for basic operating expenses. Although community and volunteer emergency service providers are working on funding solutions in some areas, in most places this is not occurring. A comprehensive review of local enabling tax legislation would be helpful. Today, communities rely almost solely on real estate taxes and numerous "cafeteria" style options to fund the system. Unfortunately, none of these options except real estate taxes generate enough

revenue to sustain the system alone. In order to provide adequate funding, the feasibility of new options should be considered. Unless funding is addressed, volunteer fire and EMS organizations will continue to struggle to keep the lights on. Local governments including counties cannot rely solely on the state for funds to operate the fire and emergency services in their community.

With these challenges making themselves apparent in 2008, the Center's leadership designated a dedicated staff person to assist emergency service organizations and local communities with the delivery of fire and emergency services. Since then, our office has refocused and developed several tools to deal with the delivery of emergency services. Although challenges still exist, steps are being taking to provide the needed services in this ever changing environment.

Technical expertise for new partnerships for the delivery of fire and emergency services is the number one request for assistance received under the shared services umbrella. Approximately three new requests per week arrive at our office. All types of new partnerships are being pursued state-wide including but not limited to mergers, consolidations, and multi-municipal efforts for the delivery of fire, EMS and emergency management (EMA) services.

In the last five years, those requests for assistance have dramatically increased. In Fiscal Year 2008-09, I conducted outreach to more than 300 persons and conducted more than two dozen field visits to meet with local emergency service providers, community leaders, and citizens.

The most recent fiscal year, 2012-13, the number of client contacts exceeded more than 1,800 and the number of field meetings elevated to more than 60. In the large majority of these instances, the outreach was conducted to provide resources and guidance to organizations that were developing a new strategic partnership for the delivery of emergency services. With these efforts, four out of five of those asking for guidance are rank and file members of the emergency service community – not necessarily the leadership or local elected officials.

In one way to support this initiative, the Center is working with people who already went through the new partnership process to showcase their efforts and provide additional guidance and resources to groups in their early stages. Our panel discussions and network of people is making the partnership idea very successful. This provides an opportunity to share their experiences with a group thinking about a new partnership.

We are also marketing basic administration courses through the PA Local Government Training Partnership. As new partnerships are being formalized, opportunities arise to correct problems that had been facing organizations. Courses in basic bookkeeping, basic accounting, and charts of accounts are being offered to not only our normal audience of local officials but emergency responders as well. This was done because of the struggle many volunteer organizations have in providing budget, audit and financial data to their members and local municipalities.

Another successful venture has been with Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) and the Pennsylvania Association of Non-Profit Organizations (PANO). With this effort, a

certified Fire and EMS Administrative Officer Course was developed and is now being provided by HACC. Providing new educational opportunities in the area of management and leadership will only help to strengthen our local emergency service organizations.

We are also recognizing in two ways those who are taking leadership roles in order to make their communities safer and create a better emergency service delivery model. In April of this year, the annual ***Governor's Award for Local Government Excellence*** recognized three groups of newly merged and consolidated fire and EMS organizations and the local government leaders. In each case, unique groups came together, put differences aside and worked diligently to create a better emergency service model.

In 2012, a dedicated award to highlight these efforts was created. The ***Cooperative Partnership Leadership Award*** is given annually at the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute's annual conference and dinner in November. The award highlights one new cooperative partnership that went above and beyond in creating their new service. Both of these awards bring more focus and attention to the proactive efforts occurring state-wide.

Our Peer Assistance Program has been revamped to provide facilitator services when needed. Whether it is working on a new partnership or expanding a current model, the Center has peer professionals who can provide direct, one-on-one assistance when requested. This is being conducted on a trial basis currently. If successful, additional Peers would be needed to assist groups state-wide.

From the funding side, DCED's Municipal Assistance Program (MAP) grant provides up to 50 percent of matching funds for eligible costs associated with newly merged or consolidated

services. During the start-up period, the need for professional services including an attorney, accountant and other professionals will be needed. Rebranding of apparatus, buildings and other equipment is also necessary. Our constituents have come to rely on the Municipal Assistance Program to help cover the start-up costs of these ventures.

As I've heard the Fire Commissioner Ed Mann say repeatedly, I too have never had a former volunteer firefighter or EMT tell me they quit because there was too much training. What I have heard is that they grew tired of the lack of leadership in the firehouse or they spent more time raising funds to support the fire company than actually responding to emergencies. Improving the delivery service model, developing a steady and reliable funding stream and providing the training needed to create leaders will provide much relief to this strained system.

Adams County is a great example of leadership and cooperation in Pennsylvania. Working together, the Adams County Commissioners, the Adams County Council of Governments and the Adams County Volunteer Emergency Services Association are addressing these and other challenges head on. Nowhere else in the state has such a comprehensive study been completed on the funding of emergency services.

Through the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, these agencies created a new partnership to address the challenges we face today. Do we need a total overhaul of legislation to fix the system? Positively not! Although some fixes may be in order, many of the tools we need to run a sustainable and efficient emergency services system already exists. What we do need is a higher level of cooperation and an unparalleled willingness to work together to accomplish this goal.

Although some would disagree with me, the Commonwealth does provide many types of financial support. Pennsylvania provides in excess of \$150 million each year to the fire and ambulance service through several programs including the Fire Company-Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), and the Fireman's Relief Fund. In order to strengthen the volunteer ranks, other possible areas of support could include free fire and EMS training, a tuition assistance program, and Length of Service Award Program. The real challenge with these programs would be finding the funds to support programs, but I truly believe the cost of acting now will be a lot less than waiting for the volunteer emergency services to continue to deteriorate.

In closing, I want to stress the importance of continuing the services currently being provided by not only DCED but also the Office of State Fire Commissioner, Bureau of EMS and other state agencies. Many professionals day in and day out provide a great level of service and work to address the challenges facing Pennsylvania's fire and emergency services. With that, we must also continue to foster existing relationships and build new partnerships between state and local governments, and other stakeholders. This includes counties, the PA fire and emergency services community - both career and volunteer - and other stakeholders. Working together, we can jointly develop a comprehensive plan on how we're going to deliver fire and emergency services in the 21st century. The safety of each and every one of our citizens and businesses depends on it.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.