

**COUNTY OF**



**ALLEGHENY**

**RICH FITZGERALD**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**Testimony of Chief Alvin Henderson, Jr., CEM, CFPS  
Allegheny County Emergency Services  
to the  
Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee  
September 2, 2015**

Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa and members of the Committee, I am Chief Alvin Henderson of the Allegheny County Department of Emergency Services. On behalf of County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, welcome to Allegheny County. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on efforts to amend the Emergency Management Services Code, commonly referred to as Title 35.

Located within the structure of Allegheny County Emergency Services are the county's 911 and dispatch center, county EMS and fire training programs, the Fire Marshal's Office and the Allegheny County Emergency Management Agency. We are the second largest county program in the state with a rich history of successful emergency and disaster response. Much of that success can be attributed to the efforts and dedication of our first responders and emergency service providers. Many of these providers are volunteers who step forward into harm's way, exemplifying a spirit and dedication to public service so common within that community. It is critical that we and this new legislation do all that can be done to protect them and provide for them in the event they are injured or tragically killed in the line of duty; before, during or after these events.

Each year there is conversation that Title 35 will be updated and passed, but it hasn't happened. We owe it to our volunteers, employees and citizens to move this legislation forward and get it enacted sometime soon. The nature of emergency management has changed markedly since this Code was originally put into effect. The events we must prepare for today were never even contemplated when these policies were first created. It was enacted before 9/11, Katrina, the 07 Valentine's day snow event, and before Hurricanes Irene and Sandy and Tropical Storm Lee (which on top of Irene brought the most significant flooding that our state had seen since Hurricane Agnes in 1972). The existing act never contemplated preparedness and response to global jihad, Marcellus Shale gas wells throughout the region and the 100 car Baken Crude Oil unit trains that pass through this county, including the City of Pittsburgh on a regular basis.

With that background, I believe there are five specific areas that a new bill needs to address. The first is to ensure adequate comprehensive workers compensation coverage for emergency management volunteers and workers, the backbone of emergency responders in this county and the state. It is increasingly difficult to attract, recruit and train those volunteers. We must assure them that an injury

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while engaging in our service will not bankrupt them or their families. Pennsylvania communities can ill afford its emergency services if they don't have a cadre of dedicated volunteers.

Second, a new bill needs to institutionalize change related to statewide interoperable emergency communications. While draft legislation has referred to the need for counties and municipal governments to build interoperable systems when possible, shouldn't that apply to the state as well? More than 15 years ago, this county and many other PA counties were promised by Harrisburg that if we supported the efforts for a new statewide 800 MHz statewide radio system, we would all be part of it. Well, we supported it and when it was built, the state agency in charge told us it was only for the state's use. It is time for the state to keep its promise to the counties and their emergency responders. The interoperability of emergency communications needs to be a priority in the Commonwealth at all levels for all emergency responders. A former PEMA Director used to say "any band any brand" – they all need to be capable of interoperating with each other. Let's not let one more person die because of a failure of radio communications. Please create a system where the only vested interest is to have the best system that works for the men and women that get sent out to do the job of helping everyone else in need, regardless of where that need is in Pennsylvania.

The third point, which relates to interoperability but also much more, is the completion of the Emergency Services Internet Protocol Broadband Network, commonly referred to as the ESINET. That capability is presently available in 24 Western PA counties and the City of Pittsburgh. It is designed as a system of connected systems. It saves capital dollars, operating dollars and it works. It is providing the platform for Next Generation 911 here in Western Pennsylvania. There are significant resources at the state level that can be committed to bringing this concept statewide, resources already bought, paid for and underutilized. The ESINET, besides saving money and reducing ongoing costs can save lives. Recently, I faced the nightmare that 911 center directors hope they never face; I had to order the evacuation and relocation of the second largest 911 center in the state. It was relocated for a week at dispersed temporary locations and not one (1) 911 call or dispatch was missed. Our Center, while in various locations, handled 33,957 calls for service at 100% continuity of operations. Proper pre-planning, the use of the Region 13 ESINET, the support of command post vehicles from the City of Pittsburgh and Region 13 Task Force Counties and the hard work of dedicated people created a successful situation that was totally transparent to the callers of 911. This system needs to be finished across the state and institutionalized within a new formalized state structure.

That leads me to my fourth point, the Regional Emergency Response Task Forces. The task force area in where you are sitting predates 9/11 and was created from the initiative and visionary leadership of 13 counties and a city. They saw a need to stop competing against each other for very limited preparedness resources and instead came together to plan, purchase, prepare, respond, recover and mitigate issues in a different way; in a cooperative, collaborative way. I'm sure you have heard that all disasters are local, that they start locally and they end locally. At the county level, our budget resources are constrained. We count on the support of our neighbors and we need a state partner that joins with us in an engaged partnership. The Task Forces need a state partner that has resources available to support operations beyond the capacity of the Region and member counties, before federal assets are engaged, as to not delay assistance to those in need.

Finally, the fifth point. Many disaster emergencies or events of a severe catastrophic nature are, locally, extremely devastating. As a result, that devastation is often beyond the financial ability of county and local governments to help yet the damages fall beneath the financial thresholds required for a federal disaster declaration. While there was some movement on this issue a year ago, more work needs done and funding committed towards the formalization of a statewide disaster assistance program. A program that assures that PEMA will be able to help our people and communities in need when FEMA can't is absolutely essential.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today as you deliberate changes to Title 35. I appreciate the chance to offer testimony today on this extremely important subject and am happy to make myself and my staff available to you as you move through this process as a resource.