



FIREMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

JOINT HOUSE AND SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE

INFORMATIONAL MEETING ON PROGRAMS & ISSUES OF CONCERN TO FIRE SERVICES COMMUNITY

MARCH 09, 2016

Every day lives, properties and communities are in danger due to the threat of fire, accidents, natural disasters, acts of terrorism and when help is requested, someone answers the call. Pennsylvania is very fortunate to have an active volunteer fire service community, deeply rooted in the tradition of public service and concern for one's neighbor and community. But the stark reality, as many of you know, is that the ranks of the fire service have declined precipitously in that last 30 years and we are facing a crisis. If this trend continues, you will undoubtedly see more departments closing their doors, due to the lack of staffing and the days of people voluntarily responding to the call for help will be a thing of the past.

Reversing this trend is one of the fire services greatest challenges, and consequently top priorities. If we are unsuccessful, the services that are performed today, at little or no cost, will be required to be provided by local governments. It has been estimated that the volunteer fire service saves state and local governments between **\$8-10 billion**. If we spread the cost evenly across the Commonwealth, that is \$134 million per county and \$3.5 million per municipality. Protecting lives, properties and communities is indeed expensive, and it cannot continue to be taken for granted or it will be lost.



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We believe that a nominal and recurring investment in keeping existing volunteers and inspiring others to join us, would prevent further decline in the number of volunteer firefighters. As Don mentioned, for the last several years, we have been using the recommendation contained in SR 60 to guide our legislative agenda. Primarily, we had been focused on enacting the proposed recruitment and retention tools, that if implemented, would result in no additional cost to the state. However, if we are to make a monumental change, the type of change that is required to draw a large group of people to volunteer their time and talent, we need a coordinated, multifaceted, and in part, state funded approach.

In various studies that have been conducted to determine which incentives would provide the best return on investment, the experts have pointed to relying more on a “toolbox approach” to recruitment and retention, as opposed to a few select options. What might work in a rural area, would be vastly different than what would be beneficial in an urban area. Similarly, what appeals to a high school student or young person out of college, would probably have little value to an established professional or mature individual. Identified options range from post secondary tuition credits, college loan forgiveness, various types of tax credits, including sales tax rebates for equipment purchases, state, local income and property tax credits and length of service programs. Many of these strategies have been introduced in one form or another over that last several legislative sessions. However, identifying a funding source has continued to be a very large obstacle that has yet to be overcome.

Understanding the tremendous fiscal constraints faced by the state, in the spring of last year, we proposed increasing the tax on foreign fire insurance premiums by one



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(1) percent. The tax would be levied on homeowner insurance policies that were written by non-Pennsylvania companies. The Department of Revenue anticipated that the increase in the tax would have raised \$35 million in FY 2015-2016 and would increase annually thereafter, \$47.7 million in 2016-2017.

The average cost for homeowner's insurance in Pennsylvania in 2016 is \$766. If the tax were increased by 1%, an additional \$7.66 would be added to annual premiums. An additional \$7.66 per household per year seems like a relatively small cost, and would be paid by the people that are actually receiving the services. Through the tireless efforts of Commissioner Solobay and many of you, our modified proposal was included in the overall negotiations regarding FY 2015-2016 budget. And, a 0.05 percent increase is contained in the Governor's proposed FY 2016-2017 budget, with \$10 million dedicated to the fire service. Obviously, we'd prefer that rate be raised by 1%, and that all of the proceeds from the tax on foreign fire insurance premiums be dedicated to the fire service.

If new money is provided we propose the following:

1. Increasing the amount that is distributed to municipalities for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations (VFRA's), whereby the minimum amount received by any VFRA would be a minimum of \$10,000;
2. Expanding the acceptable uses of VFRA funds to include recruitment and retention activities;
3. Dedicating the rest of the proceeds (approximately \$3 million) to developing and administering an online training program.



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Current and prospective firefighters have indicated that the number of classroom hours, the related costs, and the accessibility of quality training programs are three reasons why they are unable to complete training programs or decide not to join the fire service. We need to eliminate these barriers by making the necessary training free and available online. This will provide the flexibility needed for people to participate in training sessions on their schedule and complete the bulk of the “classroom portion” from their own computers. This alone will probably have the greatest impact on recruitment and retention, as people will be able to control where and when they engage in training exercises.

Securing this necessary funding is the Fireman’s Association of the State of Pennsylvania’s (FASP) top legislative priority this session.

Another area of focus is reauthorizing the Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program. Act 78-2012, which reauthorized this grant program, will sunset on June 30th 2016. Legislation needed to reauthorize this program is currently being drafted and we look forward to working with both Committees to ensure that this vital program is extended.

The volunteer fire service is telling all of us the time to act is now, before service further deteriorates and there isn’t anyone left to respond to the needs of our communities. Let’s commit today to preserve and strengthen one of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s biggest cost savings institutions, the volunteer fire and emergency services.