

Testimony of Joe Kovel  
President, Pennsylvania State Troopers Association  
March 28, 2012

The Impact of Reduced Trooper Complement

My name is Joe Kovel and I have the honor and privilege of serving as president of the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association, otherwise known as the PSTA. The PSTA represents the outstanding men and women who make up the finest state police organization in the nation. I want to thank the four chairmen—Sen. Pippy, Sen. Ferlo, Rep. Marsico and Rep. Caltagirone—as well as all the other members of the House and Senate committees for recognizing the extreme importance of adequately staffing the state police. Providing for public safety is a fundamental obligation of state government and Pennsylvania has a long and distinguished history of leadership among the states for maintaining a sharp focus on public safety.

Unlike our counterparts in many other states, the Pennsylvania State Police provides a full law enforcement service throughout the commonwealth. In addition to the traditional highway patrol, we also provide criminal investigations, drug interdiction, undercover police work, SERT teams, aviation units, forensic services including labs, DNA testing, and the State Police Fire Marshall. We provide criminal intelligence, vehicle theft units, finger printing, supervision of liquor code enforcement, gaming enforcement, port security, gang task forces, and work to detect and prevent acts of terrorism. I could continue to delineate even more services and responsibilities of the Pennsylvania State Police, as I truly just scratched the surface, but you get the point. We are tasked with great responsibilities, in terms of both providing the only police service in large areas of the commonwealth and providing professional police services to virtually every other police department and community located within Pennsylvania.

To state what might seem obvious, adequately meeting those obligations and responsibilities requires proper staffing levels. As many of you know, the PSTA has led the fight for years to see that our ranks had a sufficient number of troopers to ensure both public and officer safety. The four chairmen and the members of both of these committees have been great

advocates for us in those efforts, successfully adding to proposed funding levels to provide for greatly needed cadets.

Last year we were pleased and publicly thanked the governor for his proposal to fund 237 cadets, which the legislature included within the current budget. Unfortunately, only 45 of those cadets became a reality before **funding** for the remaining 192 cadets was placed into budgetary reserve. While we greatly appreciate the governor recommending a cadet class of 115 members during the upcoming fiscal year, it is woefully short of our very real need for a cadet class of close to 300 members, which we believe will merely maintain our currently staffing levels due to pending retirements and current vacancies. Failure to address the deficiency of troopers now places us in jeopardy of falling so far behind retirements that it will be impossible to get the job done without drastically redefining just what is the job.

The frank and honest assessment Commissioner **Noonan** provided during the appropriation hearings acknowledges that, at current and projected staffing levels, he cannot continue to provide the same level of services and presence within your communities as has been historically accomplished. So as he has stated, we will close barracks within your communities. We will eliminate or reduce some of the special details and enforcement efforts. How many of our gang interdiction personnel will need to shift back to highway patrol; how many of our specially trained meth lab cleanup team members will be assigned to other duties; and how many of our criminal investigators will be re-assigned to cover shortfalls? How much of our community presence and public safety services will be compromised because we just don't have enough troopers available?

The reality of the situation is our ranks are currently 357 below authorized levels. More than 170 current troopers have submitted their papers indicating their intent to retire. More troopers are expected to submit their papers in April, and even more are expected to retire following the settlement of current contract negotiations. Historically we average 150 troopers retiring in a calendar year; yet, here we sit in March already over that number and climbing. During the House appropriation hearing Commissioner **Noonan** acknowledged our ranks could, and I emphasize could, be as many as 1,000 troopers below authorized levels. That, ladies and gentlemen, would be catastrophic for public safety!

The currently depleted complement level is already taxing the ability of our members to adequately perform their duties and maintain the level of services expected and needed by your constituents. My members are frequently faced with the choice of following proper procedure or getting the job done.

Let me share a few examples. When troopers are called to respond to a domestic disturbance, department regulations require that two troopers respond. Now place yourself in the shoes of the first trooper to arrive. Do you sit there in the driveway waiting for who knows how long until another trooper arrives to assist while someone is getting battered in the house, or do you intervene? And if barracks are closed, the response times will only worsen. This scenario has happened to my members.

Department regulations require two troopers to be in the car when transporting prisoners; yet, due to depleted ranks, that duty is often performed with just one trooper. This not only places the safety of my members at risk, but also the safety of community residents should that prisoner escape because he was able to overpower one officer.

In counties where we are the only police presence we typically will have at least one car on patrol at all times. Will our reduced ranks result in us not maintaining a 24-hour patrol presence, forcing us to call troopers out only as needed? Ladies and gentlemen, if barracks are closed, when my members are called out to respond, they will have to travel greater distances to whatever barrack is open to retrieve a vehicle and equipment prior to responding. When you need help and seconds seem like minutes, and minutes like hours, I am afraid that the hours it will take to respond in those situations will seem like days.

There are numerous examples of issues that are impacting the morale of the individuals serving as troopers, including the difficulty of scheduling time off due to lack of personnel for coverage, facing angry residents because it took us so long to respond to their call for assistance, and the uncertainty of when or if backup will be there when needed. We want to perform our duties to the best of our abilities. We want to be responsive to calls for help. We want to catch the bad guy; that is why we become law enforcement officers.

All we ask is that our ranks are not allowed to be depleted to a level that endangers our citizens and my members. If we do not proactively address

our reduced ranks now, it will reach a point of financial impossibility to do so, and we will all pay a terrible price for that lack of foresight. Pennsylvania, without question, is on the verge of a public safety crisis.

We would welcome an opportunity for a follow-up hearing in which we can have troopers currently working in the field share with you their personal stories of how our depleted ranks are making it hard to successfully complete their duties. We also would like to suggest that perhaps a follow-up hearing be held in the communities that may be at risk of having the state police barracks closed so that committee members can observe first-hand how essential maintaining that police presence is for the proper servicing of those areas of the state.

Again, I want to thank the committee chairs for giving us this opportunity and for the committee members giving us their attention to this critical issue.

I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.