



**TESTIMONY BY  
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF  
TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS**

**BEFORE THE  
HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS AND  
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER  
RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

**PRESENTED BY**

**ELAM M. HERR  
ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**FEBRUARY 27, 2014**

**HARRISBURG, PA**

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Chairmen Barrar and members of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee:

Good morning. My name is Elam M. Herr and I am the assistant executive director for the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the 1,454 townships in Pennsylvania represented by the Association.

Townships comprise 95 percent of the Commonwealth's land area and are home to over 5.5 million Pennsylvanians — 44 percent of the state's population. These townships are diverse, ranging from rural communities with fewer than 200 residents to more populated communities with more than 60,000 residents. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an issue that impacts every township across the state.

The Association believes that state, federal, and local government are partners in the provision of public safety services for our residents, including emergency management, fire protection, police protection, and ambulance and rescue response. As the first responder, local government plays a critical role in ensuring the delivery of these vital services.

Volunteer fire departments and volunteer firefighters are the primary providers of fire protection in townships. We strongly support our volunteers for providing a valuable service, one that the government would need to provide if there weren't volunteers willing to prepare for and respond to incidents requiring rescue, fire suppression, and hazardous materials cleanup. The cost to replace our volunteer firefighters with paid fire service statewide has been estimated at nearly \$6 billion annually, which is why it is important to provide recruitment and retention incentives for volunteer emergency responders throughout the Commonwealth.

The responsibilities of these first responders have expanded over the years to include rescue, hazardous materials response, and terrorism prevention, which has significantly increased the training needed by these volunteers and, in turn, led to the reduction in willing volunteers.

Volunteer fire departments struggle with adequate funding sources and, according to the Department of Community and Economic Development's Municipal Statistic reports, 99.5 percent of townships reported contributing a total of \$163 million to help their volunteer fire departments in 2011. This is a more than 25 percent increase in contributions from townships since 2008, when DCED's records show that \$120 million was contributed by townships of the second class. In fact, 88 percent of reporting townships reported spending more than \$10,000 for fire protection and 43 percent reported spending more than \$50,000. These expenses ranged from \$478 from our smallest township, East Keating Township, Clinton County, to a largest reported expenditure of \$3.37 million from West Hanover Township, Dauphin County.

We encourage our members to work with their volunteer fire companies and to be proactive in discussing the needs, current and future, to make sure that our volunteers will remain active well into the future and can spend their time training and responding, not fundraising. This is a requirement that was added to all of the municipal codes several years ago. We also suggest that townships consider paying directly for needed equipment and vehicles, as well as making the township the legal owner of large equipment and vehicles in the unfortunate event that their volunteer fire company became unsustainable in the future. The more taxpayer funding is needed to support our volunteer fire departments, which appears to be our future, the more accountability will be needed to ensure that these funds are used properly.

While the commonwealth has taken important steps to improve public safety by implementing the recommendations of legislative task forces that studied emergency response, additional action is needed. The most urgent need is for the adoption of statewide volunteer benefit programs to strongly encourage the recruitment and retention of emergency service volunteers.

The Association supports the 2004 recommendations of the Senate Resolution 60 Commission that would help recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and emergency service personnel and strongly urges the General Assembly to implement the following:

- ♦ state tax credits or deductions for active volunteer firefighters and fire police;
- ♦ state tax credits or deductions for businesses that support volunteer fire and emergency service volunteers;
- ♦ educational tuition credits for volunteer fire and emergency medical service personnel enrolled in undergraduate-level courses at a Pennsylvania university or community college; and
- ♦ permissible benefits spending program that could be used by volunteer fire departments to provide benefits to active volunteer firefighters.

Numerous bills have been introduced and assigned to this committee that would address these issues. And although we support the concept behind the majority of these bills, there are issues that we contend should be addressed and corrected. We are more than willing to work with the staffs of this committee to address these concerns.

In accordance with the SR 60 recommendations, the Volunteer Firemen's Relief Association program should be restructured to return to the original program goal of providing minimum protection, including basic personal protection equipment, to all emergency responders. In addition, legislation is needed to establish criteria consistent with the intent of the act that would allow volunteer fire departments to use fire relief funds for the recruitment and retention of volunteers under the oversight of the state fire commissioner.

The Association has long supported legislation that would authorize fire companies to collect reimbursement from insurance companies for expenses incurred while responding to and cleaning up automobile accidents and other emergency incidents as an additional means of support. Another recommendation is that the state should provide

incentives to encourage cooperative purchasing among volunteer fire companies, such as grants and low-interest loans in order to reduce the costs of purchasing equipment. In addition, unnecessary administrative requirements should be eliminated for volunteer fire departments, which should be exempt from all state and federal taxes. The state should also authorize municipalities to voluntarily contribute to defined-contribution length-of-service appreciation programs for active volunteer firefighters and fire police.

Further, the General Assembly should give townships additional tools for funding public safety services, such as authorization for municipalities to assess emergency services impact fees on all new subdivisions and land development. In addition, townships should be authorized to collect a municipal services fee for state and federal facilities located within their boundaries to offset the costs of public safety services.

Our Association is also urging Congress to provide incentives for volunteerism at the federal level by amending the U.S. tax code to authorize the use of defined-contribution length-of-service appreciation programs for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; providing a federal income tax deduction for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; and offering a federal income tax deduction for employers who allow active volunteer firefighters and fire police to respond to emergencies during work hours.

Finally, the General Assembly should be careful to avoid benefits for a few of our volunteers that may unintentionally cause a significant increase in expenses and create an unfunded mandate, such as Act 46 of 2011 (*workers' compensation cancer presumption for firefighters*). Instead, the costs and benefits of all of the proposals should be examined carefully to ensure that we maximize our return for the taxpayer's dollar and create incentives that truly benefit our volunteer firefighters and other volunteer emergency responders.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment today and I will attempt to answer any questions that you may have.



# Mutual AID

WORK TOGETHER

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

**THE HAND-WRITING IS ON THE WALL:** Pennsylvania is on the verge of a public safety crisis, and it's being driven by the struggles of its volunteer fire companies. With donations and volunteers harder and harder to come by, the fear is that many local stations will be forced to close their doors. This sobering possibility, though, has led to lots of discussions and many townships to the same conclusion: Volunteer fire companies are simply too important to lose.



## VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

It was there in black and white, and it wasn't pretty.

As he read between the lines of the Union Fire Company's monthly reports, new township supervisor Nelson Ott Jr. grew increasingly alarmed.

For decades, the fire company had proudly served Union Township in Berks County, but by 2007 — the year Ott took office — its status in the community had shifted. No longer a social hub where generations of families would congregate and lend a hand with fund raising and fighting fires, the company was now a creaky, desolate place that very few people had the time, energy, or money to support.

With only a dozen active volunteers left, the fire company struggled to man the station and answer calls, Ott says. That meant neighboring companies several miles away had to fill the void, which lengthened response times — never a good situation when seconds can mean the difference between life, death, and property loss.

"The company in [neighboring] Birdsboro was coming to our aid a lot, but you know when I really realized that we were in trouble... that lives were at risk?" Ott asks. "It's when the fire company went to sell a truck. One of the firefighters climbed inside, and it wouldn't start.

"Something," he says, "had to be done."

### **The dollars and sense of keeping a tradition alive**

For Ott, the solution was clear: The two fire companies, Union and Birdsboro, needed to become one.

Eventually, they did, but the merger wasn't quick and it wasn't easy. Squabbles were common, and some volunteers were skeptical of the process and of Ott, who had never fought a fire in his life. "It was an uphill battle," the township supervisor recalls.

The situation, however, began improving after Ott joined the firefighters

**“If we would have to start replacing volunteer fire companies with paid fire companies, I don’t know any township that could afford that. The talk of it scares me to death.”**

at a practice drill and rushed with them into a burning building. He chuckles at the memory.

“When I got there, a lot of other people were standing around in their suits watching what was going on,” he says, “and there I was getting ready to go into that building.”

The supervisor’s willingness to take a little heat proved to the volunteers that he wanted to learn more about them and their passion for helping others. Ott demonstrated something else that day, too: a dedication to keeping Pennsylvania’s tradition of volunteer firefighting alive.

And it’s safe to say he isn’t alone.

Across Pennsylvania, municipal leaders are deepening their commitment to protecting and preserving local fire companies because the alternative, paid fire service — a venture that would cost well over \$1 million a year to operate — isn’t a realistic or affordable option.

What does make sense, however, is supporting volunteer firefighters, who provide the same community service at a fraction of the cost

Two local officials who clearly understand the value of volunteer fire protection are PSATS Executive Board members Shirl Barnhart, a supervisor for Morgan Township in Greene County, and A.J. Boni, a supervisor for Perry Township in Fayette County. Together, the pair has more than six decades of firefighting experience.

“These are people who volunteer to provide a service that townships are required by law to have in place, and we should do everything we can to make their job easier,” Barnhart says. “The fundraisers they sponsor make money to buy equipment that we are responsible

to provide so we should do what we can to help fire companies because without them, we have the job.”

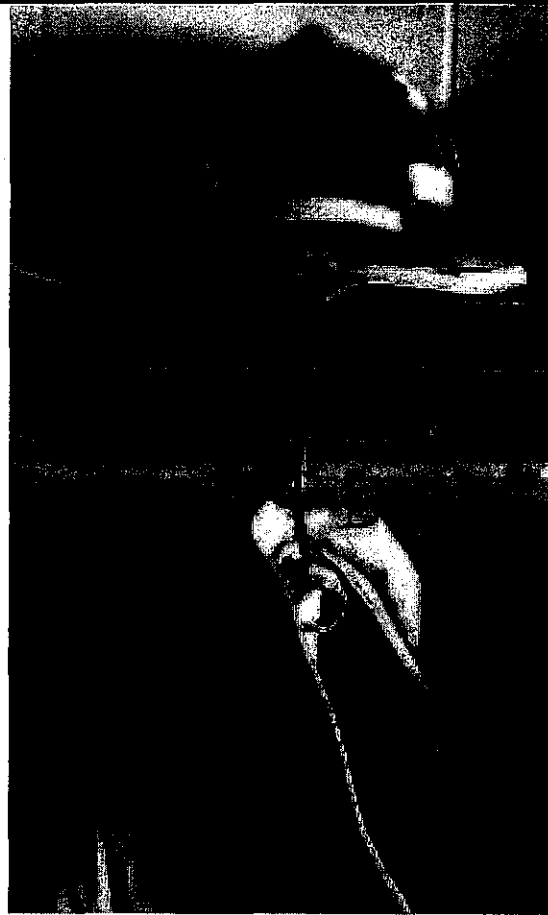
Boni shudders at the thought.

“If we would have to start replacing volunteer fire companies with paid fire companies, I don’t know any township that could afford that,” he says. “If you think police departments are expensive, then you’ve never looked into how much it costs to run a paid fire department.

“The talk of it scares me to death.”

Feeling that same concern, municipalities of all sizes are focusing on working cooperatively with their local fire companies to help them survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an approach that is taking many forms, says Rob Brady, a local government policy specialist with the Governor’s Center for Local Government Services who specializes in emergency service issues.

“We’re getting better on the level of



**“These are people who volunteer to provide a service that townships are required by law to have in place, and we should do everything we can to make their job easier.”**

# VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

cooperation," he recently told a local newspaper. (Note: Act 46 of 2011, which compensates firefighters diagnosed with cancer, has complicated this relationship as township's deal with the law's unintended consequences. For more about this, see the sidebar on the adjacent page.)

Some municipalities, like Union Township, have chosen to take the merger route. In other instances, fire companies have chosen to keep their own identities but are sharing equipment and manpower and even hosting joint fundraisers.

Another option, the local fire tax, has been enabling townships to dedicate up to 3 mills to help fire companies pay their operating expenses. In Old Lycoming Township, Lycoming County, the levy brings in \$150,000 a year.

"I sat down and figured out how many full-time paid firefighters we would need and what that would cost," supervisor and roadmaster John Eck says, "and then we asked ourselves: 'Can we afford \$1 million or \$150,000?'"

And that's where we are. At the time, it caused a bit of an uproar, but it just made sense."

And in at least one community, township employees have been trained to respond to daytime ambulance calls.

"This is not about closing fire houses," Brady has said. "It's about towns and firefighters deciding, 'What models can we use to make our communities safer?' Everyone has to look at the big picture."

## Saving lives and tax dollars

Because make no mistake, experts say: Pennsylvania is on the verge of a public safety crisis, driven by the dwindling resources, including money and manpower, of its volunteer fire companies.

"When the local garden club doesn't have enough volunteers to help, it just means you won't have flowers in the town square," state Fire Commissioner Ed Mann says, "but when the local fire company doesn't have enough volunteers, that has a direct impact on public safety."

William Jenaway, Ph.D., who chaired the Senate Resolution 60 Commission, which studied volunteer fire companies and their struggles in 2004, agrees: "Fires, rescues, hazardous materials inci-

dents, and emergency medical incidents require people to perform the necessary tasks to protect lives and property.

"Whether volunteer, part-paid, or career, people perform the tasks [and] without firefighters and medical responders, the job doesn't get done."

The decline in volunteers has been significant, Brady has reported.

"In the 1970s, 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," he recently told a panel of lawmakers. "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."

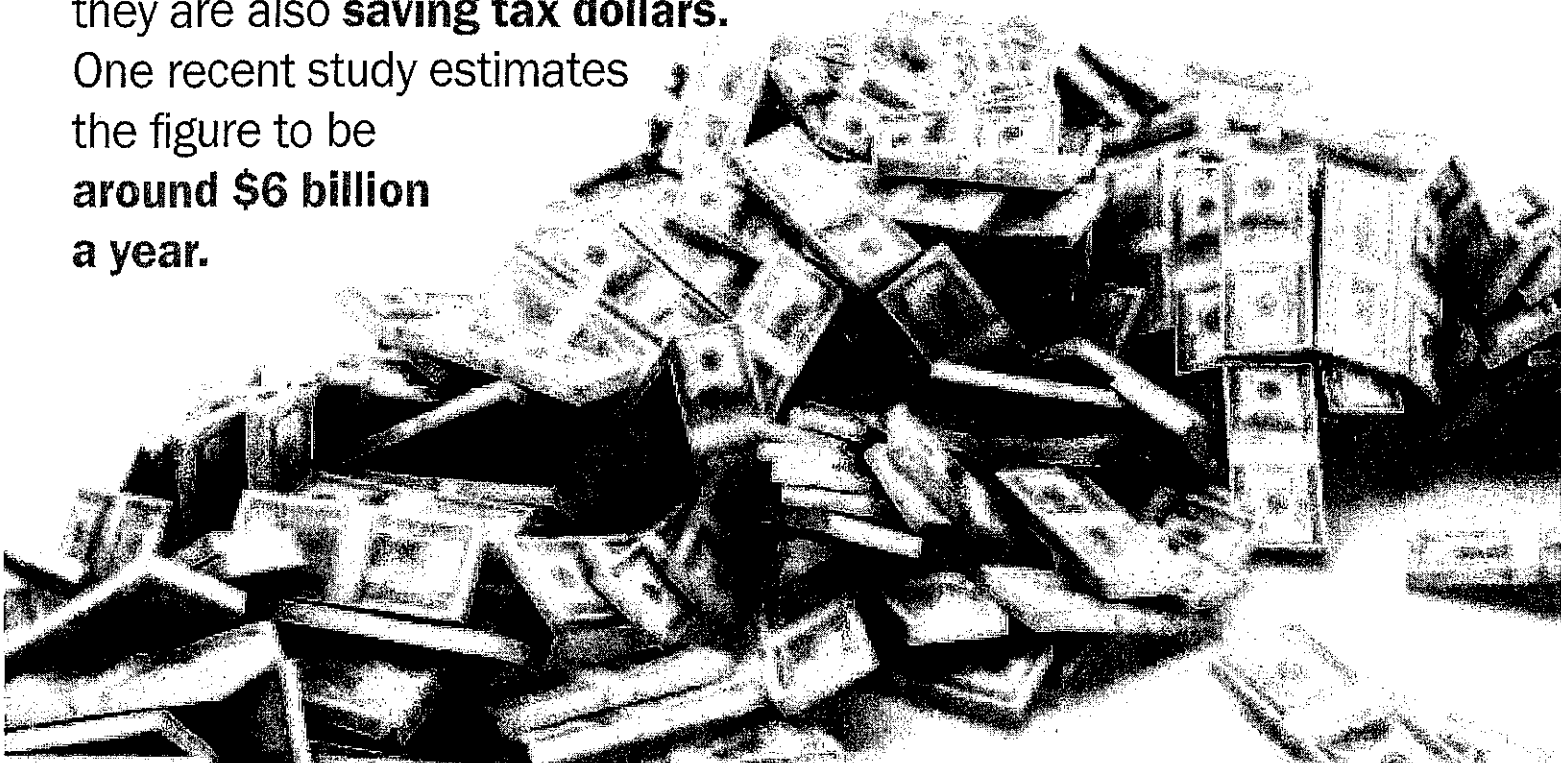
That's troubling news when you consider Pennsylvania's rich firefighting history.

The nation's first volunteer fire company was established here in the early 1700s, and to this day, the commonwealth has more volunteer fire companies — a figure estimated at around 2,300 — than any other state.

The companies and their volunteers, Mann says, are intertwined in the fabric of nearly every community, hosting parades and visits from Santa, bringing

As volunteer firefighters are **saving lives**,  
they are also **saving tax dollars**.

One recent study estimates  
the figure to be  
**around \$6 billion**  
a year.





# The hazards of Act 46

## Firefighter cancer law is escalating workers' comp premiums for townships

PSATS presses lawmakers to address act's unintended consequences

On paper, Act 46 of 2011 made a lot of sense. The idea was to recognize cancer as an occupational disease for firefighters and compensate them accordingly.

In reality, however, the law has created chaos in the insurance industry, causing some worried providers, concerned about a significant increase in cancer claims, to stop offering workers' compensation coverage. Meanwhile, premiums for municipalities, which under state law are required to provide these benefits to volunteer firefighters, have also soared.

Tobyhanna Township in Monroe County, for instance, was paying \$3,550 to cover its firefighters in 2010, the year before lawmakers enacted Act 46. By 2013, the township's rates for workers' comp insurance — now provided by the state after its previous carrier dropped the coverage — had skyrocketed to nearly \$20,000.

"Ever since the recession in 2008, it's just been one thing after another," supervisor Heidi Pickard says, ticking off thousands of dollars in revenues the township has lost through a decline in its earned income tax collections and the state's decision to no longer reimburse municipalities for sewage enforcement. "We've had to shuffle money around and, as a result, are giving less to everyone."

She says this includes the township's two volunteer fire companies, which are receiving fewer dollars for heating oil and vehicle repairs, two expenses the township used to cover.

"It's just a vicious circle," Pickard says.

### A cry for help

Other townships are feeling the pinch of Act 46, too.

In a survey PSATS conducted last summer, 37 percent of townships that responded have seen their workers' comp rates increase up to 25 percent. Another 15 percent are paying up to 50 percent more, while 11 percent of respondents are paying premiums that are up to 100 percent higher.

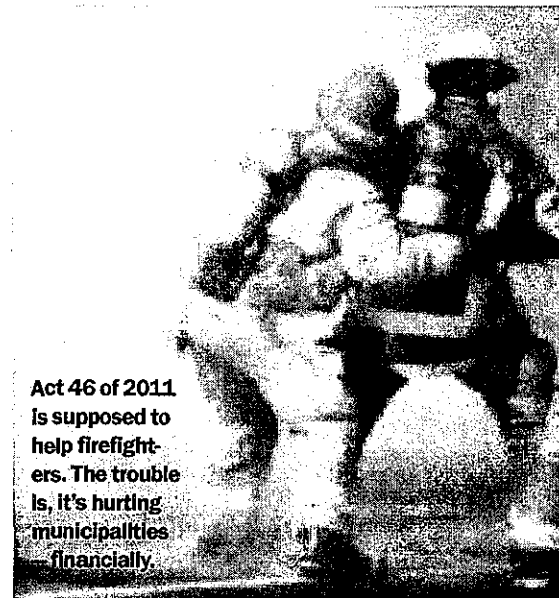
On average, workers' compensation insurance cost most townships nearly \$13,500 a year in 2013, the study found.

PSATS Assistant Executive Director Elam M. Herr pressed lawmakers to address the unintended consequences of Act 46 during recent testimony before a joint hearing of the House Labor and Industry Committee and the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee,

"Legislative fixes are needed to avoid further burdening municipalities and their taxpayers while appropriately providing coverage for our firefighters," he said.

Herr recommended that lawmakers take the following steps:

- **Reduce the liability and costs of individual claims by limiting the types of cancer that are covered under Act 46.** In addition, Herr said, the law should be amended to prohibit new claims if a third party (such as Medicare) is paying an individual's medical expenses and to cap medical expenses and other costs on a per-claim basis.
- **Clarify the term "substantial competent evidence"** to further delineate the information that townships may present to rebut the presumption that a volunteer's cancer was caused by firefighting activities. This clarification, Herr said, could help limit the need for litigation.
- **Require the state to provide all**



Act 46 of 2011 is supposed to help firefighters. The trouble is, it's hurting municipalities financially.

**or part of the additional costs and liability that have been imposed by Act 46.** Herr suggested that the commonwealth either establish a separate program for firefighters under the State Workers Insurance Fund or take on all costs and liability for the workers' comp coverage.

• **Strengthen Pennsylvania's municipal codes to allow minimum fitness levels for first responders.** PSATS strongly supports volunteer fire companies' efforts to recruit and retain volunteers. However, some who heed the call for help are not physically capable of performing the duties and become injured. This drives up townships' cost for workers' compensation coverage.

"Adjustments need to be made to the municipal codes to allow municipalities to require a minimum level of fitness for these responders," he told lawmakers.

# VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

neighbors together for monthly fried chicken dinners, and educating school children about fire safety.

"Fire companies are a vital part of the community," he says "and I don't think people realize just how much they'll lose, socially and otherwise, if they close."

Most local fire companies are independent operations — meaning they may or may not receive financial support from the municipalities they cover — and are overseen by men and women like Anthony Williams.

A member and former officer of the Rawlingsville Fire Co. in Lancaster County, Williams has devoted his life to protecting his neighbors and their property.

"It's in my blood; I don't know how to explain it," says the 30-year volunteer, who also serves as the emergency management coordinator for Martic and Pequea townships in Lancaster County. "It's not a switch you can turn off.

"I've left family meals and holiday celebrations and missed appointments because that tone has gone off," he adds. "It's what I do. It's something I have to do."

In many ways, PSATS' Shirl Barnhart says, being a volunteer firefighter is like being a township supervisor. "They don't get paid, and sometimes they don't even get a thank-you," he says. "It takes a special person to do something like that." (Note: For more about the similarities between township supervisors and local firefighters, see the sidebar at right.)

Meanwhile, as these volunteers are saving lives, they are also saving tax dollars. One recent study estimates the figure to be around \$6 billion a year. Given this, Pennsylvania's municipalities would be left with a huge public safety hole to fill if local fire companies begin shutting their doors *en masse*.

This sobering possibility has paved the way for lots of discussions and led many state and local officials to the same conclusion: Volunteer fire compa-

nies are simply too important to lose. "There has to be some recognition on the part of municipal officials, and I think there is, that we need our volunteer firefighters as much as they need us," Union Township's Nelson Ott Jr. says.

Townships also have to understand that like local government, also a product of another century, volunteer fire companies are fighting to remain relevant in a world that's changing around them.

## 'Those were the days...'

Looking back, Pat Angiolelli, a supervisor for Union Township in Lawrence County, can't remember a time when the local fire department *wasn't* a part of his life.

The eldest of five, Angiolelli recalls making dinner for his brothers and sisters while his parents were down at the station helping with chores and fundraisers. Later, fresh out of high school, Angiolelli joined the ranks himself. That was in 1979, and he is still active today.


"Those were the days when whole families belonged to the fire company, and everyone worked hand-in-hand raising money," says Angiolelli, a hint of sadness creeping into his voice. "I remember helping my dad at the fire hall, but you don't see many fathers bringing their sons in anymore. . ."

Times certainly have changed. Any firefighter will tell you that.

Some will say that volunteerism, the cornerstone of any thriving organization, is dead. Younger people, they scoff, aren't interested in helping. Others will say that residents are just too busy, pushed and pulled between work, family, and hobbies, to have time for anything else, much less running into burning buildings at 3 a.m. or serving up roast turkey on the weekends.

Fewer volunteers also mean that more demands are placed on those who remain at the station. The list of tasks is long, ranging from mundane chores, such as maintaining equipment, to life-saving calls for help. And then, of course, there is the whole issue of training.

"When I started in 1972, you would show up at the fire department, hope-

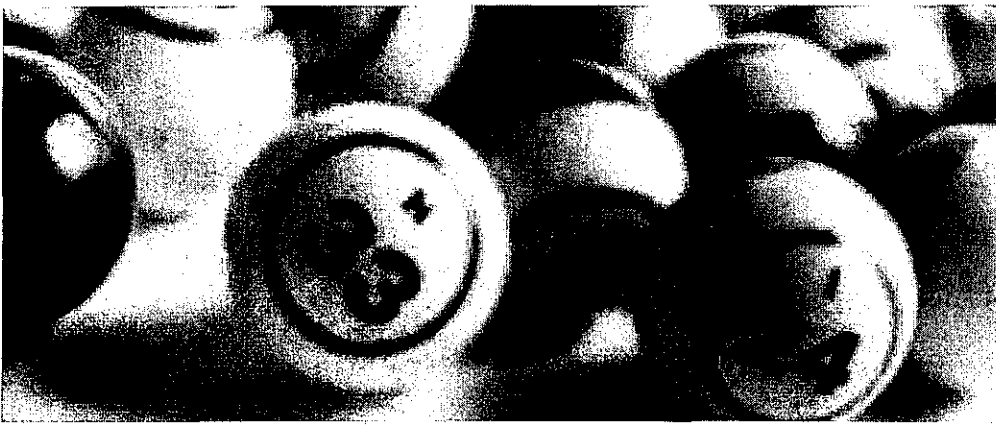


## Township supervisors, volunteer firefighters have a lot in common

It's been pointed out that there are many similarities between township supervisors and volunteer firefighters. Here are a few, but maybe you can think of more.

- Each is **doing more with less**, including funding and volunteers.
- They're often taken for granted. **Very few people realize the hard work they do** — in and out of the public eye — for their townships.
- They're on call, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and **spend many hours away from their families** while serving their community.
- **Their ranks are aging, and they are worried about the future**, wondering who is going to come along to fill their shoes.
- As their responsibilities increase, **training, and lots of it, is an essential part of the job.**
- **Neither can pinpoint why they do what they do.** They just know that something inside compels them to help their neighbors and strangers alike.





## VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

fully with some useable skills, and learn on the job," says Pete Albaugh, the fire marshal for Summit Township in Crawford County and an instructor for the State Fire Academy.

Today's volunteer firefighters, however, are expected to attend hundreds of hours of training before they can even begin helping at a scene, says Ben Thomas, manager of Cumberland Township in Adams County, who has 40 years of fire service under his belt.

"There's always something new you have to learn," he says. "It's a constant thing."

Paying the bills is another challenge. Back in the day, volunteer fire companies could count on the community's largesse and support themselves almost entirely with donations and fundraisers. Gifts of money, however, have slowed to a trickle, and fundraisers aren't turning a profit. Meanwhile, operating costs are skyrocketing.

"The traditional chicken barbecues, roast beef and oyster dinners, and gun raffles no longer earn adequate funds to pay for basic operating expenses," Rob Brady of the Governor's Center says.

For instance, it costs more than \$6,000 to suit up just one volunteer firefighter. And the equipment he needs to fight a blaze? Well, a rescue engine/pumper goes for nearly \$500,000, and an aerial ladder truck costs upwards of \$800,000.

"Who can afford that?" asks Angiolelli, recounting his department's search for a used aerial truck. "We searched and searched for the right one at the right price and finally found it in Missouri of all places."

Although the fire company tries to be as self-reliant as possible, he says, it does have a "buddy system" with neighboring departments, which support each other through mutual aid agreements, combined training and fundraising, and equipment sharing.

"We're not territorial," the supervisor says, "because we realize it's in everyone's best interest to keep all of our doors

## Too much fundraising could be hurting the local fire company, survey finds

Constant fundraising is a necessity for many volunteer fire companies in Pennsylvania, but it's also the reason that many recruits are quitting fire service.

This is just one of the findings in a 2012 survey of fire chiefs conducted by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute. The center compared the results to a similar survey conducted in 2001 on firefighter recruitment and retention patterns.

Below is a summary of the most recent findings:

### Larger fire companies are more successful at recruiting and retaining members

In general, the larger the fire company, the more successful it was at recruiting and retaining members. Additionally, larger companies tended to have bigger budgets and responded to more fire calls compared to smaller and mid-size companies.

### Female firefighters are still in short supply

While it is not unusual for fire companies to have female firefighters, it is unusual for companies to have more than a handful. The 2012 survey results indicated that while the majority of companies (79 percent) had at least one female firefighter, the average company had less than three.

### Most companies are able to recruit firefighters

The 2012 survey results indicated that more than 95 percent of fire companies recruited one or more firefighters that year. On average, companies recruited six new firefighters, and the majority of these new recruits were between 18 and 30 years old. Overall, companies had an average net increase of one new firefighter in 2012.

### Too many fundraisers are negatively affecting firefighter retention

Only one variable was correlated with the number of fundraising events: retention. In fact, it appears that the more fundraisers the fire company sponsored, the more firefighters that left or became inactive. This finding could suggest that too much fundraising may contribute to the loss of firefighters. However, it does not necessarily appear to deter new firefighters from joining.

### There has been little change in the number of firefighters

Data from the 2001 survey showed that the average fire company had 18.2 firefighters who regularly responded to calls. In 2012, the average was 16.8 firefighters. The difference between 2001 and 2012 was not statistically significant. While some companies may have seen a decline in the number of firefighters who respond to calls, most have seen little or no change.

open. We're focused on maintaining what we have, not on consolidating it."

Other critical support for the fire company comes from Union Township, which provides revenues from the local services tax to help firefighters purchase equipment. The township also pays for the fire company's heating fuel, gasoline, and insurance.

Angiolelli believes his dual role as a township supervisor and the fire company's president has helped both sides understand the need to work together.

"The supervisors realize that the fire company can't do it on its own anymore, and on the flip side," he says, "the firefighters don't see the township as a cash cow. There has to be education on both sides about what is changing."

Or, as expert William Jenaway puts it: "The fire and emergency medical systems in place today are NOT our grandfather's or our father's systems. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is demanding a revisiting of how fire and emergency medicine is provided."

And townships, he says, have to be at the forefront of that movement.

"There are no silver bullets," Jenaway says, "but this is a local problem, and that's where the solutions have to start."

In some communities, though, that can be easier said than done.

### Local solutions for a local problem

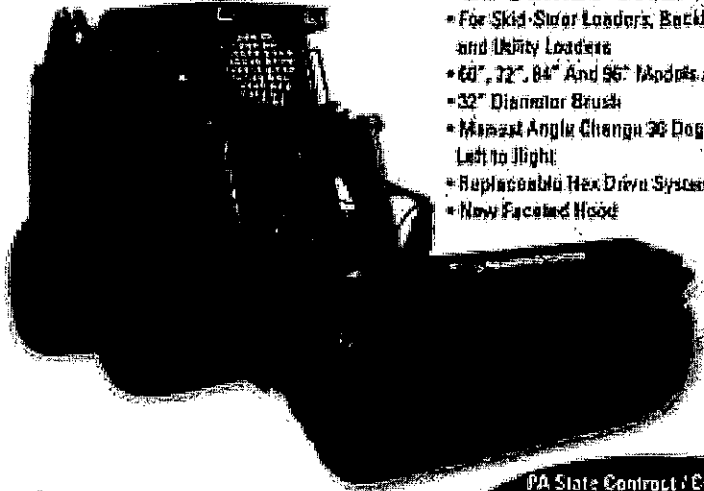
A recent email shared the story of a troubled relationship between one township and its volunteer fire company. After detailing years of mistrust, suspicion, and bullying, the sender closed with these words: "Please do not use my name. Retribution could be possible."

Don Konkle, executive director of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, isn't surprised. "There are lots of places where the relationship between the municipality and the firefighters works well," he says, "and then there are those places where it's broken."

At times, personalities have been at the root of these disruptive clashes. At others, fire company members simply didn't like the township supervisors sticking their noses in the station's business.

"That's a big challenge in some

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# VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

places,” Perry Township supervisor A.J. Boni says. “The fire companies are reluctant to welcome township officials with open arms, and truthfully, they shouldn’t wait until they need something to start building that rapport. By then, it’s just too late.”

In 2008, the state took a stab at restoring the disconnected lines of communication with the passage of Act 7 of 2008, a result of the SR 60 Commission report. The law did two key things: It clarified that municipalities are responsible for fire protection — and with this

authority, supervisors have the right to see fire company records. Act 7 also encouraged local leaders and firefighters to hold regular meetings.

William Jenaway, the commission’s chair and a supervisor for Upper Merion Township in Montgomery County, says the group supported Act 7 because negotiating, bartering, and talking really do work.

“The places that have been most successful in helping their fire companies,” he says, “are the ones where everyone sat down, talked, and developed a plan to get from Point A to Point B.”

Don Konkle agrees: “We think building that relationship is critical, and in those places where it’s not happening, everyone is missing out.”

Regular meetings between township

supervisors and firefighters, Konkle says, provide an opportunity to work toward common goals and put everything on the table, including the level of fire protection that’s available in the community, as well as the fire company’s needs for funding, manpower, and training.

He cautions, though, that it’s important for everyone to have realistic expectations, especially firefighters.

“Firefighters have to understand that they are not going to get 50 percent of the township budget for fire protection,” Konkle says, “and they also have to realize they need to be held accountable for whatever funding they receive because, really, who else would a township give \$40,000 to and say, ‘Have a nice day!’”

Are these meetings easy? Not always, but are they worth it? Konkle believes so.

**“The places that have been most successful in helping their fire companies are the ones where everyone sat down, talked, and developed a plan to get from Point A to Point B.”**

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"No doubt, things have changed," he says, "but that whole concept of 'we're in this together' is what's going to carry everyone through."

And that's exactly what they're hoping for in places like Adams County, where local leaders are tackling the future of fire protection in unique and meaningful ways.

### A starting point

Faced with a puzzle, the Adams County Council of Governments, a group of township, borough, and school district leaders, began looking for answers to a question that is confounding many local governments today: What can we do to help our ailing volunteer fire companies?

This question, in turn, led the COG on a 14-month quest that culminated with a \$13,000 report, which found that an extra dose of public money would be the best medicine for the county's fire departments. Now, all 34 municipalities in Adams County are being asked to voluntarily implement a quarter-mill fire tax to help sustain volunteer firefighting.

Barb Underwood, a COG member and chair of the Cumberland Township Board of Supervisors, doesn't believe the proposed tax is an ideal solution but does feel it's a useful starting point, she says.

"None of us wanted to raise taxes, but we needed to find an equitable way to fund our fire departments because we want to help them," Underwood says, noting that the fire tax strikes a good balance. It won't overburden taxpayers — the owner of a home assessed at \$200,000 would pay \$50 a year — but would create a stable funding stream to reimburse the companies for their operating expenses.

"Nothing is perfect," the supervisor adds, "but it is the best formula we could come up with."

Since the fire tax idea was floated last spring, Underwood says the reaction among municipalities has been mixed.

"Some are on board with the tax," she says, adding that her township supports it, "and others aren't so I don't know how things will unfold."

Underwood is encouraged, though,

## Lawmakers step up with money and other help to keep volunteer fire companies' doors open

Studies are good, but action is even better, and the way state Fire Commissioner Ed Mann sees the situation, it's going to take a concerted effort to help Pennsylvania's volunteer fire companies survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"There must be a true partnership between state and local governments and the fire service to develop a comprehensive tool box of solutions to the issues facing the Pennsylvania fire service today and in the future," Mann says.

Mann is encouraged by efforts unfolding in places like Adams County, where a group of local officials studied the future of fire protection there and are now asking all 34 municipalities to levy a quarter-mill fire tax.

The state has been helpful, too, he says, noting that the commonwealth "provides in excess of \$150 million each year to the volunteer fire service."

Much of this state funding arrives through the Firemen's Relief Fund, the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program, and the Fire Company-Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program, which was recently reauthorized for another four years and received a \$5 million annual increase.

In 2012, lawmakers also passed Act 13, the natural gas impact fee law, which included \$750,000 for Mann's office to provide training. In addition, counties and municipalities in the Marcellus Shale region that receive a share of the revenues can use the funding to improve fire protection. For instance, Morgan Township in Greene County has funneled \$80,000 in impact fee revenues to its two small fire companies over the past two years.

And Harrisburg has more help in the pipeline, including bills that would:

- **Authorize state tax credits** to employers who allow employees to leave work to respond to an emergency and attend training.
- **Double the current loan amounts** available through the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program, which helps fire and ambulance companies purchase equipment. Incentives would also be offered to companies that merge or consolidate. This would mark the first major changes to the program since 1984.
- **Provide a \$500 state income tax credit** to volunteers, including firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, and members of ambulance and rescue squads.

Thoughtful proposals like these are critical to firefighting's future, Mann says.

"There are no easy answers, but it's obvious that we don't need any more studies — we've studied this enough," he says. "It's time to get serious and act. The safety of our citizens depends on it. We simply cannot sit by and do nothing at all."

**"There are no easy answers, but it's obvious that we don't need any more studies — we've studied this enough. It's time to get serious and act."**

## VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

that the proposal is getting township supervisors and volunteer firefighters to sit down and have a conversation about the future. "Some of these people haven't talked in years," she says, "and it's good to see those conversations starting."

When similar discussions were held in Harborcreek Township, Erie County, the township supervisors came up with a much different, but just as creative, approach. By providing manpower to answer daytime EMS calls, they are helping the three local volunteer fire companies recover lost revenues.

Today, the township subsidizes Team 237, a group of seven employees, including two township supervisors, Tim May and Joe Peck, who have been trained to administer first aid and drive an ambulance. And when emergency calls come in during work hours — 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. — the staffers will stop



**Team 237, a group of supervisors and employees representing Harborcreek Township, Erie County, assists the municipality's three fire departments with daytime emergency calls. Members include, from left, Code Enforcement Officer Brian Benovic, Parks Department employee Don Erbin, Parks Coordinator Krista Jelley, and township supervisors Tim May and Joe Peck. (Reprinted with permission from Times Publishing Co., Erie, Pa. Copyright 2013.)**

what they're doing and, with the township's blessing, head out to the scene.

"It's a far better option than a paid fire department," supervisor Dean Pepi-

cello says. "That would be crushing to a township like ours and many others."

Since 2012, the team has responded to 450 calls, everything from cardiac arrests to fires, and generated \$225,000 in revenue for the fire company.

"Each time an ambulance goes out, that's \$500 to \$800 that can be billed to an insurance company," Peck says. "Before, when the fire company didn't have any people available during the day, they were dropping those calls. Team 237 was able to help with that."

"We're saving lives and property and, in turn, keeping revenue coming into the fire company," adds team leader Brian Benovic, the township's code enforcement officer. "It's really been a win-win all the way around."

Brian Hawryliw, chief of the Fairfield Hose Co., one of three companies that are assisted by Team 237, agrees: "We're very fortunate in Harborcreek Township. We have an amazing relationship with the supervisors. If we need anything, they will help us out. Everyone works together." ♦

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