

Mark Kirchgasser – President, The Delaware County Association of Township Officials  
Testimony Regarding Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

February 27, 2014

Chairman Barrar, Democratic Chair Sainato, distinguished members of this committee, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify to you today regarding Volunteer Firefighter Retention and Recruitment in the State of Pennsylvania. My name is Mark Kirchgasser and I serve as President of the Delaware County Association of Township Officials (DCATO) and I am Chairman of Middletown Township Council. I'm here today to share with you a problem that our Association and leaders from our member municipalities have identified as our greatest collective problem; the eroding base of volunteer emergency responders in our Townships.

They say you can't fix something until you make a really good problem statement. So I'll try to be clear about the issues facing municipalities in Delaware County and throughout the State as I can:

- 97% of the firefighters in Pennsylvania are volunteers. These are unique men and women; multiple times a week they will drop what they're doing, including sleeping, respond to their Fire Station to turn out apparatus towards someone in need. They'll spend on average just over one hour per event, making way to the scene before returning to work, their families or often back to sleep.

And they do this for free of their own time to help others

- The Volunteer Fire Companies in Pennsylvania save an estimated \$6B in local government costs
  - Each volunteer is worth about \$12,400 in annual municipal savings
- The number of volunteer firefighters in the State of Pennsylvania have declined
  - From 300,000 in the 70's
  - To 70,000 in the late 90's
  - To under 50,000 today
- While the ranks have declined, the burdens have dramatically increased
  - Call volumes have more than tripled since the 70's
  - Severity of calls have increased
  - Training requirements have increased
  - Increased liability and tort exposure against their performance in the Field

**To summarize:** over the past 30 years the number of volunteers has fallen by 84%, call volumes have tripled and time required to meet training and certification minimums have more than doubled. The average responder in our township will make just 25% of the total number of emergency calls in a year, this represents 150 times where the volunteer will have dropped what they were doing to help out a neighbor or someone else in need. This averages to about 1 emergency call every 2.4

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days, about 1.5 hours per call from departing base through return to base. Add in weekly training and the typical commitment is around a full work day each week, but we should note that these are eight unplanned hours. The Volunteer Firefighter community is a unique group – theirs is a commitment that's difficult to explain and certainly a be-attitude that exemplifies the best of our citizens in Delaware County. Our problem is that while the need for their time has never been greater; their ranks have never been smaller. If something is not done to build and retain the ranks of our volunteer departments, we will no longer be able to rely on a Volunteer service to provide emergency response in our communities. And the financial costs associated with this loss will be significant.

This erosion of volunteers is something the Municipalities in Delaware County are working together, with both Fire Department and municipal leaders, to address.

**Department Consolidation:** A concerted effort has begun in Delaware County to merge stations and resources. In our Township we just completed the merger of The Lenni Heights and Lima Fire Companies into the Rocky Run Fire Company. Four other new departments have been formed in Delaware County with at least four more that I'm aware of. Ten years ago these mergers were unthinkable given the inter-departmental hubris, now they're a regular occurrence in the interest of surviving. The benefit is the consolidation of manpower and assets albeit across a larger response area.

**Municipal Funding:** A majority of municipalities in Delaware County are supporting their volunteer Fire Companies financially through vehicle fueling, house and apparatus insurance and in some cases apparatus purchase. In Middletown, 7.5% of our annual operating budget is allocated to our now two Volunteer departments. In addition we purchase two front line apparatus for each department: To provide you a sense of cost against this a new first due pumper, nothing fancy, was approved for bid by our Township on Monday @ \$559,000, new ladder trucks can easily double that price to over \$1,000,000. Ultimately we'll spend over \$2,000,000 on a full four unit apparatus replacement cycle.

**Mutual Aid Responses with Neighboring Municipalities:** The two Middletown Township companies will adjust the amount and type mutual assists from neighboring municipalities to ensure proper incident staffing based on day and time. Weekdays when manpower is

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lowest more departments will be called, on weekends or nighttime lower levels of Mutual Aid are required.

**Daytime Staffing:** A number of higher volume Volunteer companies have resorted to paid drivers and limited crew in order to ensure they are getting out the door during daytime hours – historically the most difficult time to get Volunteers to respond. DCATO municipalities Concord and Newtown Townships employ daytime staffing which, in turn, benefits neighboring communities who, in mutual aid agreements with Concord and Newtown also benefit from staffed responses

As Municipal Leaders we have options available to financially address these two of the three legs Volunteer Fire Departments operate upon; Station / Operations and apparatus. The third and most important leg are the people, the volunteers that make this work. And I'm here today to tell you we will need your help to keep them.

Any potential progress in retaining or adding Volunteer Firefighters lies in getting two areas very right: improving the recruiting process for new volunteers and keeping them past the age of 22 once we have them.

**1<sup>st</sup> - Recruiting:** Long Term and Short Term solutions

The key for our departments has been to get recruits involved when their interest is peaked. And they are going straight for their biggest fans to get them interested: our elementary school students! Fire Prevention week has become an interactive time between our Fire Companies and local kids and parents with collector card trading programs featuring our local volunteers, police and EMS. They hold an interactive 'Thrill Show' on a weekend night for kids to see how firefighters extinguish car fires and extract victims from car accidents. **The problem** is it takes about 10 years to see an ROI although we're seeing annual interest as we cycle the program.

A local Junior Firefighter summer camp has recently been started allowing youth aged 11 to 13 to spend a week of their summer as a Rescue, Truck or Engine company member doing various firefighting functions, including getting very wet. The program has been a major success and has

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already been filled for the summer of 2014. Wait here is only about five years before we can get a structure firefighter (age 18).

Delaware County Departments are also developing new recruiting and membership vehicles:

- Live in or ride along programs for College Students. Some departments are providing free room and board to local college students in exchange for their staffing and responding to emergencies. Typically highly qualified volunteers who want to continue firefighting while away from home at school. This program works for departments proximate to colleges and universities.
- High School minimum volunteer graduation requirements: Departments are seeing some students meet their minimums by volunteering in and around the station. There is an opportunity to be developed to get students from helping *around* the station to participating on the fire ground
- Member's kids. The vast majority of long term members county-wide are legacy families – multiple generations of brothers and sisters serving

Recruiting Firefighter aged members is a much more difficult task – as you'll hear in a moment.

**2<sup>nd</sup> - Volunteer Firefighter Retention:**

I think the problem of retention can best be articulated by clustering the ages of the Top 10 responders at Middletown Fire Company from 2013: Five of them are aged 58 and above, five are 22 and below. The burden of this Department's response, and others across Delaware County, are borne largely upon newer members just out of high school or college, starting new careers and vocations, and those members at the ends of their careers who have more discretionary time on their hands. A general polling of our local Departments showed this clustering of ages is common among responders throughout Delaware County and it's this 30-some-year age gap that I'd like to focus on with you today.

Departments are losing their best qualified Volunteer Firefighters, younger, better fit and better trained because, quite simply their lives are getting in the way. They get full time jobs, they get married, they have families and they just don't have the time or flexibility or reward from eight hours or more a week of unplanned responses to the Firehouse. We lose not only solid, active members

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but also the investment of the hours of training getting these volunteers certified in Firefighting, Vehicle Rescue and other critical skill sets. These so called Gen X firefighters are not easily replaced; typically the increased response burden will fall on nominally younger or significantly older firefighters to get apparatus out. To 'Scratch' or be replaced on a dispatch because you did not get a unit out the door is particularly demeaning between departments in the volunteer service and volunteers will do all they can to avoid scratching. This often results in over-burdening members, the so called 80:20 set, until manpower again evens out.

But there is some good news among this Gen X set; these members have some very common interests that we believe – if properly capitalized upon – could allow us to retain their services and advanced skill sets over the years to come, albeit at a lower turnout frequency than was previously enjoyed.

- Their new families and establishing a nest egg
- Education, both for themselves and their families
- Firefighting. Once it's in you, it's hard to get it out.

We believe that there is hope in retaining this key set of members by providing incentive in the form of a family equity that they can build by continuing to volunteer at a predetermined, prescribed levels to earn credits against an equity. Examples of these types of equities might be:

- Education credits at State institutions that would be transferrable to spouses and children
- State Tax credits
- Annual credits earned against a state savings account

Remember that we're not incenting *participation*, we're incenting the retention of already trained volunteers by allowing them to earn valuable incentives to support their common interests – their families – while remaining active in the volunteer fire service. Controls can easily be set against earning against this equity:

- A minimum window of consecutive of active service to qualify for the equity program with a statewide, universal definition of 'Active'

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Testimony Regarding Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

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- Once you've qualified the Volunteer would earn credits within a capped model based on minimum levels of volunteer service
  - A service gap of a pre-determined consecutive amount would require the volunteer to re-qualify for the equity program
  - Active Military service would not penalize the volunteer
  - A hardship qualifier could also be earned or spent back to address gaps in consecutive service
- Training certifications and call tabulation software would serve as measurable control mechanisms to prevent any abuse
- We're not talking a free college education here! But we are proposing earned college or savings credits from the state that would be utilized by the member's immediate family or one generation detached (to broaden it's application)

As a municipality or a county we readily and willingly assist with the operational financial needs of our Volunteer Companies. But we simply lack the scale, ability and access to provide the type of a solution needed to address the skilled volunteer firefighters we're losing. This is where why we're here asking for your help.

So please allow me appeal to your sensibilities as legislators; how your investment will provide you a measureable return to the taxpayers in the state of Pennsylvania. At risk here are billions of dollars in annual lost services that our communities benefit from. On the other side of the failure of our Volunteer service are costs that will be borne by local taxpayers in the form of progressively incremental paid services that replace the current volunteer model. As an example, Middletown Township is a 15.1 square mile community of 16,000 residents, 5,000 single family households, three public schools, a struggling mall, a hospital and a growing crossroads as we absorb traffic from outlying community's growth. Perhaps we're similar to some of the towns in your constituencies. Our annual budget is \$3.8M, our cost estimate to replace our volunteers would increase our annual budget by \$2.0M, and given our revenue structure would require a 200% increase in real property taxes to our residents. Our volunteers are quite valuable indeed.

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In the interest of full disclosure; next week I will begin my 35<sup>th</sup> year as a member of the Middletown Volunteer Fire Company No. 1. My father was a volunteer, his Grandfather was a volunteer and our 12 year old son, if his mother lets him, will be the next in our family to serve. I've not been as active as I was 15 years ago, but I turn out when I can. In 1995 I was participating in one of our Fire Prevention week outreach programs at our local elementary school, went crawling into a Kindergarten class and met my future wife who was teaching that day. Volunteer Firefighting has been a large part of mine and my family's lives. So I can share with you today not only as a municipal leader, but as one who has seen many come, and many go from our ranks over my 34 years.

When once describing our volunteer system to a colleague at work he had a question: 'What happens if nobody shows up?'. It was a great question then, it's a very real one now. I'm here to tell you I think we have a very workable solution here to an increasingly significant statewide problem that, when combined with other service sustaining programs that Commissioner Mann's office is advocating, would provide a comprehensive template for municipalities to work from to preserve this very valuable and important part of the Commonwealth's fabric. Mr. Chairman, I look forward to assisting your committee in any way possible to make an equity based retention system work for the State of Pennsylvania. On behalf of the Members of the Delaware County Association of Township Officials and the 49 municipalities in Delaware County, thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you this morning.

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