



Testimony to
Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

Recruitment and Retention in the EMS system of
Pennsylvania

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Good morning Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and distinguished members of the committee, I am Richard Gibbons, Director of the Department of Health's Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (BEMS). Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to provide testimony today on recruitment and retention efforts for volunteer responders in our EMS system.

Volunteer recruitment and retention remains one of the largest challenges that our EMS system faces. While this challenge is not unique to EMS or even emergency services, it remains a troubling state and national problem.

One of the biggest barriers to being able to confront the issue of recruiting and retaining volunteers is that we have little, if any, good data about the volunteer work force. As was pointed out in "The Emergency Medical Services Workforce Agenda for the Future" published in 2011, "[l]ittle is known about the size, distribution, composition and demographics of the volunteer EMS workforce; or about factors related to satisfaction and retention among volunteers".¹

In order to develop better recruitment and retention initiatives it is important for us to better understand the workforce we are targeting. The answers to questions such as: "Why do people leave?", "Why did they volunteer in the first place?", and "What is most meaningful to them?" are needed to be successful in our efforts to recruit and retain a quality workforce, volunteer or otherwise. One suggestion to gain valuable insight into how to help address these issues is to conduct an exit interview to provide volunteers the opportunity to candidly discuss their reasons for leaving an organization.

We continue to lose people in the EMS system due to the increased educational demands, the increasing cost of education and the increasing number of regulations. The educational

¹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "The Emergency Medical Services Workforce Agenda for the Future", May 2011, p. 9

requirements take longer and are more demanding due to the fact that our EMS system is more complex than it used to be. Public expectations of the EMS system are much higher than they were 50 years ago.

Today we have assisted mediations, automated external defibrillators, incident command education and disaster medicine as part of our basic education. Our system has grown to the point that the depth and breadth of the skills required look nothing like the original courses many of us took. With increased complexity and skill levels required for EMS volunteers comes an increase in the cost of education. These costs, which are not controlled by the Department of Health, have continued to climb over the years.

To help address this situation, several regional EMS councils through the Emergency Services Operating Fund (EMSOF) grant process have prioritized recruitment and retention programs. One of our regional councils, EMMCO-West, is starting two programs using EMSOF funding. One is an EMS Scholarship and the other is a distance learning project. The scholarship program enables agencies to apply to use EMSOF funding to pay for the initial education and testing of EMS students. The program is just starting but the early application numbers look promising. Distance learning is a much different education style that provides great potential from a recruitment perspective. Having the ability for someone in Tioga County to take a course on line, at their own pace, is potentially a great method for getting new people into the system.

While there are obviously many logistics to be worked out, we are committed to assisting these programs by providing some flexibility while maintaining the integrity of both the educational and testing process.

Other programs designed to increase volunteer recruitment target students in junior high and high school. One such program is "Summer Camps" for EMS which encourages young adults to participate in week long activities designed to build their interest in EMS and emergency services. Another program is daytime and summer EMS classes that are routinely scheduled around the commonwealth in an effort to capture the young audiences and encourage their participation in emergency services. Another exciting opportunity that we have, thanks to the new national education standards, is the opportunity for providers to "bridge" their education from one level to another. These "bridge" programs allow a provider to build upon the knowledge of their current certification to obtain a higher certification level. In other words, it is now possible for a certified Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) to take a modified course, allowing them to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). Likewise, an EMT could become an Advanced EMT and an Advanced EMT could become a Paramedic without having to take the entire certification programs from the beginning.

We believe this "bridge" program has tremendous potential, allowing agencies to start new recruits off in an EMR program which is shorter and less expensive. The individual gains the opportunity to see if they are truly interested in continuing before investing additional funding in their education. Individuals also receive the chance to obtain higher certifications in a shorter amount of time than what was previously needed.

Although our purpose today is focused on the volunteer issues, these issues are not unique to only the volunteer sector in EMS. The combination of low pay, long hours, difficult work and, in some cases, the need to work multiple jobs is taking a toll on our EMS work force in general.

I wish I could tell you that I have the magic answer that will cure all of the recruitment and retention challenges within emergency services in the Commonwealth. What I can tell you is that we have a system and partners who are committed to exploring new recruitment and retention options in an ever changing, dynamic system.

Thank you for your time and interest and I welcome any questions you may have.