

Statement for the House Appropriations Committee

March 8, 2016

OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Timothy Solobay, State Fire Commissioner

Chairman Browne, Chairman Hughes, and Members of the Committee, I am Tim Solobay, the State Fire Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement and discuss Governor Wolf's 2016-2017 budget request for the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC).

I want you to know that Governor Wolf and his administration maintains a very strong commitment to the fire service -- both paid and volunteer -- across the commonwealth. As many of you know, along with being the Fire Commissioner, I serve as assistant Fire Chief for the volunteer company in my home town. I care deeply about the safety of our firefighter and have a keen understanding of the issues that affect the fire service across all levels of the commonwealth. Each day, the members of fire services put their lives on the line to save others. Because of that, we need to ensure that at the state level we do the very best we can to ensure they have the resources necessary to maximize their safety. Our goal -- as the motto of the program to prevent line-of-duty deaths says -- is to ensure that "Everyone Goes Home™" safely after responding to a fire.

The Fire Company and Ambulance Service Grant Program is one of the most important programs for the fire service. The program is up for re-authorization this year and we have been

working with the standing committees to complete it by June 30th. The last time the General Assembly re-authorized the program it provided an additional \$5 million in funds to the grant awards, added career fire departments to the grant program, and provided additional funding to restore training programs.

The grant program has been very successful since its inception and this year is no exception. This past year we awarded 2,036 grants to fire companies and 504 grants to volunteer ambulance services. The average grant to a fire department was \$12,966.59 and the grants provided to ambulance services averaged \$7,142.86.

In addition to the grant program, a second major program that assists the fire services is the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP). The VLAP is one of the major sources of funding for our volunteer fire companies and volunteer ambulance services. The VLAP continues to provide essential help with construction of new buildings, acquisition of apparatus, and the purchase of equipment. Changes made to the law in 2013 increased the loan amounts and extended the repayment period which was greatly appreciated by the volunteer fire services. OSFC provides an average of \$2 million in low interest loans in addition to managing the loans that have already been approved. While the VLAP has been successful, we would like the General Assembly to consider expanding the program to include fire service and ambulance services in third class cities.

There are several matters that the Office of the State Fire Commissioner is looking to discuss with the General Assembly this year. One priority is recruitment and retention issues regarding our volunteer fire service. The number of volunteers continues to decline year after year. We all need to consider how we can best address this issue. We encourage the legislature to consider legislation that has been introduced to provide incentives for volunteer firefighters including length of service awards programs (LOSAP), tuition rebates to members with student loans, and similar incentives. A second priority is to update the Firefighter Relief Fund law which has updated in quite some time. The third priority is to provide additional funding to volunteer fire companies. We are hoping to add an additional 0.5% to the existing 2% premium of fire and property casualty insurance. This would provide \$10 million to OSFC of which up to 75% would be directed to increase the amount volunteer fire companies receive. The remainder would be used to allow OSFC to develop and operate an online training system of all of our current programs at the academy, as well as reimburse department that send members to traditional training.

As Governor Wolf has said -- public safety is core function of government. My office plays a very important role in ensuring that the fire service is prepared to provide this crucial public safety service to all the citizens of the commonwealth. Governor Wolf is committed to providing the necessary resources for this core governmental function. Without question, Governor Wolf's proposed 2016-2017 budget for OSFC provides the required resources that give a very solid foundation for us to accomplish our important public safety mission.

Chairman Browne, Chairman Hughes, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Governor Wolf and the twelve million Pennsylvanians we serve, I thank for your continued support of OSFC and the Pennsylvania fire service. I believe that with Governor Wolf's commitment and your continued support of our mission, the Pennsylvania fire service will continue to be one of the preeminent fire services in the nation.

I am happy to answer any questions that you might have.