

State Representative  
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**REPORT**  
*to the 55th*

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## AN UPDATE ON STATE ISSUES REGARDING OUR FIRST RESPONDERS



Dear Friend,

I want to offer a big "thank you" to all you firefighters and first responders who willingly put your lives at risk to help others. Your families and significant others also deserve thanks.

All too often, we, the general public, take for granted the seriousness and critical nature of your work and you do this while placing yourself in harm's way. This newsletter is meant to highlight state issues which may impact you as emergency responders.

### Local emergency responders receive state grants

Each year, grants are awarded to emergency responders from the Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program, which is funded by gaming revenue and property tax relief funding. For fiscal year 2015-16, 2,538 grants were awarded statewide.

Our fire departments and emergency service providers often spend countless hours fundraising to ensure their equipment and training are up to date so they can help keep us safe. These grants are a vital source of funding, which helps them focus on their service to their communities.

**The following first responder groups in our area received state grants this year:**

#### Armstrong County

- Apollo Volunteer Fire Dept. Hose Co. No. 2 – \$12,195
- Apollo Volunteer Fire Dept. Hose Co. No. 3 – \$11,967
- Leechburg Volunteer Fire Co. – \$11,511
- Lower Kiski Ambulance Service Inc. – \$12,650
- Parks Township Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$11,511

#### Indiana County

- Saltsburg Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$12,422

#### Westmoreland County

- Avonmore Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$11,511
- Bell Township Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$12,195
- Derry Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$11,739
- Derry Township Volunteer Fire Dept. No. 1 of Bradenville – \$12,195
- Free Service Fire Unit No. 6, Latrobe – \$11,511
- Freewill Volunteer Hose Co. No. 3 and 4, Latrobe – \$11,511
- George G. McMurtry Fire Dept. Vandergrift No. 1 – \$13,789
- Good Friends Hose Co. No. 5, Latrobe – \$11,511
- Goodwill Hose Co. No. 1, Latrobe – \$11,511
- Hook & Ladder Co. 2 Latrobe Volunteer Fire Dept. (Fire) – \$11,967
- Hook & Ladder Co. 2 Latrobe Volunteer Fire Dept. (EMS) – \$6,949
- Hyde Park Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$12,878
- Lloydsville Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$13,789
- New Alexandria Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$11,967
- Oklahoma Volunteer Fire Dept. 1 (Fire) – \$12,195

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## Petrarca supports grant program extension

The Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant program has been invaluable in helping our fire and EMS companies provide the services that keep us safe, which is why I was proud to vote for legislation that became law to extend the program for an additional four years.

Other changes:

- The program also adds career EMS agencies and volunteer EMS agencies that are associated with a hospital to apply for these grants, provided they are designated as a municipality's primary EMS provider.
- Authorizes the use of a bonus point system for departments with no more than 20 firefighters certified at 1 level or higher.
- Permits merged volunteer fire companies to continue to receive a larger grant for 10 years.
- Requires fire companies to have responded to at least 10 fire or rescue emergencies in the previous year and actively participate in the Pennsylvania Fire Information Reporting System to be eligible for the program.

First responders sacrifice their time and safety for the benefit of others, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude for the services they provide our community.

## Background checks required for those who work with junior firefighters

I wanted to remind you of a state law that requires background checks for volunteers and employees who work with children. This includes those who work with junior firefighters and other junior first responders.

EMS-specific information on the state's background check law is available online at the Office of the State Fire Commissioner: [www.osfc.pa.gov](http://www.osfc.pa.gov) under the items of interest.

Volunteers and employees who work with children under the age of 18 need up to three separate background checks:

- Pennsylvania State Police criminal report. The police report can be ordered online at <https://epatch.state.pa.us>.
- Child Abuse History Clearance from the Department of Human Services. To order the Child Abuse History Clearance, you need to create an account through the Department of Human Services at <http://bit.ly/1GIVJZf>.
- An FBI criminal history report is also required if:  
The volunteer position is paid and the volunteer has lived outside of Pennsylvania sometime during the previous 10 years. That report can be ordered at [https://www.pa.cogentid.com/index\\_dpw.htm](https://www.pa.cogentid.com/index_dpw.htm).

The clearances must then be renewed every five years.

State background check fees have been waived for volunteers. Those whose employment requires the checks also had their state fees reduced to \$8 each. Unfortunately, the state has no control over the cost of the FBI background check, which is currently \$27.50. If your department is a paid department, any paid staff who have the oversight of children must purchase their background checks.

More information is available at the website [www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov](http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov).



*Rep. Petrarca visits with Father Stephen West and Derry area firefighters at the Blue Mass held in July at St. Joseph Parish.*

**The Center for Rural PA has reported that there are about 50,000 volunteer firefighters in PA, down from nearly 300,000 in the 1970s. Nearly 60 percent of all PA rural volunteer fire departments have operating budgets of less than \$100,000 per year.**



# Here is a summary of new laws impacting first responders and other bills I support that are under consideration in the General Assembly.

## **Act 84 of 2015**

### **EMS direct reimbursement**

This law guarantees timely payments to EMS providers, while also protecting patients from balance billing that can lead to unexpected costs.

It requires that reimbursement of medically necessary services be made directly to an EMS agency by an insurance company when the EMS agency was dispatched for emergency services.

## **Act 57 of 2015**

### **Highway donation soliciting**

This law permits a first responder organization to solicit donations at a controlled intersection with a stop sign or traffic signal.

## **H.B. 1988**

This bill would require certain paid fire chiefs to receive the same salary increases as the highest ranking fire officer. Fire chiefs or heads of fire departments who have been removed from a bargaining unit because they are considered management and not a member of the bargaining unit, would receive the same benefits as the highest ranking officer in the bargaining unit.

The bill passed the House and was sent to the Senate.

## **H.B. 2058**

This bill would authorize paramedics to help law enforcement in drawing blood from people suspected of certain DUI violations.

This bill passed the House and is under consideration in the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

## **H.B. 2148**

This bill would include additional first responders in the definition of a firefighter under the Heart and Lung Act to ensure that all first responders in a department are treated equally when it comes to disability benefits. This would include firefighters at airports, state firefighters, EMS personnel employed by a fire department and state fire marshals.

The bill passed the House and was sent to the Senate.

## **H.B. 397**

This bill would guarantee that EMS volunteers are covered under Workers' Compensation rules, providing coverage that's already given to volunteer firefighters who are injured while performing their duties.

The bill is under consideration in the House Labor and Industry Committee.

## **H.B. 422**

This bill would make volunteer stand-alone quick response services, such as river rescue squads, eligible for the current state Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program.



This bill is under consideration in the House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

## **H.B. 979**

This bill would allow a voter referendum directing up to \$10 million of previously approved money for volunteer fire and EMS to be used as loans for funding equipment purchases.

The bill is under consideration in the House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

## **H.B. 1617 and S.B. 296**

These bills would increase penalties for any injuries or deaths that result from the act of "swatting," or faking the originating position of a fraudulent 9-1-1 call in the effort to draw a SWAT team or emergency personnel. The bill also would allow courts to order the originator to repay actual costs of the faked call.

The Senate bill passed the Senate and is under consideration in the House Judiciary Committee, of which I am Democratic chairman. The House bill also is in the Judiciary Committee.

## **S.B. 986**

This bill would offer Good Samaritan civil liability immunity for someone who breaks a window or otherwise damages a vehicle in an effort to save an unattended child who may be locked inside a hot vehicle and in danger of heatstroke or death.

The bill passed the Senate and is under consideration in the House Judiciary Committee.

## **S.B. 25**

This bill would expand the Police Officer, Firefighter, Correction Employee and National Guard Member Child Beneficiary Educational Program, a tuition waiver program, to include surviving spouses of firefighters killed in the line of duty.

The bill is under consideration in the Senate Education Committee.



## S.B. 26

This bill would establish a tuition credit program of up to \$600 a year for a volunteer or family member who attends a community college. A volunteer would have to agree to serve the emergency response team for a minimum of four years, and the student would need to maintain a "C" average to extend coverage for the maximum of four years.

The bill is under consideration in the Senate Education Committee.

## S.B. 27

This bill would offer educational assistance grants and student loan forgiveness for volunteer emergency service personnel. Annual educational grants of up to \$3,700 would be available to Pennsylvania residents who have been a volunteer in good standing for over a year. Loan forgiveness also would be available for qualified volunteers, with a maximum forgiveness of \$2,000 per year up to \$10,000 over five years.

The bill is under consideration in the Senate Education Committee.

## S.B. 136

This bill would permit a driver of an emergency vehicle to leave the scene of an accident he or she is involved in under certain conditions without penalty. The driver would be allowed to leave the scene to respond to the initial emergency or to continue to transport a victim from the initial emergency, as long as another person acting on the driver's behalf remains at the scene or the driver is in radio communication with the responders to the accident.

This bill is under consideration in the Senate Transportation Committee.

## S.B. 267

This bill would include EMTs and paramedics in the definition of a firefighter under the Heart and Lung Act to ensure that all first responders in a department are treated equally.

This bill is under consideration in the Senate Labor and Industry Committee.

### The following first responder groups in our area received state grants this year:

- Oklahoma Volunteer Fire Dept. 1 (EMS) – \$7,201
- Rough Terrain Support Unit, Latrobe – \$13,789
- Vandergrift Fire Dept. No. 2 (Fire) – \$11,391
- Vandergrift Fire Dept. No. 2 (EMS) – \$7,201
- Washington Township Volunteer Fire Co. No. 1 of Westmoreland County – \$12,650
- West Leechburg Volunteer Fire Co. – \$11,511
- Whitney Hostetter Volunteer Fire Dept. – \$11,739
- Youngstown Volunteer Fire Dept. and Relief Association – \$13,789

Grants can be used toward repairing, building or renovating facilities. Grant money also can be applied toward the purchase of new equipment, training and certification of staff, or it may go to repay debt related to equipment purchases or facility building and maintenance.

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**Volunteer firefighters save municipalities across the state nearly \$10 billion in local tax savings annually.**

## MY OFFICE CAN HELP YOU WITH:

- Property Tax/Rent Rebate problems or questions
- PACE prescription-drug cards for senior citizens
- Car registrations, special tags, handicap placards, titles and driver's license applications
- Information on financial assistance for higher education
- Assistance in obtaining and completing state forms of all kinds
- Voter registration and absentee ballot applications
- Unemployment compensation, disability and workers' compensation
- Birth and death certificates
- Issues with the Department of Human Services (food stamps, medical and income assistance)
- Retrieval of unclaimed property
- Requests for literature of all kinds – bills, regulations, statutes, Pennsylvania maps, senior citizen information
- Inquiries about utilities and the Public Utility Commission
- Citations from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives for outstanding accomplishments and family milestones
- Issues with insurance companies
- Renewal of state-issued licenses or certifications
- Questions about the state lottery
- Consumer complaints
- Liquor Control Board concerns or questions
- Tours of the state Capitol for individuals or groups