

Fall 2019



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## Historic new program extends college benefits to National Guard families

Pennsylvania National Guard members can now earn college education benefits for their spouses or children by reenlisting for a second term of service. Pennsylvania's new Military Family Education Program – signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf in July – is a historic, first-of-its-kind initiative that acknowledges the sacrifices made by Guard members and their families.

Since 1996, Pennsylvania National Guard members who fulfill their initial service obligation of six years have been eligible for the Education Assistance Program, which pays 100% of the member's college tuition.

The new Military Family Education Program will give up to 10 semesters of tuition assistance at approved Pennsylvania educational institutions to the spouses or children of Guard members who reenlist for an additional six years of service. The benefit will cover the cost of attending any university in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, such as Slippery Rock. The program will fully cover the cost of institutions charging less than the annual PASSHE rate, while the student would be responsible for the additional expense of an institution costing more than the PASSHE rate.

I co-authored this legislation with Republican chairman state Rep. Steve Barrar, R-Chester/Delaware, as an incentive to help maintain the commonwealth's strong defense capabilities. Boosting retention rates will help

Pennsylvania's Guard – with about 18,500 members representing every county in the state – maintain its status as the second largest in the country.

Reenlistments will also save the commonwealth resources on training and recruiting new Guard members and will strengthen its readiness to take on the important missions that come their way.

Young families and the state's economy stand to benefit as well. This new program could help up to 8,000 Guard family members, who are facing college tuition rates that have grown by 213% over the last 30 years and a nationwide student debt crisis. The program addresses the need for more affordable higher learning options while offering a well-deserved benefit to our Guard members and their families, who sacrifice when they're away.

Moreover, by providing a means to defray education costs and gain greater financial stability, the program gives young adults the means to reinvest in the state's economy, which strengthens the commonwealth financially.

As the first state to offer this unique educational benefit to military families, Pennsylvania is now a model for other states, which is fitting given that the commonwealth has one of the strongest National Guards in the nation. The legislation's bipartisan roots and its unanimous passage in the state House and Senate serve as an excellent example of all we can accomplish when we work together.

## Sainato honored with military medal for civilian leadership

Serving as the Democratic chairman of the House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee has been, without a doubt, the greatest honor of my career. I was humbled to receive the Pennsylvania Meritorious Service Medal last year, which Major General Anthony J. Carrelli, the Adjutant General of Pennsylvania, presented on behalf of Gov. Tom Wolf, in recognition of my support of Pennsylvania's National Guard and veterans.

The constitutional democratic republic of the United States of America has stood as a model throughout the world for nearly 250 years, and I have been so fortunate to benefit from the opportunities afforded by this nation. None of those chances would be possible if our borders and our interests were not protected by the men and women of the

U.S. military, who place their lives on the line so we can pursue our American dreams.

I have been blessed to meet so many active duty, reserve, and veteran service members, and I thank each one of them from the bottom of my heart for their sacrifice. I hope I can live up to the honor bestowed upon me.





## More than 20 bills advance to fight fire, EMS crisis

This fall, the House of Representatives has focused its efforts on advancing bills to support first responders throughout Pennsylvania. My colleagues and I introduced these measures in response to a report released last year by the Senate Resolution 6 Commission – a bipartisan commission formed to recommend improvements to the delivery of emergency services in Pennsylvania.

The report identified a dramatic decline in the number of Pennsylvania's volunteer first responders – from about 300,000 in the 1970s to as few as 38,000 in 2018. The issue threatens to affect public safety and Pennsylvania taxpayers as well. It's estimated that volunteers save Pennsylvania communities billions annually.

Recruitment and retention of volunteers has been a longstanding issue facing volunteer firefighter and EMS organizations. In recent years, attracting young people has become increasingly difficult, as they are working harder to pay for the rising cost of higher education.

As the Democratic chairman of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, I'm especially concerned about our declining ranks of volunteer emergency responders.

To aid in recruitment and retention, I authored a bill that would create the First Responder Loan Forgiveness Program. The bill – which passed the House unanimously in October – would allow students graduating from a Pennsylvania college or technical school to earn loan forgiveness of up to \$4,000 per year of school, capped at \$16,000 total, for each year of service as a member of a volunteer firefighter department or EMS organization.

The bill – which is now in the state Senate – would provide a powerful way to recruit volunteer first responders, enabling them to afford a quality education while giving back to the community.

The SR 6 Commission's report also identified the state's Fire and EMS Grant Program as an effective funding source for recruitment and retention initiatives. The program – which is scheduled to expire this summer – has served as an important source of funding for career and volunteer fire departments, EMS agencies and rescue squads, which rely on the grants for critical resources, such as equipment, training and facility repairs.

To ensure that our first responders don't lose this valuable funding source, I drafted a bill that would extend the program until 2024. My measure would also expand the use of the grant program to fund critical recruitment and retention initiatives, such as pension-type programs that financially reward length of service. The bill passed the House unanimously and is now before the state Senate for consideration.

My colleagues have introduced additional recruitment and retention proposals that would provide emergency

volunteers with tax credits and tuition assistance, among other incentives.

In addition to emphasizing the need for recruitment and retention, the SR 6 Commission's report outlined other challenges facing first responders and provided detailed suggestions for addressing those problems. In response, the House has advanced more than 20 bills to address Pennsylvania's first responder crisis.

### Some of those bills would:

- increase the loan limits available under the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program to ensure fire, ambulance and rescue companies can afford increasing equipment costs;
- expand the existing Volunteer Loan Assistance Program to allow volunteer, career and combination fire, ambulance and rescue services to access low-interest loans;
- allow the use of relief monies to fund new programs, such as length-of-service award programs; and
- allow the Department of Health to waive certain ambulance staffing requirements for smaller counties in extraordinary circumstances to ensure that rural EMS organizations receive their fair share of funding.

Sometimes, the challenges first responders face are not the result of administrative or funding deficits, but a lack of institutional support. It is critical to support the mental health of all emergency responders, including firefighters, EMS personnel, police officers, 911 operators and others.

To accomplish that, the House passed a bill that would require a statewide protocol and support program to assist fire, EMS and rescue workers with the often-devastating effects of responding to traumatic incidents. At times, these effects may become so severe that they impact the ability of responders to do their jobs and may lead them to seek workers' compensation.

On a related note, the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee approved a bill that would expand post-traumatic stress injury benefits for first responders. Although the bill has not yet come up for a vote in the House, I am committed to ensuring that our emergency workers are properly covered for treatment of these often severe stress-related injuries.

The good news in all of this is that we are all committed to strengthening the ranks of Pennsylvania's emergency first responders. Through our ongoing bipartisan efforts, I'm confident that we will restore our ranks and bring the necessary support to those on the front lines who keep us safe.

# Around the district

It's always an honor to present legislative citations to groups and individuals who are bettering themselves and our community! Here are just a few of the many I have been fortunate to honor in recent months:



*The Dorals have been entertaining the New Castle area for 25 years! I hope they keep rocking for at least 25 more!*



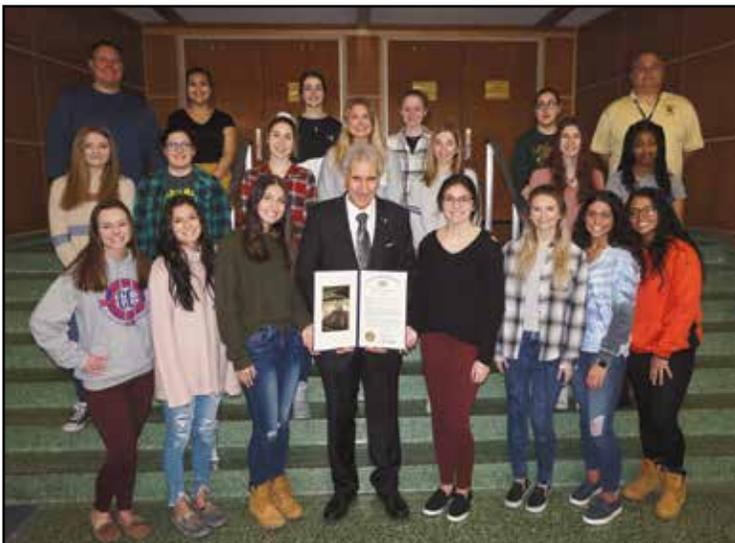
*These fine students from Union Middle School achieved perfect attendance in the 2018-19 scholastic year. It was a pleasure to celebrate their academic commitment along with some of their mentors!*



*The Neshannock Township girls' basketball team won the 2018-19 Class 3A WPIAL Championship and advanced to the quarterfinals of the state championship tournament. Congratulations to the Lady Lancers and good luck in 2019-20!*



*Many students from Lawrence County Career & Technical Center participated in SkillsUSA, a national career education organization and competition. I was pleased to visit with some of the state champions!*



*The Shenango Area Lady Wildcats girls' track and field team won the 2018 WPIAL Class 2A Championship. The team was also successful in 2019, in winning the Tri-County Championship. Congratulations, girls!*



*The boys of New Castle Area brought home the 2018-19 Class 4A WPIAL Championship and won two more games in the state playoffs. Great job to the Red Hurricanes, and best of luck in the new season!*



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## Volunteer responders receive \$500 million, program may expand

This August, the Elfinwild Volunteer Fire Department received a \$200,000 low-interest loan through the state's Volunteer Loan Assistance Program. The award marked an important milestone for the program, which has now provided more than \$500 million to volunteer fire departments, EMS organizations and rescue squads throughout the commonwealth.

The program was established in 1976 as a method of providing low-interest loans to volunteer fire departments, EMS organizations and rescue squads needing help purchasing equipment or acquiring or renovating facilities. Through this program, organizations have been able to update emergency vehicles, repair old facilities and ensure that their volunteers retain the most up-to-date and safest equipment available.

This source of reliable, affordable financing is available to many volunteer organizations. Those interested should contact my Harrisburg office for additional information and help applying.

While the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program is currently available to volunteer first responder organizations only, the House recently passed legislation that would make the program available to paid first responder organizations, as well. The legislation, which I co-sponsored, was drafted in

response to a recommendation in the SR 6 Commission, which found that permitting paid fire departments to participate in the loan assistance program would enable them to thrive without diminishing the funds available to volunteer organizations (see "More than 20 bills advance to fight fire, EMS crisis" to learn more about the SR 6 Commission and its report).

As our career fire departments serve many cities, like New Castle, that are experiencing budget deficits, they continue to pay the same rate for apparatus and equipment as volunteer organizations, while receiving little of the same assistance. This measure would not require additional funding or indebtedness and would ensure that all of Pennsylvania's first responders have the resources they need. The bill is currently awaiting consideration in the Senate.

The Volunteer Loan Assistance Program is just one means by which the state can continue to support firefighters, EMS organizations and rescue squads in the years to come. The men and women who keep Pennsylvania safe every day – whether through paid careers or volunteerism – are nothing short of heroes. We must work to provide them with the assistance they need to perform their duties safely and effectively.

