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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
Saving Volunteer Firefighting

Wednesday, October 30, 2024 | 10:00 a.m.

Representative Jim Haddock

OPENING REMARKS

10:00 a.m. Rep. Jim Haddock, D-Lackawanna, Luzerne

PANEL ONE

10:05 a.m. Jim Williams, Firefighter
Old Forge Fire Department

Bob Auliso, Firefighter
Old Forge Fire Department

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

10:45 a.m. Mike Lombardo, Paramedic, Vice President
Greater Pittston Regional Ambulance Association

Paul Lukas, Northeast Director
Firefighters Association of Pennsylvania

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL THREE

11:20 a.m. Brooks Stahlnecker, Founder
RIT First Responders Wellness Program

Eric Frantz, Advisor
Danville High School Fire Club

Q & A with Legislators

Remarks and Testimony can be found by scanning the QR Code below:

Old Forge Fire Department

Engine Tower Ladder Squad Brush

93

Chief Mark Tagliaterra

Asst Chief Bill Stull Jr

Democratic Policy Committee: Public hearing on Saving Volunteer Firefighting

October 30, 2024, at 10:00 AM ET

Old Forge Fire Department

375 Milwaukee Avenue

Old Forge, PA 18518

Public hearing on Saving Volunteer Firefighting

Introduction

Old Forge Fire Department Representative

James Williams became a member of the Old Forge Fire Department in 1978, operating out of the Lawrence Hose Company. Mr. Williams was promoted to a company officer in 1984 and in 1993, was promoted to Engine Captain. In his time as Engine Captain, Mr. Williams oversaw 15 firefighters, he received over 2000 hours of training. James retired in 2009 from active duty due to medical concerns. In 2021 James returned as a chauffeur and a mentor to the younger fire fighters.

Brief history of the Old Forge Fire Department (OFFD)

In 1874 the company originated under Old Forge Township before becoming chartered and formally registered in the state of Pennsylvania in 1899. The departments grew to four companies by 1917. When founded the original four departments were located near one of the town coal mine breakers.

In 1980 two companies merged into one. The remaining two companies remained in their current locations which resulted in 3 fire companies in Old Forge.

A new command structure was formed in 1993 which established one fire chief for the remaining departments, two assistant fire chiefs, and individual captains and lieutenants for each company. At this time the two remaining companies decided to share one building to cut costs and expenses.

The remaining three companies began to merge in 2022 by first establishing a singular location to operate out of. In 2024 the process has begun to merge the three individual companies into one individual company which will be the Old Forge Fire Department.

The state of volunteer firefighting

Problems

A) Training - The volunteer fire departments can be their own worst enemy. Change for some is hard to accept. The ever-growing demand for more specialized training has increased, causing an increase in the amount of time needed to be able to handle these jobs.

Training has increased over the years. In 1978 an individual needed a 36-hour state certification fire training class to be considered a fire fighter. Today that same certification takes 188 hours.

Some major changes that have impacted the fire department community which require specialized training include but are not limited to

- Electric Cars
- E-bikes and Scooters
- Solar Panels

Extra training is also needed in vehicle rescue, rope rescue, water rescue, confined space rescue, hazmat material. These classes only touch the surface of the extra training needed for firefighters to operate efficiently and safely. Each training class requires time but also additional funds to pay for the training.

- The OFFD asks members to take these trainings and then also asks firefighters to volunteer their time to work chicken dinners, pancake breakfasts, sell raffles, car washes and other assortment of fundraisers in their free time. These fundraising efforts are just part of what is required to survive but add many more additional hours.

B) Call Volume - As the world changes so does our call volume. With the growth of new hotels, hospitals, apartment complexes and industries coming to the area emergency call volumes have seen a rapid increase.

With fewer volunteer members, departments are expanding their coverage areas to help neighboring departments and communities. The OFFD responds to emergency calls in the borough of Old Forge but assists communities of Moosic, Taylor, and Avoca as first due assignments. This has added to wear and tear on the vehicles and the growing expense of fuel.

C) Cost of Equipment – As the cost of living in areas changes, so does the cost of materials required to safely operate in emergency situations.

- Cost of Gear
 - The current price is \$14,000.00 for 1 set of gear.
 - Firefighting gear is custom ordered and manufactured specifically for the safety of the fire fighters and victims they may rescue.
 - In 1987 a full set of gear cost an average of \$1,500.00
 - The NFPA wants each firefighter to have two sets of gear on hand.

- Gear is also expected to be changed every ten years from the manufacture date.
 - If gear is damaged in a call, it is not a quick turnaround time
 - This adds to the expense, and we need to have two sets of gear available.
- Apparatus
 - In 2004 the OFFD engine was purchased for \$259,000.00.
 - This apparatus was purchased as a demo model which reduced the overall cost by \$30,000.00.
 - The apparatus would have cost OFFD \$289,000.00
 - Today that same apparatus would cost over \$1,000,000.00

With the amount of money that is coming in there is no way to replace the OFFD's 22-year-old engine with a new engine. As the vehicle ages the cost of repairs also increases.

D) Department Closures - Throughout Pennsylvania, Fire Departments are closing because of the lack of members and financial instability. Boroughs, which are liable for fire protection, will be forced to establish how to afford a paid staff.

Band Aids

Fire Departments are very thankful for any grant, or amount of money given that comes our way. Many would not be able to make it without these.

Increasing a grant from an estimated \$20,000.00 to \$40,000.00 is great but it doesn't fix the problem, it puts a band aid on it.

The FEMA grants are a competitive and complicated process. Many times, information is not explicitly stated surrounding why a grant is accepted versus declined. For example, I know of a company that used the grant for purchase of a new ladder truck, and the next year a new engine. The same grant was used with just item change for air packs was denied. There are many more instances like this. Another example is a company that received the grant 3 years in a row with half the population of ours while other companies get denied the grant.

All these grants are doing is giving hope to survive, without fixing the problem. We need a solution that will attack the main problem.

When you have 3 companies applying for the same grant a common solution given is to just consolidate instead of 3 companies applying against each other.

Solutions

To survive we as fire departments, must stop being our own worst enemy. We need to acknowledge there is a problem and join instead of working against each other.

It is time to bury pride.

There is a bold way to fix this that has been tried in other states (New York, Maryland, Virginia) and has been successful. This bold approach would enable municipalities to be able to put a flat property tax of \$200.00 per household and \$400.00 on a business. However, this can't happen because as you know in Pennsylvania a borough like ours can only levy more than 3 mils annually for fire engines, apparatus and hose.

If in our state we were allowed to add this flat fee it would help, and everyone would pay their fair share.

Our department does a yearly mail in fund drive, for the past 7 years we have had a 19% return yearly of people donating. These letters go out to 3300 residents and 210 businesses.

If we were able to have a flat fee this would generate \$750,000.00. We then would be able to focus on what we all are dedicated to. That is firefighting and helping our community. That \$750,000.00 would allow us to have an operating budget set up by a committee that would be called a Fire District to approve expenses.

An example of a large expense is a brand-new ladder truck, this would cost over \$2,000,000.00 with a life expectancy of 25 years. We today purchased a used refurbished ladder truck for \$275,000.00. That is the best we can do with the funds that we have and be able to keep affording everything else that we need.

To accomplish this property fire tax legislation would have to be changed allowing municipalities to do this.

I don't have every answer to making this work, but this is a proven process that works, and we need to start somewhere. We need you to be the change and implement this into policy legislation.

Conclusion

Also, what has bothered me throughout the designation paid vs volunteer, when the bell rings and you ride out to that call the job is the same. We need to hold everyone to the same standards. The boys club mentality is over. As a company officer my fear on the job was not dying, it will happen in this business. The fear was having to tell the parents, wife or husband that one of my brothers or sisters had died. That was the fear I carried.

We have not had anybody take this situation head on, it has been happening for years as departments consolidate and close.

I am sure you don't want to be the person who sees the volunteer fire department come to an end.

Our job is getting harder and harder to do. We need your help to change this financial situation so we can continue to do this job. Every year we go before our council who are responsible for police, garbage removal, snow removal, and other tasks and then comes the fire departments. We ask that they give a small monetary amount that can help which is money sometimes is given, but when it isn't "We still go" In 1991 there was a popular movie Backdraft that came out. In that movie there is a line that is very true. "The only problem is that in this job there is just no place to hide. It's not like having a bad day selling log cabins. You have a bad day here and somebody dies.... And that's just not good enough."

We are just trying to not have that bad day.

Thank you for your time.



125th Anniversary

OLD FORGE FIRE DEPARTMENT

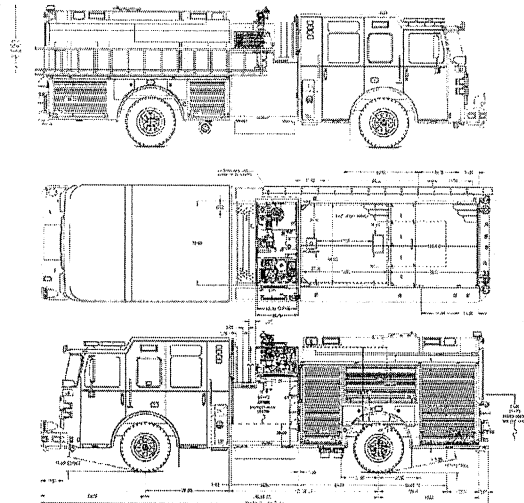
Volunteer Fire Companies provide a tremendous **tax savings** to residents and business in our communities. In 1970, there were **300,000 volunteer firefighters** in Pennsylvania. That number dropped to **150,000 by 1985** and has plummeted to **under 36,000 today**. With the evolution of society, the volunteer fire service is facing staffing challenges.

COST PER FIREFIGHTER!

Helmet	\$455
Hood	\$45
Mask	\$300
SCBA	\$7,000
Coat	\$2,500
Radio	\$1,400
Pager	\$600
Gloves	\$120
Pants	\$1,600
Boots	\$550
Total	\$13,965



The 2002 Pumper was purchased for \$259,000. If we ordered one today it would cost over 1 million dollars !!!



Testimony on Saving Volunteer Firefighting

Date: October 19, 2024

Name: Brooks E. Stahlnecker

Background: 30 years as a volunteer firefighter/EMT, Certified Firefighter 2, and corporate professional focused on employee benefits.

The volunteer first responder ranks have been declining at a rapid rate over the years and are now at catastrophic levels in the state and across the country. In 2000 there were 300,000 volunteer first responders in the state and now it is estimated at 30,000. Almost every department in the 6-county area of Central PA is struggling with staffing which also means they are having problems meeting NFPA 1720. NFPA 1720 is a standard that specifies requirements for effective and efficient organization and deployment of fire suppression operations, emergency medical operations, and special operations to the public by volunteer and combination fire departments to protect citizens and the occupational safety and health of fire department employees/volunteers.

The low numbers can be attributed to many factors and the solution needs to be multi-faceted as well. Currently, a lot of the focus and funding has been in the urban areas and many rural departments that lack the resources and contacts are finding themselves struggling even more. While some programs offer incentives, many do not cover all members, exacerbating the issue.

Our non-profit organization was formed to raise funds to initiate several programs to assist the departments with a viable, long term staffing solution. We wanted to reward and retain all current members while creating a robust plan to recruit new members. The first step was a SWOT analysis and an attempt to get to the root cause of the shortage and then implement solutions. Follow up steps included launching a wellness portal to support the mental and physical health of current volunteers and encouraging community engagement through initiatives like a "second-alarm club" for non-frontline support roles. They can maintain the rigs, pack hose, perform maintenance, tech duties, fund raising, and a host of other things that will free-up those who want to be the front-line responders.

We also plan to assist departments with grant writing and administrative tasks as funding allows, leveraging community talents to enhance volunteer services. The problem is complex, and we realize it will take a complex approach. We need to encompass the youth which is being done through school fire clubs and formal CTE programs which will be a feeder for years to come of qualified first responders. We also need to keep the volunteers we have and utilize the time and talents of all ages and demographics to include retirees.

In summary, we must urgently save the volunteer fire service, especially in rural areas, as they are vital for emergency response. Without targeted funding and innovative solutions, the expectation of timely help in emergencies is at risk. Every community deserves protection. The trend is to go to paid departments. That simply isn't a viable option. We have 1 hybrid and 1 paid department in our 6-county footprint. They both have staff vacancies and they both are struggling to hire people. When those two departments get a major call they both rely on volunteers to aid them.



October 30, 2024

Covering approximately 132 square miles in central Pennsylvania, Montour County is home to approximately 18,000 residents and is recognized as the smallest county by land area in the Commonwealth. With a population density of approximately 140 per square mile, Montour County relies solely on the efforts of volunteers to provide aid during emergencies such as fires, auto accidents, water rescues, and natural disasters. In the 1970s the number of volunteers in Pennsylvania hovered around 360,000. Today there are fewer than 37,000 volunteers statewide. Locally in Montour County, the average age of volunteers continues to climb year after year while the number of younger folks getting involved continues to decline. The family legacy of firefighting is without a doubt dissolving as the world we now live in offers plenty of distractions for teenagers. The key to building a strong and reliable emergency response network for the future of Montour County is to somehow engage the youth. In the fall of 2023, the Danville High School Fire Club (DHSFC) was founded to do just that. The mission of the DHSFC is to introduce students to the world of opportunities that the volunteer fire service has to offer with the ultimate goal being to connect students with their local firehouse where they become a member and begin volunteering.

Below are just some of the many benefits the volunteer fire service offers the students:

- Gives students a mature support network - firefighting is as much about supporting the community and mentoring new members, as it is preventing and extinguishing fires.
- The camaraderie and personal support received through a fire company cannot be overstated. There's a natural feeling of needing to excel and be at your best when you're relying on those around you in life-or-death situations. The people at a fire company genuinely care and help other members become better versions of themselves.
- Connects students with community members with diverse backgrounds - can help with career identification and recommendations.
- Teaches skills that can be applied anywhere, and are needed everywhere. Helps individuals become more proactive and observant.
- Students graduate with employable skills - can pursue part-time while attending secondary education, or pursue full-time while expanding their existing skillset.
- Helps instill responsibility - not abusing privileges.
- Helps establish a penchant for volunteerism - not only the importance of the work being done, but also the self-gratification and value that accompany it.

Volunteer firefighting requires a tremendous amount of training both in the classroom as well as outside in the elements with hands-on exercises. For the average high school student, carving out the time to take these classes and attain the necessary state certifications is very difficult while also juggling school work, extra-curriculars, jobs, and family time. Typically, the training classes are conducted in the evenings and weekends. A long-term goal of the DHSFC is have firefighting offered as an elective in the High School's curriculum. The ability to earn certifications during the school day will drastically improve our community's volunteer numbers.

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