

# Fire and Ambulance Service

**V**olunteer fire departments are the primary providers of fire protection in townships. The responsibilities of these first responders have expanded over the years to include rescue, hazardous materials response, and terrorism prevention, significantly increasing the training needed by these volunteers and, in turn, leading to the reduction in willing volunteers.

With the recent release of the SR 6 Commission report, the time for action is now. PSATS previously requested that the governor convene a special session of the General Assembly to address the overwhelming challenges affecting the commonwealth's emergency responders, including, but not limited to, the recruitment and retention of volunteers and the availability of cost-effective, necessary, and appropriate training.

## Senate Resolution 6 Commission

The Association applauds the SR 6 Commission for pre-

paring a plan to preserve our volunteer fire companies. Now that a plan is in place to promote the recruitment and retention of volunteer emergency service responders, it is time to fund and implement the plan.

We call on the state legislature to move forward immediately on those recommendations that would support our volunteers, including state tax credits for volunteers, grants for response vehicles, buildings for emergency response, and incentives for employers to release volunteer emergency service providers to respond to incidents.

PSATS strongly urges the General Assembly to implement the following recommendations from the SR 6 report:

- state tax credits or deductions for active volunteer emergency service providers;
- state tax credits or deductions for businesses that support volunteer emergency service providers;
- educational tuition credits for volunteer emergency service providers enrolled in undergraduate-level courses at a Pennsylvania university or community college; and
- a permissible benefits spending program that could be customized by volunteer emergency service providers to recruit and retain volunteers, such as a qualified plan or participation in a credit union.

The Association believes that townships are a partner in the delivery of fire protection services, and are, in fact, responsible for ensuring that fire and emergency response service is provided in their community. Volunteer fire departments struggle with adequate funding sources, and townships contributed more than \$164 million to such departments in 2016.

The Association supports authorizing fire companies to collect reimbursement from insurance companies for expenses incurred while responding to and cleaning up automobile accidents and other emergency incidents, as rescue efforts have become a major role that takes up a significant amount of time for volunteer personnel. This cost should be based on the fair market value of these services, including depreciation and the amortization of equipment used in these operations. ➤

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◀ With the release of the state's SR 6 Commission report in late 2018, PSATS says the time is now to take action on its recommendations and prepare a plan to preserve the state's volunteer fire companies and retain and recruit volunteers.



# The Workers' Compensation Act **must be amended to clarify that all volunteers, not just firefighters,** for volunteer fire companies are **covered under the act when engaged in fire company activities** as authorized by the municipality.

In addition, townships should be authorized to collect a municipal services fee for state and federal facilities located within their boundaries to offset the costs of public safety services.

To reduce the costs of purchasing equipment, the state should provide incentives to encourage cooperative purchasing among volunteer fire companies, such as grants and low-interest loans. Unnecessary administrative requirements should be eliminated for volunteer fire departments, which should be exempt from all state and federal taxes.

The Volunteer Firemen's Relief Association program should be restructured to return to the original program goal of providing minimum protection, including basic personal protection equipment, to all volunteer emergency service providers. In addition, legislation is needed to establish criteria consistent with the intent of the act that would allow volunteer fire departments to use fire relief funds for the recruitment and retention of volunteers under the oversight of the state fire commissioner.

Pennsylvania should protect its firefighters by requiring switches at the main service disconnect for all solar panel electrical system installations that will rapidly stop the solar panels from supplying electricity to the structure and that these switches be clearly marked.

## Workers' Compensation Coverage

The Association believes that the General Assembly needs to address the increased costs that municipalities have incurred due to Act 46 of 2011, the Firefighter Cancer Presumption Act. As a result of this act, most insurance providers dropped firefighters from workers' compensation coverage, leading to an increased number of municipalities that must rely on the State Workers' Compensation Insurance Fund to provide coverage to their volunteer firefighters.

The state must require SWIF to allow municipalities to retain a portion of their premium that is not used to settle claims should the private market return and a municipality chooses to leave SWIF. Finally, a study is needed to determine how SWIF has used the premiums collected for coverage of volunteer firefighters.

In addition, the Workers' Compensation Act must be amended to clarify that all volunteers, not just firefighters, for volunteer fire companies are covered under the act when engaged in fire company activities as authorized by the municipality.

## Ambulance/EMS

The General Assembly should increase the maximum millage for funding ambulance service from .5 to 1.5 mills. Also, legislation is needed to ensure that insurance payments for ambulance services are paid directly to the ambulance company, rather than the patient. While recent legislation attempted to address this issue, it is not working as intended.

## Federal Support for Volunteers

We urge Congress to provide incentives for volunteerism by amending the Federal Tax Code to authorize the use of defined-contribution length-of-service appreciation programs for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; providing a federal income tax deduction for active volunteer firefighters and fire police; and offering a federal income tax deduction for employers who allow active volunteer firefighters and fire police to respond to emergencies during work hours. ❖



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