

A STUDY OF VOLUNTEER FIRE AND
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES IN THE
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

PREPARED BY
THE PENNSYLVANIA EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
GOVERNOR SCHWEIKER'S FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES TASK
FORCE

FOR PRESENTATION TO
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

SENATE
COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS
AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY

September 29, 2002

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Governor's Fire and Emergency Services Task Force
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

September 29, 2002

Honorable Mark S. Schweiker
Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
238 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Schweiker:

I am pleased to present to you the report of the Governor's Fire and Emergency Services Task Force. As you directed, the members of the Task Force carefully examined the many challenges facing the Commonwealth's volunteer fire and emergency medical services community, explored the opportunities to address those challenges, and, wherever possible, identified funding needs.

It was the intention of the task force members to squarely confront issues and to provide to you a brutally honest snapshot of the relative health of these critical public-safety systems. Since 1995, there have been significant strides made by the Ridge/Schweiker administration, as a partner with the fire and emergency services community, in addressing pressing issues identified by the Statewide Advisory Board of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute and others in 1994. However, there is still more to be done.

State Fire Commissioner Edward Mann enthusiastically spearheaded the effort to identify and document the issues and is due special recognition for his diligent, tireless efforts. Mr. Steve Taglang, Senior Policy Manager in the Governor's Policy Office, skillfully assembled and edited the reports for each of the component areas. Director Margaret "Peggy" Trimble, Office of Emergency Medical Services within the Department of Health, provided invaluable insights related to the issues and opportunities related to Pennsylvania's emergency medical services systems.

It was, however, the effort of the stakeholders on the task force that truly produced this document. Representatives of the Firemen's Association - State of Pennsylvania, the Fireman's Legislative Federation, the Ambulance Association of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Emergency Health Services Council, and the Western Pennsylvania Firemen's Association, together with agency representatives from Department of Community and Economic Development, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Department of Environmental Protection and the Governor's Budget Office, brought considerable experience and many practical ideas to the table. Special thanks are extended Executive Director Thomas Savage, Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, for not only providing his input to

the proceedings but also for assembling the institute's Statewide Advisory Board to gather information and identify solutions.

Each of us on the task force thank you for the opportunity to serve the Commonwealth in this important undertaking. We join you in the hope that the General Assembly will seize the opportunities herein presented to strengthen Pennsylvania's fire and emergency medical services.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David L. Smith". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "D" and "S".

David L. Smith,
Chairman

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VOLUNTEER FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES
ISSUES CONFRONTING ORGANIZATIONS IN PENNSYLVANIA'S
COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

Act 89 of 2002 directed the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) to conduct a study of the manner in which funding sources may be established to improve the delivery of services provided by volunteer fire companies and volunteer emergency service organizations in the Commonwealth.

On August 27, 2002, Governor Mark Schweiker issued Executive Order 2002-9 creating the Governor's Fire and Emergency Services Task Force. Governor Schweiker directed the Task Force to advise PEMA as it prepared the report directed by Act 89 and to review and evaluate potential funding sources that could be used to improve the delivery of services provided by volunteer fire and emergency service organizations, opportunities to improve the delivery of essential services provided by these organizations, and the amount of funding necessary to achieve these goals.

Governor Schweiker appointed the Director of PEMA to serve as the Chairman of the Task Force and representatives from the Ambulance Association of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Emergency Health Services Council, Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, Firemen's Association - State of Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania Firemen's Association, Fireman's Legislative Federation of Pennsylvania, Office of the State Fire Commissioner, Governor's Policy Office and the Pennsylvania Departments of Agriculture, Community and Economic Development, Conservation and Natural Resources, Environmental Protection, and Health as members.

Task Force members were instrumental in developing this report by providing their assessment of the issues confronting volunteer fire and emergency service organizations and identifying potential solutions to improve the delivery of services in these areas.

Although Act 89 directed this report to target the volunteer community the Task Force overwhelmingly agreed that many of the issues identified in this report are also applicable to many of Pennsylvania's career fire departments as well.

INTRODUCTION

While Pennsylvania is a diverse state of rural communities, small towns and large and small cities, many of these areas benefit from the services provided by volunteer fire and emergency service organizations. A recent study conducted by the National Fire Protection Association estimates that nearly 73% of all fire departments in the country are staffed entirely of volunteers and mostly volunteers staff an additional 15% of fire departments.¹ Another study by the National Association of State Foresters estimated that volunteer fire departments save localities \$36.8 billion nationally each year.² In Pennsylvania, a much higher percentage of all firefighters (approximately 90%) are volunteers, and the Commonwealth's volunteer fire services have been estimated to provide \$6.0 billion in tax savings to the state.

These national studies only confirm what many Pennsylvanians have known for some time: volunteer fire and emergency services organizations provide invaluable services to countless Pennsylvania citizens while generating significant cost savings for local governments. While motivated from a sense of duty to give of their time, talent, and, at times, their lives, volunteers choose to participate in a system that rewards them for their effort with only a strong sense of accomplishment for a job well done.

In Pennsylvania, over 2,400 fire departments with some 70,000, mostly volunteer, personnel provide fire protection to the Commonwealth. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) throughout the Commonwealth is provided through 1,000 ambulance services and over 500 Quick Response Services. Over 50,000 practitioners are credentialed by the Department of Health through the Emergency Medical Services Office. Approximately 3,000 ground vehicles and more than 30 air ambulances serve the Commonwealth. Annually, these services respond to over 1.5 million patients resulting in many lives saved, disabilities avoided and pain and suffering relieved.

Emergency medical services include ambulance services that are all volunteer (about 25%), staffed by volunteers and career personnel (approximately 50%), and all career personnel (about 25%). Many are non-profit services while some are for profit. More than two thirds of ambulance services are stand alone, i.e. not part of a fire service; most of the remaining services are part of the fire department while a small number of ambulance services are operated by a local hospital.

¹ *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2000*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Massachusetts, December 2001.

² *Fire Protection in Rural America: A Challenge for the Future*. National Association of State Foresters, 1993.

That system in which so many give so much, however, faces significant challenges in the very near future.

This Task Force has identified pressing issues that merit leadership and solutions so that the volunteers and the system can continue to provide – and enhance – the level of service in the communities that they serve. These issues include membership recruitment and retention, training and education, the long-term wellness of the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program, public fire prevention and safety education, mutual aid, interoperability, and mergers and consolidations, among others.

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT

The number of citizens who are willing to volunteer to help provide fire, rescue and emergency medical services in Pennsylvania has been on the decline for many years.

In 1976, "*Pennsylvania Burning*" reported that there were an estimated 300,000 Pennsylvanians making up the volunteer services serving in some 3,000 companies. In 1995, a report by the Department of Community and Economic Development estimated the number of volunteers to be near 70,000 -- a loss of 230,000 volunteers. This is an annual loss of over 12,000 volunteers per year over that 19-year period.

Recruiting new members into the volunteer fire and emergency medical service is difficult. There are many reasons for this, including changes in society, the lack of tangible benefits to volunteers, limited recruiting resources, and limited local government involvement. Also, while the number of fires has decreased over time, the emergency responders face new and more dangerous conditions, like communicable disease exposures, hazardous materials and possible terrorist acts when they respond to alarms.

One area that is difficult to address is drastic societal change. Communities have seen many locally owned businesses replaced by corporate-owned workplaces that are not as closely connected to the community and are, therefore, less committed to supporting community volunteerism. Pennsylvanians are commuting longer distances to work, and it is impractical for many volunteers to return to their communities to respond.

In many cases, busy lifestyles do not afford the "extra time" for community involvement. In many families, both adults are working outside the home, and there are wide varieties of activities and opportunities that did not exist previously that make volunteering for fire or emergency services difficult. Finally, as smaller communities grow and as people move in from larger, metropolitan areas, many new residents may be unaware that these services are provided by volunteers, rather than by career fire and emergency services.

For EMS, the threat of litigation is also a deterrent. Expectations of the public for expert practitioners and assurance of competency have resulted in increased standards and training requirements. Not as many people can succeed in the more demanding programs that require a significant commitment in time and study. In addition, EMS volunteers make a significant investment in maintaining credentials that requires time and, sometimes, travel and other expense.

There are over 50,000 credentialed EMS practitioners in Pennsylvania but only an estimated 22,000 are actually actively providing care and responding on calls. No assessment of the reasons that personnel stay active in EMS has ever been done in Pennsylvania. We need to know why those who stay, stay and why those who leave, leave. In many ways, the manpower "shortage" in EMS is parallel with the shortage in other health care professions. EMS is the safety net of our community for health. We need better analysis of the supply of practitioners

and predictive tools to plan for future needs. This includes an assessment of what EMS resources a community actually needs and collaboration among regional EMS councils, elected officials and EMS services to provide those services in the most effective and efficient ways to accomplish their mission of emergency response.

There are few tangible benefits for volunteers. An individual's decision to volunteer his or her time to a fire company or ambulance service is based on many, often intangible reasons – friends or family involvement, service to community, or even the childhood notion of wanting to be a fireman -- but there are few rewards for this service. In many cases, only insurance or “relief” money provided in the event of a death in the line of duty is afforded members' families. While this is a benefit, it is not significant in the recruitment of volunteers.

In 1999, the Department of Community and Economic Development report issued in response to House Resolution 67 plainly stated, “The most vibrant volunteer fire companies are those that have a strong relationship with their respective local governments.” Nonetheless, in many communities across Pennsylvania, local government plays little or no role in supporting its fire and emergency service organizations. A similar study was recently conducted to assess local government support for emergency medical service organizations in Vermont; applying that state's methodology to Pennsylvania could provide invaluable insights.

Recruitment efforts have been initiated in Pennsylvania. A partnership between the Commonwealth and the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, the 1 800- FIRE-LINE campaign, was initiated with great hopes it would help with the recruiting effort. The program depended on public service television and radio advertising to get the message out. These commercials competed with paid advertisements and were relegated to less than desirable time slots that had low numbers of viewers. The program continues, using such avenues as “bill stuffers” recently enclosed with certain cable television bills, but to have an impact the 1-800-FIRELINE program must be more vigorously supported.

Although the number of actual fires nationwide is on the decline, the actual numbers of calls for service to fire and EMS companies are on the rise. The emergency services community is facing greater dangers today than they were 25 years ago. Communicable diseases, hazardous materials and the threat of terrorist activity have made making the commitment to volunteer more dangerous and less desirable than ever before.

OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities to reverse the current trends are as varied as the problems themselves, and not one solution or combination of solutions will solve the problems in every community.

Some solutions will require additional funds from government, while others may only require a change in the mindset of volunteer leadership and a better understanding of the recruiting market for volunteer fire companies and emergency services. Examples of these potential solutions include statewide standards for volunteer fire and emergency service organizations and local recognition programs for exemplary organizations or volunteers and the raising of the level of performance and local awareness of these organizations. Those requiring funding include scholarships/loan forgiveness programs for younger members; grant programs to provide administrative support staff, and state-paid advertising for volunteer fire and emergency medical services recruitment efforts.

One very real, low or no cost opportunity is the creation of local recognition programs. Developed by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner and the Department of Health EMS Office through the regional EMS councils, these programs would encourage local governments to establish special programs to foster better community understanding of the volunteer emergency services community.

A Length of Service Award Program could provide volunteer emergency services organizations an incentive or benefit to be used in attracting new members. Length of Service Award Programs are essentially modified retirement programs providing monetary rewards tied to lengths of volunteer service. In some cases, there are fire companies now that have the ability to offer Length Of Service Award Programs if Firemen's Relief funds could be used to create the programs; however, legislation allowing Firemen's Relief funding of Length of Service Award Programs has never been enacted.

Only two high school based EMT programs exist in the Commonwealth. Both are very successful models. The Department of Education could be a valuable partner in supporting emergency services training by encouraging EMT and fire service programs in other high schools and offering "career days" that permit students to experience emergency services work.

State government advertising programs exist in support of many issues. These include breast cancer awareness, recycling and highway worker safety. A high-profile program led by senior state officials and aimed at recruiting volunteer emergency services personnel, possibly using the 1-800-FIRELINE system as a vehicle, could be a wise investment of state dollars. This advertising should not be limited to operational/firefighting personnel but should also target other needs like fund-raising, bookkeeping and administrative support.

The Commonwealth is presently surveying nursing personnel to determine what factors cause nurses to remain active and what factors are causing them to exit. Emergency services personnel should be assessed as well. The information gathered from this survey would add information upon which to base targeted actions. The Department of Labor and Industry and the Department of Health are important partners for this opportunity.

Another possible incentive program involves offering local governments some type of reimbursement or incentive for providing paid administrative support to those organizations that show a genuine need for the support and that have a plan to utilize it effectively.

Establishing statewide standards for officers of volunteer emergency services could assist in both recruitment and retention of members. Statewide standards should encourage development of a “career path” for volunteers, whereby progressively advanced training could be documented and those who have taken this training are eligible for promotion within the volunteer emergency service. Compliance with established standards could also be tied to recognition programs or future grant programs.

ESTIMATED FUNDING REQUIREMENTS:

Fire Commission Recognition Program	Development time only
Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP)	Would utilize existing funding sources
Recruitment/Retention Scholarships	\$100,000 first-year cost
State-wide Advertising Campaign	\$750,000 first-year cost for pilot program
Administrative support grants	Estimated \$5.2 M for minimal grants
Statewide Standards for Officers	\$150,000 for materials and program delivery
Assessment of Retention/Recruitment	\$100,000 per year

MEMBERSHIP RETENTION

With the estimated loss of 230,000 volunteers in a 19-year period, it is clear that the recruitment of new members is only half of the challenge; retaining enrolled volunteers is a pressing issue.

The difficulties volunteer emergency services have recruiting new members are applicable to the retention problem. Changes in society, the lack of benefits for volunteers, limited local government involvement and greater dangers diminish enthusiasm. Many volunteers find that they are spending more time raising funds to purchase needed equipment or to pay monthly bills than in training and response. Compounding the problem is the reality that many of these volunteers are trying to perform their duties while providing for and raising their families. Taken together, these factors frustrate volunteers and eventually lead to their departure from the organizations.

OPPORTUNITIES

It should be accepted that not all people who join a volunteer fire company or ambulance service want to actually fight fire or provide medical care to the sick or injured. In some cases, individuals only want to drive the vehicles, to offer administrative expertise or to help with other functions related to the operation of the service.

Creating classes of membership that are directly related to the activity in which an individual is engaged may help create a better environment. For example, an individual who wishes to perform administrative duties would not be required to meet the same training standard that an active fire suppression member would be required to meet, thereby reducing the demands placed on an individual.

The State Fire Commissioner should develop a method for collecting best practices from across the Commonwealth and disseminate those practices to other volunteer organizations. As an incentive, a cash award along with statewide recognition could be afforded organizations submitting one or more of the five best practices each year.

The creation of technical assistance teams to provide help to local governments and emergency services organization creates the potential for partnerships between DCED, the County Commissioners Association, the Pennsylvania State Association of Townships, The Boroughs Association, The League of Cities, The Office of the State Fire Commissioner, The Department of Health Emergency Medical Services and PEMA. These partnerships could lead to teams of peers being used to provide technical assistance across the spectrum of local governments and volunteer emergency services organizations found in our Commonwealth. Organizations such as the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute and the Pennsylvania Emergency Health Services Council could serve as advocates for emergency services to network and facilitate the process of working together.

Those programs requiring government funds would be scholarships/loan forgiveness, Length Of Service Awards Programs, incentives to local governments and grant programs to emergency services organizations.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Training and education is the key to enhanced responder safety and effective performance. Pennsylvania's fire training program is one of the most active in the nation. The curriculum contains over 130 separate courses, and the State Fire Academy and its network of Education Training Agencies delivers over 1.25 million student-hours of training annually, the large majority of it free of charge and within a few miles of the student's home. Notwithstanding this activity, the program has historically suffered from a marketing and image problem. It is not unusual to find fire fighters and fire chiefs who have little or no knowledge of the courses, programs, and services available through the State Fire Academy's training network. This has resulted in a poor understanding of how training services can be obtained and a perception in some areas that Pennsylvania's training system is not "user friendly".

The State Fire Academy system has, on the whole, done an adequate job of preparing Pennsylvania volunteer responders for the challenges that await them. There is significant room for improvement in several areas. Aside from hazardous materials training requirements mandated by the US Environmental Protection Agency, there are no uniform statewide minimum training and education standards for fire service personnel. Each individual volunteer fire company or jurisdiction is free to set its own standards - or to set none at all.

Most fire companies, to their credit, have established minimum training standards. They range from the most complex and comprehensive down to the most rudimentary, with most being somewhere in the middle. There are, however, still many volunteer fire companies in the state where newly recruited volunteers are permitted to fully participate in hazardous activities with little more training than how to put on their protective clothing.

The delivery system is fragmented both administratively and fiscally. In the early 1970s, monies to support the State Fire Academy Local Level Fire Training program, which delivers training in the fire fighters' home areas, was cut from the Academy budget. To preserve Local Level training, the Academy partnered with several community colleges throughout the state to deliver Local Level courses as non-credit adult or 'lifelong' learning programs, the cost of which are reimbursable by the state Department of Education. This system of institutions evolved into the Academy's current network of 15 "Educational Training Agencies", nine community colleges and six county government-supported fire training organizations having full time administrative and/or instructional staff.

Recent years have witnessed a measured but steady increase in the expectations of the Academy's customers regarding program quality. The bar has been raised; a still modest but rapidly increasing number of fire fighters and fire officers expect a high-quality educational experience that enables student mastery of the knowledge and skills taught, provides professional-grade course materials, and includes comprehensive third-party testing allowing for demonstration of competency. The State Fire Academy and its programs are transitioning from the era of simple "vocational-technical" training to true professional development.

The State Fire Academy's facilities at Lewistown, Mifflin County, perform an important, necessary, and central role in the delivery of quality training. The current Administration has made a significant investment in restoring and improving the physical plant and equipment in Lewistown, supported offering courses in the field using Academy staff through an "Academy on the Road" initiative, and increased staff complement to deal with professional certification and homeland defense program areas.

An average of 2,000-2,500 students annually attend a training activity at the Lewistown facility. The most prominent inhibiting factor in increasing that number is that students (or their fire companies) must absorb the entire cost of travel, lodging and subsistence while attending classes in Lewistown. This is a powerful disincentive to taking advantage of the staff, curriculum and facilities located there, particularly when most students take vacation or unpaid time from their job to attend resident courses. There are no dormitory or dining facilities at the Fire Academy.

Another inhibiting factor is that funding and staffing levels do not currently facilitate 7-day per week operations. Increasing weekend training opportunities from the current one to two weekends per month to every weekend would provide a modest but significant increase in training opportunities on weekends when most volunteers are not working. Other possibilities, such as two-shift operation, might increase Academy utilization.

Significantly, there is no statewide "master plan" for the provision of fire services. Master plans should identify key elements of the system such as the levels of service actually needed to protect public safety, the qualifications of the persons providing those services, the numbers of staff required, the facilities and equipment needed, the roles of state, county, and local government, volunteer organizations, community residents, and other stakeholders in the process, and the identification of viable funding streams. It is difficult to chart a future course for the fire training system without this type of planning.

Emergency Medical Services training programs are conducted through accredited training institutes and accredited continuing education sponsors at various sites around the state. There are over 60 accredited training institutes that provide educational programs leading to certification. The institutes are primarily secondary or post-secondary institutions, hospitals and regional EMS councils. These institutes are at 188 different sites and provide education across the Commonwealth. Over 1,000 continuing education sponsors approved by the Department of Health's EMS Office have 1,900 continuing education courses accredited for EMS personnel. These courses are available for renewing authorization to practice and for updating and refreshing information and knowledge of the practitioner.

In 2000-2001, 646 First Responders, 3,751 EMTs, 360 paramedics, 42 prehospital RNs and 105 EMS instructors successfully completed the basic training programs. Additional manpower does come from practitioners from other states being recognized in Pennsylvania through a type of reciprocity process. The number of personnel trained in Pennsylvania and leaving the state for better paying positions is not known at this time but needs to be assessed. Hospitals with

manpower shortages also benefit from EMS training because they can hire these trained practitioners into technician positions. The number of paramedic practitioners trained but "lost" to this workplace will be assessed through a December, 2002, survey done by the EMS Office, but this type of assessment needs to be done regularly.

For EMS education, the courses require considerable time at training and away from home and family. They can also be expensive if the person wishes academic credit. Basic training for an EMT takes between 125 and 150 hours depending upon what optional modules are included. Paramedic training averages 1000 hours and varies depending upon whether academic credit is given. Costs for EMT courses range from free to over \$800; paramedic programs range from \$350 to over \$20,000 at college locations. The value of college credit is of significance to many EMS practitioners but not to all. Both settings for education are of value but each need a different approach to support.

OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunity exists to make significant positive changes by adjusting the way the system does business, through comparatively modest investments of public monies, and by having the collective will to champion the need for increased professionalism at all levels of the volunteer fire service.

A state Master Plan for the Fire Service, similar in scope and comprehensiveness to the 1977 Department of Health EMS Master Plan, should be created. This plan will provide a blueprint for the Pennsylvania fire service training system of the 21st century by clearly identifying the role and level(s) of service that its customers, the fire service itself, is expected to provide. This will serve as the "training needs analysis" that is the keystone of effective curriculum development and management.

This "master plan" should include a "training career path" that includes training courses and levels of professional certification that a volunteer should have completed to hold or aspire to every position commonly found in the volunteer fire service. As an incentive, participation by a fire company in any State-sponsored benefit program, such as loans or grants should be tied to their willingness to adopt and implement the training career path for its personnel.

A comprehensive market research study should be conducted to establish customer perceptions of the current State Fire Academy training system as well as specific customer perceptions regarding curriculum and training delivery system needs and desires. Included in this research would be an evaluation of alternate training delivery structural models used in other states. This market research is necessary to ensure that Pennsylvania is using the delivery structure that best meets the needs of the Commonwealth's fire services.

The willingness and technical ability of the fire service to use and take advantage of new distance learning initiatives such as web-based and 2-way teleconference instructional delivery should be assessed so that decision-makers have quantifiable, valid information at hand before committing to establish state-of-the-art distance learning capabilities within the Academy training system. In the interim, Academy staff should continue to explore possible partnerships with existing distance learning systems in the hands of state government and others.

Distributive learning system for EMS personnel has been established through the Department of Health. It presently will support 20,000 EMS users. This system should be expanded to include more users and the basic training programs (didactic portions) for EMT, paramedic, First Responder and prehospital RNs. Content is developed and could be purchased. An alternative is to contract with the community college programs to prepare the content for delivery through this system.

The computerized mannequins that support skill training are being successfully used right now in Pennsylvania at the National Guard medical training center at Fort Indiantown Gap, Geisinger Medical Center, Hershey Medical Center and in a mobile training van from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. With the exception of the mobile van and the planned additional mannequin at Geisinger, few civilian EMS personnel have access to these training aids. Skill labs using these devices should be located at every training institute. Difficult to acquire and maintain skills could be trained and refreshed at these locations rather than EMS personnel having to train in hospitals or on calls as patient situations present. The personnel can be scheduled through the skill labs at reasonable hours and gain a sense of confidence and mastery for themselves through this process. Purchase of additional mannequins is essential. Community colleges would benefit by using the training aids for other classes and would be expected to contribute matching in kind support such as staff and space.

EMS personnel may renew authorization to practice through taking continuing education courses. The Department of Health has approved over 1000 sponsors of continuing education and 1900 courses are accredited for delivery across the state. In both continuing education and in the basic training program for First Responders (a credentialed practitioner level in EMS), EMTs, paramedics, and prehospital RNs, didactic content could be delivered through distributive education technology. The capability to do this exists for most, but not all, EMS services through computers and connection to the Internet. Funding allocated to purchase to configure the National Standard Curricula for each of these training programs and continuing education programs would allow access to the training seven days a week and 24 hours a day at the individual's convenience and in the local or home location. Skill components would still require application training and competency testing in person, but the number of hours and the expense of the travel would be greatly reduced. The consistency of instruction and statewide updates of content would improve dramatically.

The current practice of funding fire training through the Department of Education's non-credit program should be evaluated to determine if this training would be better placed in the Office of the State Fire Commissioner and if EMS training would be better placed with the rest of the EMS program management at the Department of Health, EMS Office. Experienced fire service training professionals who are directly accountable to the State Fire Commissioner may best handle state-funded fire training. Educational Training Agencies, such as county fire academies, should be eligible for cost reimbursement on an equal basis with community colleges. The existing system of community colleges and county fire training agencies is effective, but the Office of the State Fire Commissioner and the State Fire Academy may best handle the oversight and control of this system and, for EMS programs, the EMS Office.

In the case of EMS, many Emergency Medical Service Operating Fund dollars are being given to the training institutes in addition to the Department of Education funding and the student tuition. Consolidating the funding would allow visibility of duplicate funding and more effective distribution based upon success of students in meeting the minimal standards of safe practice as evidenced by the state testing process. The funding from so many different sources leads to inefficiency and even the possibility of inadvertent double funding of courses. The funding is not connected to product. If a student does not ever reach competency and certification, the present process continues without the EMS Office being able to hold the training institute accountable for support to the student or internal quality improvement being connected to funding.

EMS personnel should be able to acquire training at many locations and not be tied only to one institution. This would allow for modular approach to training so that in the case of paramedic training, the 1000 hours could be taken in "bite size" pieces. For example, the didactic could be acquired through distributive learning, a respiratory skill module may be scheduled at a community college at a time and on a date that coincides with the students life schedule, and other modules could be taken at any accredited training institute using the same process. If the funding were managed at the EMS Office, the cost per student would allow this mobility and flexibility. The present system is an "all or none" approach and locks students to one course at one training institute. It does not fit the adult learner and especially does not fit the volunteer life cycle/schedule.

Part of any intended training career path is the provision of an independent means of demonstrating competency i.e. certification using the National Fire Protection Professional Qualifications Standards. The existing funding level in the Office of the State Fire Commissioner for fire service certification should be increased to facilitate adding additional certification levels, expand integration of certification with existing training curriculum, and increase on-site delivery of certification testing on a no-cost basis to candidates.

A program could be established that provides students attending State Fire Academy resident courses at Lewistown and other, non-resident, academy-approved training programs to defray the out-of-pocket travel expenses that they or their fire companies incur as a consequence of student attendance. Since lodging is the largest single expense incurred by students, providing State-paid lodging, at a minimum, would be an effective method of significant assistance.

State Fire Academy staffing could be expanded to allow for expansion of weekend training opportunities through full seven-day-a-week operation. The cost and feasibility of increasing Academy utilization by offering at least some Resident courses on a two-shift training schedule (i.e. one course from 7 AM to 3 PM, another from 3 PM to 11 PM), as is commonly done in military technical schools, should be explored.

In some other states, the position of County Fire Coordinator exists in each county. This is a paid, full-time county government position with various duties that may include administrative support of local fire companies, coordination of bulk purchasing of equipment and supplies, incident pre-planning activities public fire safety education, and local government-fire company communication. In some places, duties include response to larger or multiple-alarm incidents, generally serving under the on-scene Incident Commander as a member of his or her staff in a liaison, logistical, communications, or other advisory capacity. Significantly, the County Fire Coordinator also usually serves as that state's training system and/or fire safety agency representative, marketing the state training and fire service assistance programs, coordinating state training course delivery in his or her respective county, and channeling local feedback upstream to decision makers in state government.

All of these issues could be addressed by providing assistance on a matching basis to counties that agree to establish a County Fire Coordinator position. A state/county split of salary costs could be undertaken to avoid the appearance of an "unfunded mandate" and to give county government a sense of ownership in the effort. This is the method currently used by PEMA to provide qualified Emergency Management Coordinators in each county. Competency of the incumbents could be assured by establishing, as a condition of funding, minimum qualifications and a model job description that includes acting as the OSFC and State Fire Academy "point of contact" and coordinator of State fire training activities within their county.

As with any other organization, business plans are needed to ensure the future of the business. In many cases, the personnel tasked with the management of these services lack the training and education to adequately develop and implement a business plan. In other cases, as volunteers, they simply do not have the time to perform these tasks. As with any problem associated with a lack of training or education, the opportunities for this type of training should be more widely available and easily accessible. Presently, the EMS system includes 28 Advanced Life Support (ALS) training institutes and 55 Basic Life Support (BLS) training institutes for a total 63 training institutes.

Strategically placed financial and other management courses at some of these training institutes would increase access and support the development of business plans for emergency service providers. Management courses could be delivered through distributive education technology established at the Department of Health through funding from bioterrorism grants. The content requires funding support. Additional computer stations in each service would be ideal so that education does not interfere with operations.

EMS personnel may renew authorization to practice through taking continuing education courses. The Department of Health has approved over 1000 sponsors of continuing education and 1900 courses are accredited for delivery across the state. In both continuing education and in the basic training program for First Responders (a credentialed practitioner level in EMS), EMTs, paramedics, and prehospital RNs, systematic instructional content could be delivered through distributive education technology. The capability to do this exists for most, but not all, EMS services through computers and connection to the Internet. Funding allocated to purchase to configure the National Standard Curricula for each of these training programs and continuing education programs would allow access to the training seven days a week and 24 hours a day at the individual's convenience and in the local or home location. Skill components would still require application training and competency testing in person, but the number of hours and the expense of the travel would be greatly reduced. The consistency of instruction and statewide updates of content would improve dramatically.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEEDS:

Master Plan Development	\$30,000
Plan Maintenance, Review and Updating	\$5,000 annually
Career Path Development	Staff time only
Incentivization of Career Path	\$10,000 for communications
Market Research	\$50,000
Marketing Strategy and Outreach	\$50,000 annually
Study Alternative Delivery Structures	\$10,000
Fire Coordinator Matching Grants	\$1.675 M
Full funding of Training-Delivery System	\$7.0 M ³
Transfer of Funding System to OSFC	\$45,000
Distance-Learning Technologies	\$2.6 M
Distance Education Costs – Recurring	\$200,000
Facilitation of Partnership with DOH on DL/E	\$20,000
Lodging Subsidies for Students	\$200,000 annually
Enhanced Certification Levels – Development	\$100,000
Expanded Academy Operations – Weekend	\$125,000 annually
Feasibility Study – SFA 2 nd Shift Operations	\$ 0
Training Mannequins	\$1.64 M

³ The majority of this funding is already in-place within the Department of Education; supplementing the existing funding would require an increase of approximately \$2.0 M.

VOLUNTEER LOAN ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Volunteer Loan and Assistance Program (VLAP) provides low-interest loans for the purchase of major equipment, apparatus, vehicles and facilities. Since the inception of this program in 1975, \$283,173,599 has been loaned to 5,614 volunteer fire or EMS applicant organizations. There have only been 7 defaults on those loans. This program has been quite successful and has served as a national model with many other states following Pennsylvania's lead and enacting similar programs.

This loan program has been funded in two ways – through bond issues and General Fund appropriations. There have been 3 bond issues totaling \$50,000,000 and 3 transfers from the General Fund totaling \$31,000,000.

There is no continuous funding available for the program. This limitation of funding creates a backlog of loan applicants. When there is a backlog of applicants, applications must be prioritized or the number of new loan approvals in any one-month must be limited. A backlog of applications discourages organizations from applying for loans or forces volunteer organizations to seek bridge loans at much higher interest rates.

During this current budget year there have been 28 loans approved for a total of \$3,316,847. There are currently 48 applications totaling \$4,860,370 that have been qualified and are waiting to be sent to the Application Review Committee.

Loans are made without regard to the financial need of applicants. Volunteer services with millions of dollars of assets compete equally with services with few financial resources for this state loan funding. All loan recipients pay the same interest rate (2%) regardless of their differing financial conditions.

OPPORTUNITIES

There are ways to address maintaining the viability of VLAP. These are 1) raising the 2% interest rate based on a sliding scale addressing the financial need of the organizations that receive funding, 2) controlling equipment costs by creating common Pennsylvania specifications, and, 3) finding additional sources of funding.

The current interest rate of 2% has not been changed since the program began in 1975. Adjusting the interest rates to reflect an applicant organization's needs or ability to pay would encourage those with greatest need to use the program and allow recapture of some of the carrying costs of the program. For all applicants, the interest rates would still be low, but would be in a range (example: between 1% and 4%), based on need. This would be similar to how the interest rates are set for the state's PENNVEST program that provides loans to municipalities for water and sewer construction.

In many cases, the volunteer organizations that apply and are approved for low interest loans are very solvent and could get commercial loans or other financing. However, those volunteer organizations that are struggling and who need state loan assistance because they cannot afford commercial loans often do not receive VLAP. Requiring a financial needs assessment and approving loans to those who truly need assistance would reduce the total amount of loans each month and make available more funds for this program. Moreover, consideration could be given establishing a grant program to meet critical needs not able to be funded through conventional VLAP lending. This would require careful study and crafting to ensure that only essential needs are addressed.

Finding a continuous funding stream to sustain VLAP would enable the program interest rates to remain low and not require any adjustments to the loan amounts.

PUBLIC FIRE PREVENTION AND SAFETY EDUCATION

“*Pennsylvania Burning*”, a report to the Governor from the Governor’s Commission on Fire Prevention and Control (1976), identified the lack of fire prevention and public education as a key elements contributing to the devastating effects of fires and other emergencies. Unfortunately, many of those recommendations have failed to be realized, and the problems faced twenty-five years ago are still prevalent today.

There are many fire prevention and public safety education problems facing our Commonwealth today, including limited community-oriented fire prevention and public safety education program, volunteer fire companies that lack the training, education, experience and the resources necessary to provide fire prevention and safety education, no extensive partnership with the insurance industry to promote fire alarms, sprinklers systems and fire prevention efforts, no statewide effort targeting prevention and mitigation of child firesetting and juvenile arson, arson, and arson committed by firefighters.

FIRE PREVENTION AND PUBLIC SAFETY EDUCATION

Many Commonwealth communities do not have the benefit of receiving fire prevention and public safety education programs or materials from the local volunteer fire and emergency agency. This is due in part to apathy on the part of citizens and volunteer fire organizations about the need for fire prevention efforts. In many other cases the local fire company simply cannot afford to spend limited revenue for fire prevention and safety education efforts. Typically, a fire company will spend 95% of its annual revenue for fire suppression and support activities, leaving little if any funds to be directed to fire prevention programs.

Fire service organizations may also be hampered in their fire prevention efforts by a lack of community support for enforcement of fire prevention and building safety codes and standards. A substantial part of fire prevention activities should be focused on the inspection of buildings and the enforcement of established fire prevention and building codes.

The industry with perhaps the most vested interests in fire prevention and public safety education is the insurance industry. While the insurance industry does address fire prevention through a number of venues, there currently is no coordinated partnership between the industry in Pennsylvania and the fire service to promote and support fire prevention and public safety education efforts.

CHILD FIRESETTING AND JUVENILE ARSON

The occurrence of child firesetting and juvenile arson is both pervasive and an incredibly destructive behavior.

Each year, fires set by juveniles account for a large percentage of injuries, property damage and deaths in the United States. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), children “playing” with fire start approximately 99,000 fires that are reported to fire departments annually.

On an annual basis, fires set by juveniles cause an estimated 350 deaths and 2,800 injuries in the United States. The cost of providing protection from these fires and the property loss attributed to juvenile firesetters nationwide easily exceeds \$280 million annually. More than 50% of persons arrested for the crime of arson are under the age of 18 years, while a far greater number of juvenile firesetting behaviors never attain that status of criminal arson. And yet, many community agencies, schools, and organizations dealing with children, parents and caregivers, never have been introduced to this problem with the real facts and provided information on the role that they can serve in being part of the solution.

ARSON PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

Arson is a serious problem in Pennsylvania. It is a leading cause of all fires, and it annually kills and injures scores of civilians and destroys millions of dollars worth of property.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in 2000, the United States experienced an estimated 75,000 structure fires that were deliberately set, accounting for 14.8% of all structure fires.

Incendiary or suspicious fires in structures resulted in 505 civilian deaths and \$1.3 billion in property damage.

In Pennsylvania, the Fire Marshal Unit of the State Police generally handles arson investigation. In a small number of counties and larger cities, Fire Marshals with investigative and law enforcement powers are employed by local or county government.

The State Police Fire Marshal names as a “State Police Assistant Fire Marshal” a chief officer from each fire company or department. There are no training requirements for these “Assistant Fire Marshal” personnel at the local level. It is the responsibility of these personnel to report to the State Police Fire Marshal all fire incidents and all suspicious or incendiary fires.

Local fire officials sometimes fail to recognize the crime of arson and initiate the appropriate investigative actions; nonetheless, the number of suspicious and incendiary fires represents a substantial investigative caseload.

Firefighter arson has occurred in Pennsylvania and will probably continue to occur in the future unless some intervention action is taken. It should be noted that firefighter arson is not

endemic to Pennsylvania; the situation exists throughout the country and has been addressed in a variety of ways. Fire service and law enforcement officials and agencies in some states have developed programs that have been very successful in reducing the occurrence of firefighter arson.

OPPORTUNITIES

FIRE PREVENTION AND PUBLIC SAFETY EDUCATION

Fire prevention and public safety education initiatives should first be instituted at the state level and can then be filtered down to communities and fire departments with proper support for local endeavors.

Since a majority of fires occur in our homes, an aggressive and comprehensive state-sponsored awareness campaign that targets the homeowner and tenants should be launched. State-sponsored and professionally developed public-safety advertising could have a positive effect on reducing home fire hazards and unsafe practices. Public-safety advertising for the broadcast and print media as well as brochures, newsletters, magazine articles and similar publications should be developed and delivered to the general population and to the fire service organizations. A state funded mini-grant program could be established for fire agencies with trained Fire Prevention Officers who commit to implementing fire prevention and public safety education programs. Also, the Office of the State Fire Commissioner could make available to communities copies of applicable codes and standards for local reference.

CHILD FIRESETTING AND JUVENILE ARSON

This is not an issue volunteer fire organizations typically address, but the Office of the Fire Commission could establish regional coalitions and identify local agencies, services and organizations to include in a regionally based program to address child firesetting and juvenile arson. Emphasis would be placed on identifying the regional scope of the problem and on identifying agencies and persons with the expertise to execute the principles applied to intervention strategies. A special emphasis would be placed on teaching the basics of successfully interviewing children of all ages and how to use risk assessment tools to determine a level of concern for future firesetting behavior.

ARSON PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

A successful public education campaign making citizens aware of the seriousness and scope of the arson problem in the Commonwealth would be beneficial.

The Pennsylvania State Police Fire Marshal Unit, in cooperation with the State Fire Academy, should expand training programs to make fire officials more knowledgeable of fire investigation procedures and techniques and cognizant of the fact that all fires should be investigated. While a fire company chief may currently be issued a “State Police Assistant Fire Marshal card”, there is no accountability as to the knowledge, training, or experience related to fire and arson investigation of the cardholders. Some form of accountability should be established to ensure that fire officials issued State Police Assistant Fire Marshal certificates are in fact trained and capable of fulfilling the functions and responsibilities incumbent with that appointment.

A Task Force of state fire officials, volunteer and career fire fighters and others should be established to address the firefighter arson issue. The task force will develop methods to alert and inform fire service personnel to the dangers and repercussions of intentionally setting fires, and to reduce the incidence of firefighters committing arson.

A first priority of the firefighter arson task force would be to develop a Firefighter Arson Awareness Education Program that should have as its purpose the ideal of instilling in firefighters the facts of firefighter arson. *Pennsylvania Essentials of Fire Fighting*, the entry-level firefighting training curriculum delivered by the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy, could be the delivery vehicle for new firefighters.

The task force should address the lack of a process to legally and effectively screen volunteer membership candidates and new career hires. Identifying individuals who have previously exhibited behavior that has or could lead to firefighter arson could affect the successful mitigation of the problem of firefighter arson.

There is no method at present to easily identifying the scope of firefighter arson in Pennsylvania. A well established program should be developed that would allow investigators and program managers access to data of this nature. The Pennsylvania Fire Information Reporting System will address the issue to some extent, but there also may be a need for reporting and record-keeping specific to firefighter arson.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEEDS:

Public Education/Fire Prevention Campaign	\$1.25 M annually
Arson Training/Awareness Programs	\$350,000 annually
Juvenile Fire-Setter Coalitions	\$175,000 annually
Program to Combat Firefighter Arson	\$100,000 annually

MUTUAL AID

The provision of Mutual Aid is a cornerstone of the Commonwealth's public-safety response system. By means of Mutual Aid, fire, emergency medical, hazardous materials, law enforcement, public works, emergency management and other agencies come to the assistance of one another in times of emergencies and disasters.

The concept of Mutual Aid rests on recognition that no one organization, municipality or jurisdiction possesses the equipment, personnel or physical or human infrastructure to adequately handle every possible type and scope of emergency, either man-made or natural. Mutual Aid has traditionally been part of the fire and emergency services, and history is replete with examples ranging from the shipping of horse-drawn fire apparatus by rail from one community to another in the 1900s to the multi-agency mutual assistance response to United Airlines Flight 93's tragic crash on September 11, 2001.

Mutual Aid is provided within the context of three scenarios: 1) locality-based, day-to-day assistance that supplements personnel, equipment or vehicles in the event of multiple calls for service or shortages of essential materials or manpower; 2) sub-regional, incident assistance in the event of major fire alarms, multiple injury scenarios, and similar events; and, 3) regional and, potentially, statewide and interstate assistance in the event of catastrophes or terrorist incidents. The first two forms are routine mutual aid, while the third has become essential to the Commonwealth's Homeland Security preparedness.

Achieving Mutual Aid preparedness is completely dependent upon all "authorities having jurisdiction" initiating and maintaining specific, written Mutual Aid Agreements with one another. In this Commonwealth, this means municipal, county and state government organizations, as fire and emergency services entities may not enter into these agreements; only their local governments are empowered to agree. With over 2,500 jurisdictional entities, achieving statewide Mutual Aid would require one or several signed agreements with over six million specific references and signatories.

Moreover, conflicting legal interpretations and political considerations now frequently result in the absence of written Mutual Aid agreements, even at the local levels.

The absence of such agreements may well expose fire, EMS, rescue, and other response organizations and personnel to a potential loss of Workers' Compensation coverage, abrogation of health and welfare coverage and potential civil liability claims. There is concern, as well, that some insurance coverage for equipment loss or damage may be unavailable absent these agreements.

In addition, the absence of portable certifications or training/equipment standards poses significant operational and legal challenges. It is impossible, for example, for any Incident Commander to know, with assurance, that an “Engine” from another part of Pennsylvania or from an adjoining state possesses either the manpower, pumping capacity or basic equipment necessary for the task assigned.

Significantly, civil protections available to first responders may also be jeopardized because Pennsylvania, in most cases, does not recognize the validity of training standards and professional certifications of firefighters, hazardous materials responders, and rescue technicians from other states; as a result, out-of-state responders are essentially regarded as “volunteers” without standing and absent “proper training”. The Commonwealth’s emergency medical system does provide reciprocal recognition for personnel; responding services are able to respond non-routinely without becoming licensed.

While Pennsylvania is a member of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, or EMAC, that compact fails to address day-to-day operational concerns and the legal and certification difficulties of emergencies not declared disasters.

OPPORTUNITIES

Legislation is recommended to provide a basis for Mutual Aid that eliminates the requirement for individual local governments to be signatories to master agreements, conditions the existence and legality of Mutual Aid upon a legitimate request for and response to same through Public Safety Answering Points (i.e., 911 Centers), and requires, only, that counties, regional counter-terrorism task forces and the Commonwealth sign agreements that provide the foundation for asset deployment and coordination.

Legislation is recommended to provide a means of recognizing the training standards and certifications of out-of-state personnel and agencies that may be required to support the Commonwealth’s emergency response system.

The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and the Office of the State Fire Commissioner should begin discussions with county, regional and statewide stakeholder organizations to develop statewide resource-typing and equipment and training standards for fire, rescue services so that regional and statewide Mutual Aid can be effectively implemented.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEEDS:

None

INTEROPERABILITY

Interoperability is that state wherein “things work together”. For volunteer emergency service organizations, these “things” include items such as radio systems, fire hoses, protective breathing apparatuses and decontamination showers. Interoperability may also include operational procedures.

Since September 11, 2001, interoperability has become an issue on the forefront. It is universally recognized that the protection of both emergency responders and communities demands that “things work together” and that careful attention be paid to this issue if Pennsylvania and the nation are to fully develop response systems capable to handling the range of potential emergencies now before us.

In Pennsylvania’s fire service community, there are no statewide requirements or standards to ensure that “things” interoperate. Unlike the Emergency Medical Service, Law Enforcement and Hazardous Materials Response communities, the broader Pennsylvania fire service consistently has not addressed this matter save by expressing a need for interoperable radio systems.

This is not to say that local, sub-regional and regional associations have not discussed and, in some cases, implemented interoperable standards. In Union County, as example, a “Large Diameter Hose Task Force” and “Tanker Task Force” were formed based on common standards and practices. In Lycoming County, a “Rescue Task Force” is developing using common training, nomenclature, equipment and operational standards. In southwestern Pennsylvania’s “Group 13” region, exemplary progress has been made to develop interoperable systems and practices to enable responses to large-scale emergencies, catastrophes and attacks.

But, at the Commonwealth level, Pennsylvania’s fire services are very much victims of traditions, independent planning, inadequate funding and a lack of clear, statewide direction.

From the most-basic firefighting functions, like hooking one hose to another, to more-advanced evolutions, as enabling communications between organizations from widely diverse geographic locales, interoperability is a *challenge*, not a *reality*.

There are, at minimum, seventeen non-compatible hose threading standards in use within the Commonwealth with the effect that firefighters cannot couple one hose to another except through the use of costly hose thread adaptors, should they be available. Bottles of compressed air used as part of apparatus providing respiratory protection to fire and emergency service workers are not interchangeable. Tools like hydraulic cutters and pressurized airbag systems used in rescue operations cannot be interconnected.

A “Rescue Truck” from one community may come complete with all manner of lifting, cutting, disentangling, life support, protective and extrication equipment while a “Rescue Truck” from another jurisdiction bears only hand tools. Even the term “firefighter” is open to local definition, from someone possessing nationally recognized training and the proper protective equipment to a man or woman with little or no training and outdated or insufficient protective clothing.

Until these challenges are met and overcome, until the impediments to their resolution are removed and clear, statewide direction provided, interoperability, as a condition of statewide response cannot be achieved.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Office of the State Fire Commissioner and affected agencies should discuss with county, regional and statewide stakeholder organizations the development of statewide resource-typing, equipment and training standards so that the foundational basis of Interoperability can be established. All funding programs for emergency service organizations provided by the Commonwealth should require, at a minimum, adherence to these standards as a minimal requirement for assistance. State grant funds should not be used to purchase equipment that is not interoperable.

The Commonwealth’s 800 MHz radio project should be completed as part of the solution to communications interoperability.

The Commonwealth should investigate providing stand-alone, mobile interoperable “translators”, similar to those being fielded in western PA by the Federal government, to overcome, on an interim basis, the incompatibility of radio systems.

A revolving loan program specifically to acquire upgraded mobile communications systems for fire and emergency medical services organizations could be established, perhaps using monies from a bond issue. It is essential that reliance on cellular telephones is reduced and that currently underserved fire and EMS services are provided adequate radio systems.

The Office of the State Fire Commissioner should be empowered to set training and equipment standards for the Commonwealth’s fire services.

A one-time program to eliminate long-identified deficiencies, by – for example – replacing the non-standard hose in use in some areas should be considered.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEEDS:

Mobile Radio Interop Systems	\$2.75 M
Revolving Loan Program for Counties	\$45.0 M
One-Time Surge Program to Eliminate Deficiencies	\$20 M

MERGERS AND CONSOLIDATIONS

In earlier times, communities in Pennsylvania organized fire services and built stations based on needs for neighborhood fire suppression. In those days, equipment was pulled to the scene of a fire by hand or by horse over very limited systems of roads, and it made sense to establish multiple fire companies to serve new and growing communities. This system of establishment served those communities well and continued to be the only practical solution to fire protection through the early 1900s.

As the hand-drawn and horse drawn apparatus was replaced by motorized equipment, the early fire companies continued to perform their duties even though the reason for their locations and existence largely was being negated by progress in transportation and infrastructure technologies. In addition, ethnic, fraternal and social affinities often contributed not only to the establishment but also to the continuation of many departments and stations.

Through the 1950s, there were no shortages of volunteers, the cost of doing business was not insurmountable, and community support in the way of donations was generally sufficient to sustain a protection system that had its basis in history and tradition.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, however, Pennsylvania's historic and traditional system is being challenged by substantial declines in volunteers, a shrinking and older population, dramatically higher costs, and decreased community support. Despite these challenges, many fire service leaders and local government officials today resist the notion that consolidating or merging services represents a logical approach to address these challenges.

The reasons for this resistance include the long-standing traditions, the lack of any incentives, inadequate communication between local government officials and emergency services leaders, a dearth of plans for community fire protection and the fact that the public is not questioning the efficiency or effectiveness of the service they are receiving.

OPPORTUNITIES

There are needs for education and training efforts to raise the awareness of these challenges within the ranks of the leaders of government and the volunteer services.

The expansion of the state program encouraging shared municipal services and providing incentive grants for mergers and consolidations of services is strongly recommended.

The Shared Municipal Services Grant Program should be expanded to include volunteer fire companies as eligible applicants. The current annual allocation for this program is \$900,000.

Opportunities exist to expand training and informational programs for elected officials and volunteer emergency service leadership. Information on the legal issues regarding public safety, community fire protection master planning, and the benefits of mergers and consolidations should be regularly provided to raise the awareness of community leaders. This training should be offered by state government, possibly through the collaboration of the Department of Community and Economic Development and local government associations, and may be established as a prerequisite for any community to receive grant or loan funding from the Commonwealth.

There should be a systematic approach to identifying and providing tangible benefits (new grant programs, expanded loan opportunities, special recognition programs) to fire services and communities undertaking mergers, consolidations or the establishment of regional fire service organizations utilizing common procedures and with cross-response capabilities.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEEDS:

Shared Municipal Services Grant Program	\$1.5 M annually
Awareness Program (materials and delivery)	\$100,000

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Providing for the public's safety is a core function of every government.

Pennsylvania's local governments approach public safety from quite diverse perspectives. In some communities, cooperation between fire companies and local elected officials has resulted in adequate funding and policy support for fire prevention and suppression efforts. In others, governments have taken the position that volunteer fire; rescue and emergency medical services are strictly private-sector entities and have steadfastly withheld public support. The experience model for most local governments is somewhere between those two extremes, with a 1999 survey indicating that 76% of municipalities provide at least a *minimal* level of funding to volunteer fire companies.

The borough and township codes in Pennsylvania provide little guidance to impel local government involvement. Provisions for the voluntary enactment of local fire protection tax ordinances are capped at levels that cannot meet financial needs.

A 1992 survey by the Department of Community Affairs indicated that fire companies received an average municipal appropriation of \$14,331. A study by the Department of Community and Economic Development's Governor's Center for Local Government found that, on average, local government financial support for fire companies was less than fifty percent of the amount needed to meet maintenance, training, response and equipment replacement needs.

A 1999 survey conducted by the Department of Community and Economic Development's Governor's Center for Local Government Services as directed by House Resolution 67, indicated that only 48% of municipalities responding met regularly with their local fire company. This demonstrates that only a minority of local fire, rescue and emergency medical organizations communicate regularly and effectively with local government leaders concerning finances, plans, prevention requirements and training and equipment needs.

The Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, following its 1999-2000 survey of fire organizations, cited figures indicating that, as a result of low levels of public financial support, sixty percent or more of the hours available for volunteer efforts were being expended on fund-raising activities. The Institute also reported that volunteerism in the fire and emergency services ranks had decreased markedly over the past decade.

Programs whereby local governments recognize volunteers for their public-safety achievements, training accomplishments and service longevity are not widespread. Local government initiatives to involve their volunteer public-safety agencies in planning, zoning, budget and legislative discussions are uncommon.

Perhaps not surprisingly, only a small percentage of volunteer fire and emergency service agencies welcome or invite local government participation in their financial and operational planning, and many do not have recognition programs for their own personnel.

OPPORTUNITIES

Legislative action to require local governments to be responsible for the provision of fire, police, emergency medical, rescue and similar public-safety services is recommended.

A study by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee into the adequacy of local government funding, the effect of the cap on same, and the means by which local and state governments may better support volunteer fire and emergency services is suggested.

Legislative action to permit local governments to provide incentives to volunteers (i.e., local tax rebates or forgiveness, contributions to Length of Service Award Programs, etc.) is suggested.

Amendment of the Municipal Planning Code to ensure that fire and emergency services agencies are involved in planning processes is recommended.

ESTIMATED FUNDING NEED:

None

THE FIREMEN'S RELIEF ACT

The Firemen's Relief Act (Act 84 of 1968) was intended to provide a method to provide financial protection to volunteer firefighters in case of misfortune while participating in the fire service. This legislation established a grant program for Firemen's Relief Associations to provide financial support to the families of injured or killed firefighters.

The State Treasurer makes the grants to local communities that, in turn, should deliver the funds to the associations. Funding is generated from a 2% surcharge on the fire insurance premiums collected by out-of-state insurers and paid to the Department of Revenue. Distribution of the monies is made according to a formula (based on population and assessed property values) overseen by the Auditor General who also is responsible for auditing the relief associations. The Department of Community and Economic Development is responsible for developing criteria for the expenditure of the funds.

The Firemen's Relief Associations may also serve other purpose as allowed by the Act provided adequate programs are in place to ensure the primary purpose of the act is first met. However, through a combination of amendments to Act 84 as a result of requests from fire companies and pressures from local governments, the funds are now being used for purposes other than the original intent of the law. As a consequence of conflicting priorities and the unintended consequence of applying a formula that provides the bulk of funding to financially-sound communities, many Firemen's Relief Associations are unable to meet the requirement of providing intended support to injured volunteers and the families of those lost.

In 2001, \$56,306,328 was distributed in Act 84 funds. A total of \$45,044,514 went to municipalities for firemen's relief associations, and \$11,261,814 went to municipal pension funds as also allowed by the act.

Last year, 2,569 municipalities received Act 84 funds. Of that total, 917 (35%) of them received less than \$5,000, and 132 of those received less than \$1,000 (The amounts awarded ranged from \$59.69 to \$561,652).

In some communities where two or more relief associations exist, one or more associations do not receive Act 84 funding from the municipalities. There is no current provision to seamlessly permit local governments to accommodate merged or consolidated companies and associations.

OPPORTUNITIES

With a funding stream of over \$45 million, it is reasonable to assume that funds are already available to afford every firefighter basic insurance coverage. That, however, is not the case, largely because of the existing distribution formula.

Legislation would be required to amend Act 84 to change the distribution of these funds. Any amendment should equitably distribute these funds and provide funds for and require minimum insurance coverage for firefighters. This would refocus the original intent of Act 84 and should be undertaken before any increase in surcharge funding is considered.

Legislative efforts to streamline and reduce or eliminate complicated administration and oversight of the Act 84 system also should be considered. Providing funding directly to the fire companies or relief organizations rather than to local governments may be an approach worthy of consideration.

In addition, there should be a direct link made to funding received by fire companies under Act 84 and any future grant programs. Future grant programs should be based on financial need, and the financial assessment of the organizations should include funding received under Act 84.

THE FUNDING DILEMMA

For many fire and emergency medical services organizations throughout the Commonwealth, the lack of adequate funding has been and continues to be an area of great concern. Fundraising by emergency service providers is epidemic, with the local fire company carnivals, chicken bar-b-ques and other fire company fundraisers being staples of many communities in Pennsylvania. Many volunteer emergency services organization require their members to participate in fundraising activities, ironically while skills training and emergency response are optional activities.

Funding programs are available from the Commonwealth. The Volunteer Loan Assistance program has provided assistance in the form of 2% low interest loans for major purchases, Act 84 Firemen's Relief funding provides operating funds for fire departments and the \$25 million Volunteer Fire and Ambulance Grant Program provided a one-time windfall for those who took advantage of it.

There are several grant programs at the federal level, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Assistance to Firefighters grant program and from the Department of Interior grant program for rural fire companies. Most of these programs address major purchases of equipment or insurance and do not provide continuing support for operating costs of volunteer organizations.

It is important to note that few, if any, of these funding sources permit or support paying personnel. Immunizations are costly but important to protect emergency medical service personnel from risks inherent in their responsibilities. The cost to immunize one emergency responders to the same standard as the federal emergency response teams, i.e. hepatitis, influenza, tetanus, etc., is over \$300. In a recent survey of EMS personnel, approximately one third responded that they were not immunized against tetanus. Protecting responders against disease is not only sound health policy but is also a retention and recruitment issue.

As improvements in systems are recognized or developed, they often result in additional cost for emergency medical services. One example is the automated external defibrillator; another is equipment to detect the proper placement of tubes for breathing placed in patients' airways. Both of these save lives and are standards that no service should be without. New pharmaceuticals are also expensive and must be replaced when they expire. These costs cannot be 100% covered with the present EMSOF fund and with reimbursement changing, they are not fully covered through that source either.

Reimbursement payments from the insurance industry for ambulance services are paid to the policyholder rather than the EMS provider. In many cases, the provider never receives the payment or must take legal action to obtain the payment from the policyholder. This drives costs up.

In addition, Medicaid reimbursement rates have not changed in years and, in many communities, the number of Medicaid clients grows each year and the cost to provide the service continues to climb.

There is no requirement that local governments provide financial support to their fire services save for the requirement that the local governments must provide Workers' Compensation coverage for firefighters.

Volunteer fire and emergency medical service providers require funds to pay for operating expenses, such as electricity and fuel for vehicles, training of volunteers, building and equipment maintenance and repair, as well as, for major purchases like new buildings, apparatus or other vehicles.

The one-time demonstration grant program in the 2000-2001 budget was welcomed and appreciated by those who took advantage of the program. The program enabled organizations to purchase equipment sooner than normal, to reduce or retire debt, and to make needed renovations to facilities. It *did not*, however, solve the long-term challenge of fire and emergency services financing.

Additional funding for volunteer fire and emergency medical services is needed to continue to address operating expenses, equipment purchases, training and other costs.

It is important to note that should additional funding be provided, there are several mechanisms for delivery that should be considered. One mechanism would be a structured, non-exclusionary grant program that would not only provide a minimum grant to any fire, emergency medical services and rescue service but also award increasingly larger grants to emergency service providers that met progressively higher standards.

Another mechanism, similar to existing federal programs, would be a competitive grant program that requires the emergency service provider to meet minimum requirements, such as incident reporting using the PENFIRS system, prior to being eligible for any funds.

POTENTIAL FUNDING OPTIONS IDENTIFIED IN ACT 89

Act 89 of 2002 required a \$100 million bond referendum question that will be put to the voters this November. The ballot question asks voters if they favor incurring debt of up to \$100 million to enhance and improve delivery of volunteer fire and volunteer emergency services.

While past performance does not necessarily predict the outcome of the referendum on this bond issue, Pennsylvania voters have approved all but one previous bond referendum question over the past twenty years.

Bond funds can be used to purchase items with an extended life (generally 20 years). These may include building construction and improvements, large apparatus and some other vehicles and systems. Federal tax code implications preclude using bond funds for many costs associated with enhancing and improving delivery of volunteer fire and volunteer emergency services. Bond funds cannot be used for operating expenses like utility costs, short-lived equipment, training expenses and personnel costs.

Bond funds could be used to address three of the existing issues identified in this report. Bond funding could provide a funding stream for the existing Volunteer Loan Assistance Program that supports purchases of major equipment and facility construction and rehabilitation. Bond funding could also facilitate the goal of achieving interoperability by financing identified projects. Bond funding could also be used to establish a grant program financing equipment, vehicles, structures and systems meeting bond requirements.

Act 89 further specified that this report consider a monthly surcharge on the usage of cellular telephones and wireless devices to fund improvement of the delivery of services provided by volunteer fire companies and volunteer emergency services. Nearly 40% of all the in-coming calls for emergency response come from cellular or wireless devices in metropolitan areas and on and around interstate highways. This percentage is lower in rural areas due to lower cellular and wireless use and system coverage.

There are approximately 5 million cellular and wireless devices in Pennsylvania. A 25-cent monthly surcharge on cellular phones and wireless devices would generate approximately \$15 million annually. This income could potentially fund new initiatives, retire bonded indebtedness, or support continued operation of VLAP.

It is important to note that potential amendments to present 911 legislation also have generated consideration of surcharges on cellular phone and wireless devices to finance enhanced 911 systems with geo-location features. These two issues should not be confused nor should decisions on either be made independently. Without sufficient numbers of properly trained and equipped volunteers, the ability to respond to 911 calls is negated; conversely, 911 technology upgrades are essential to the overall functioning of the response system.

The Task Force discussed various funding options that might be established to support volunteer fire and emergency services. These included surcharges on building permits or new taxes on combustible building materials, a fee on new car registrations for emergency services (as may be done in Virginia), and using the proceeds from criminal property seizures, particularly in arson cases, to support services.

However, four potential options discussed by the Task Force and detailed below offer the most reasonable opportunity to provide support for volunteer fire and emergency services.

Currently, the gross premiums tax rate for property and casualty insurers is 2%. This tax is assessed on approximately 850 property and casualty insurers paying gross premiums tax in Pennsylvania. Raising this gross premiums tax rate for all property and casualty insurers by 1% would increase revenues from this tax by an estimated \$140 million for tax year 2003. These funds could be used to improve and enhance the delivery of services by volunteer fire and emergency services by supporting the recruitment, retention and training of volunteers, funding operating expenses and supporting the purchases of equipment. However, there may be consequences to domestic insurers and policyholders in the form of retaliatory tax increases by other states or withdrawal of Pennsylvania insurers from the market.

Although the Emergency Medical Services Operations Fund (EMSOF) has provided a stable funding source since the inception in 1985, there has been no increase in these funding rates since 1985. Annually, the funding needs exceed the funding availability by more than \$5 million dollars. A major cost supported by the EMSOF is communication systems. The EMS communication systems are aging across the Commonwealth and need regular and significant investment annually to assure capability of EMS personnel talking with 911 centers, with hospitals and physicians for medical direction and with other services in disaster response. An increase of \$5 for the EMS system added to the present fee (\$7.50 of a \$10 fee on moving violations goes to EMS) would result in approximately \$6,500,000 annually, based on an estimated 1.3 million moving violations per year.

The federal government does provide grant programs for fire and emergency services. Pennsylvania volunteer fire and emergency services compete well for federal grants and should continue to pursue federal funds, as they are available. In addition, new federal homeland security funds will become available for first responders and these funds can be used to support volunteer fire and emergency services needs for equipment and training related to their roles in providing Homeland Security. A program to provide grant-writing assistance to volunteer organizations may place Pennsylvania services in more competitive positions.

Recent changes with Medicare reimbursement rates have created as much as a 20% reduction in income to many services, while the demand for providing services to the elderly continue to climb. State government cannot correct the inadequacies in federal funding, as this requires congressional action at the federal level and addressing the federal Medicaid system is extremely complicated. State legislative action would be required to correct Act 68 to ensure the payments were made directly to the EMS provider.

*It is essential that **local government** be involved in supporting and assisting local fire and emergency services.*

Amending the Municipality Authorities Act of 1945 to allow for the establishment of local “fire districts” or municipal fire and emergency service authorities to enable management and provide taxing authority for local fire and emergency services should be considered.

Providing specific funding to Local Development Districts to establish emergency service planning programs assisting communities and counties in developing fire and emergency services plans should be considered.

Amending the city, township, borough and town codes to require local government involvement and participation in fire and emergency services delivery and to remove impediments to adequate tax support (for example, by removing the cap on fire protection millage) should be considered.