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Frustration Builds as State, Townships, and First Responders Try to Avert Public Safety Crisis

As the Senate Resolution 6 Commission puts the finishing touches on a study to resuscitate the commonwealth's volunteer fire and EMS companies, discontent is growing. First responders say that lawmakers have been studying the challenges for decades, but still, the problems persist. A special session to draw attention to the lack of volunteers and funding has been put on hold, too. Undeterred, community leaders and first responders are taking charge of their own future with innovative programs to welcome new members and ease the demands on current ones.

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

The talking and brainstorming are over.

Now, the members of the Senate Resolution 6 Commission are taking what they learned during more than a year of meetings and developing remedies to help resuscitate Pennsylvania's volunteer fire and EMS companies.

When the group's much-anticipated report is released in November, it

will be the latest in a series of studies that have analyzed firefighting in the commonwealth. The oldest of these, "*Pennsylvania Burning*," was written more than 40 years ago when Milton Shapp was governor and Apple had just released its first computer.

Clearly, fixing the challenges facing Pennsylvania's volunteer fire and ambulance services has been a slow process — some, in fact, would say too slow. Among them are first responders and municipal leaders, who are getting increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied.

"Look, it's 2018, and we still have to flip pancakes to provide this service to the community," says Tim Knapp, a fire chief and director of Pike County's Office of Emergency Management. "Something has to change."

Neil Vaughn, president of the Chester County Fire Chiefs Association, agrees: "At this point, we are at crisis level." ➤



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Shirl Barnhart, PSATS
Immediate Past President

“We’ve **‘talked the talk’**
long enough; it’s time
to **‘walk the walk.’**”

— *Shirl Barnhart*



PUBLIC SAFETY CRISIS



'This is an epidemic'

Tired of talk and worried about the future, Knapp, Vaughn, and others on the front lines want Harrisburg to come up with diverse and realistic solutions to address the most serious problems facing the volunteer emergency community today: declining memberships, rising costs, and time-consuming training requirements.

After all, they say, the alarms have been going off for decades. When, as a commonwealth, are we finally going to get this smoldering public safety crisis under control?

Shirl Barnhart, PSATS' immediate past president, has been one of the loudest voices of discontent. A volunteer firefighter and EMS provider, he serves on the SR 6 Commission.

"Lawmakers need to get off their butts," he says, echoing the disappointment that surfaced at the PSATS Annual Conference last April.

There, Barnhart, supported by the delegates, demanded that Gov. Tom Wolf convene a special legislative session before November's general election to raise awareness of the plight of fire and EMS providers. "We've 'talked the talk' long enough; it's time to 'walk the walk.'"

Consider these sobering facts:

- Volunteers at fire companies across Pennsylvania have dropped from 300,000 strong in the 1960s and '70s to below 50,000 today.

- At least 75 percent of fire companies are struggling with manpower at a time when the state's population is aging. The average age of a firefighter is 50-something, and people are busier today than they were decades ago.

- Communities would have to raise taxes almost \$10 billion a year to switch to a paid model for fire service, according to the Office of the State Fire Commissioner.

"This is an epidemic, and we need to take it to the streets," Barnhart adds. "The public needs to understand what

Tips for finding and keeping fire and EMS volunteers

These suggestions for recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters and EMS providers were compiled by the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Committee:

Recruitment ideas

- Create partnerships with school districts and other fire departments to offer firefighter and EMS programming to high school students.
- Market to "millennials." They want to help, but they want their experience to be meaningful. They also want to feel valued and want a friendly, non-bureaucratic work environment.
- Make joining the fire department "user-friendly" by shortening applications and following up with applicants within hours after they apply.
- Start a "Citizens Fire Academy" to increase interest and awareness in the community.

Retention ideas

- Use selective paging to reduce unnecessary runs.
- Administer surveys to determine the needs of current members and learn why others have left.
- Create a rewards system for years of service, hours of training attended, or responses to calls, where volunteers get recognized at an awards ceremony or receive a pin or gift cards at Christmas.
- Offer online training and customize all training to individual fire departments.
- Encourage leadership development by supporting or financing volunteers who attend such training.
- Reduce "bureaucracy" as much as possible to make being a volunteer less time-consuming. This could include eliminating unnecessary paperwork, procedures, or processes.



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local volunteer fire companies do and what the impact — financial and otherwise — will be on communities if they no longer existed.”

Still, despite these persistent cries for help, Gov. Wolf has yet to publicly respond to the special session request from township leaders. Another disappointment: The commission’s co-chair, Rep. Steve Barrar, says that a special session, if convened, won’t happen until after the release of the SR 6 report in November.

Barrar, who also heads the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, told the *Township News* that lawmakers want to see the report first and then use it as a foundation for legislation and public education.

“That will be a good time to run



“Look, it’s 2018, and **we still have to flip pancakes** to provide this service to the community. **Something has to change.**”

with the ball,” he says, “and really get this thing moving.”

Old problems, new ideas

When released, the report will be the result of more than a year’s work by the commission, a 39-member group of lawmakers, first responders, and local government representatives who were brought together in 2017 to follow up on the findings of their predecessor, the SR 60 Commission.

Fourteen years ago, the original panel did its own comprehensive study of the commonwealth’s fire and EMS is-

ssues that included 23 recommendations. One of those became Act 172 of 2016, which allows municipalities to offer property and income tax exemptions to first responders.

Beyond that, however, not much legislative progress has been made on those original recommendations, which is one reason for SR 6, a “reboot” of the previous effort.

“Act 172 was a first step but not the only step,” acting State Fire Commissioner Bruce Trego says, adding that first responders are still yearning for a menu of options and funding that take into account the diversity of Pennsylvania’s volunteer fire companies. “There are no cookie-cutter solutions.”

“What we really need are more efforts to entice people to volunteer,” Chester County’s Neil Vaughn says.

With that in mind, the SR 6 Commission is considering several incentives, such as offering first responders tuition assistance, forgiving their college loans, and rewarding them for long-term service. Members have also discussed developing a statewide pilot program to train high schoolers and college students in emergency management.

At the PSATS Conference in April, Barnhart advocated other legislative remedies, such as allowing variable training standards for rural, suburban, and urban areas; granting a tax incentive for employers who permit employees to respond to calls while at work; and providing a fix for out-of-control insurance rates at the State Workers Insurance Fund (SWIF).

More than anything else, though, Barnhart wants lawmakers to understand the urgency of the situation and respond.

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crisis involving fire and EMS for far too long,” he says. “It’s time that our hard-working fire companies and volunteers receive the attention and recognition they deserve from Harrisburg.”

Getting creative

In the meantime, communities and their first responders are coming to grips with their new reality.

In the not-too-distant past, volunteers were plentiful. Today, not so much, which means that fire and EMS providers are having to work harder than ever to keep the doors open, attract new and younger members, and support current ones.

They also must be a lot more creative.

As a result, marketing campaigns, videos, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages, financial incentives, such as stipends and business discounts, and outreach programs for youth and retirees have become standard operating procedures for many volunteer agencies.

“Years ago, we focused on fire prevention at community events,” Chester County fire chief Neil Vaughn says. “Now, when we’re there, we’re putting just as much emphasis on the need for volunteers.”

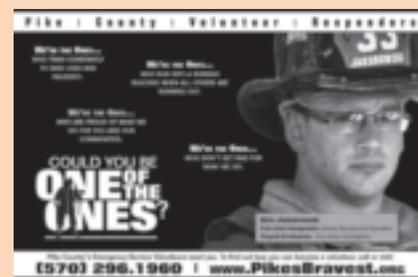
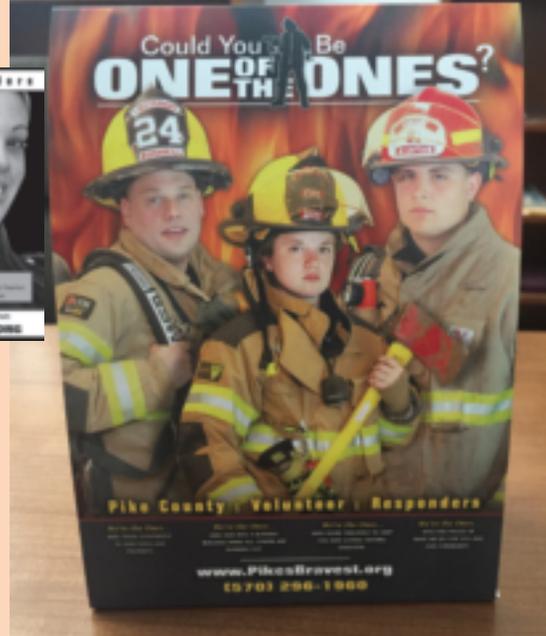
Pike County’s Tim Knapp puts it this way: “It’s all about recruit, recruit, recruit.”

“None of us can afford to sit on our hands anymore,” he adds. “We have to put ourselves out there because people aren’t beating on our doors looking for something to do like they did in the ‘80s.”

Both counties have initiated multifaceted marketing efforts that use many platforms — websites, video, social media, brochures, billboards, and even tabletop displays at local restaurants — to spread the same message: They’re looking for members. (Editor’s note: To see



These ads, featuring volunteer firefighters in Pike County, are part of a marketing campaign to draft new recruits. This is one example of how fire and EMS companies are getting creative to attract new and younger members and support current ones. (Photos courtesy of Tim Knapp, Pike County Office of Emergency Management.)



what they’re up to, go to Chester County’s website, www.helpfightfire.com, and Pike County’s site at www.pikesbravest.org.)

“We’re trying to do as much outreach as possible,” Vaughn says.

Across the state in Allegheny County, officials are taking a “next-generation” approach to recruitment.

Several years ago, eight volunteer fire companies formed the Highlands Emergency Services Alliance to provide firefighting and EMS training to high school students during school hours. More than 40 students have participated in the program, and many also serve as junior firefighters.

The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) has also partnered with the Allegheny County Workforce Alliance and Allegheny County Fire Academy to offer 200 scholarships a year to eligible students.

Of those, 150 are given to new recruits, who must commit to five years of service at a local fire department. The remaining 50 scholarships are awarded to current volunteers, who also must agree to another five years of service.

Easing the burden

In the midst of recruitment efforts like this, fire and EMS companies are working equally hard to keep current volunteers on board.

Burnout is a serious problem because with fewer members, those who remain are loaded up with additional responsibilities, and often, these have little to do with saving lives and property. In fire departments across the commonwealth, it’s not unusual for volunteers to also be raising money, balancing the books, maintaining equipment, and handling much more.

“None of us can afford to sit on our hands anymore. We have to put ourselves out there because people aren’t beating on our doors looking for something to do like they did in the 80s.”

“What we’re all doing is asking volunteers to manage a multi-million-dollar business, but that’s not why they join,” says Diane Garber, the emergency services coordinator for East Hempfield Township in Lancaster County. “They join because they want to fight fires and save lives, not take inventory and pay bills.”

“These responsibilities are burning them out so that’s why we’re trying to take some of the burden off them.”

In addition to administrative help, East Hempfield is offering financial and educational incentives to volunteers at its three local companies. A \$300,000 federal grant, allocated through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Program, is supporting the effort.

With the funding, Garber says, the township has established a tuition reimbursement program. It also pays for volunteers’ training and awards them gift cards based on the number of calls they respond to each month. Each firefighter also is given a bag of clean clothes, which is kept at the fire house.

“After they’re done with a fire call,” she says, “they know they’re always going to have a clean shirt, sweatpants, and socks to change into.”

More important, though, the township is developing a long-term strategic plan that provides a foundation for the fire companies’ future. The focus is on sharing services and resources, not on consolidating them, Garber says, adding that no consultants have been involved.

Instead, the township is relying on local expertise and experience to solve a local problem.

“It’s been a lot of work,” she says. “For 18-plus months, we’ve been working hard to build stronger relationships with the membership and leadership of our volunteer fire service organizations. We’re also finding ways to assist them where they are lacking funding, resources, and personnel.”

This support, whether it’s a pair of clean socks, a gift card, or a pat on the back, is sending a strong message to local first responders that they are wanted and needed, Garber says.

“We are investing in them because they invest in our community daily,” she adds, “many times with little to no thanks.” ♦



Share your ideas for resolving the volunteer firefighter crisis

Township officials with ideas or thoughts on possible solutions to the volunteer firefighter crisis are urged to pass them along to PSATS.

“Remember, what the SR 6 Commission hopes to accomplish is being done *for* you, not *to* you, so please be a part of it,” PSATS Immediate Past President Shirl Barnhart, who sits on the commission, says. The commission is scheduled to release its report of recommendations by November 30.

Send your suggestions or ideas to PSATS Executive Director Dave Sanko at dsanko@psats.org.

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