

SR 6 COMMISSION UPDATE

Recommendations to Avert Public Safety Crisis Are at the Heart of a Newly Released State Report

BY AMY BOBB / ASSISTANT EDITOR

The Senate Resolution 6 Commission, which was tasked last year with studying the emergency services crisis in Pennsylvania, has released a report of recommendations, which, if acted upon, may help to address urgent problems in the delivery of fire and

emergency medical services.

“These recommendations provide a roadmap to recovery,” Sen. Randy Vulakovich, co-chair of the commission, says.

For more than a year, the 39-member commission of legislators, first responders, and local representatives studied the issues plaguing volunteer fire and EMS

agencies and sought solutions.

“In the 1970s, Pennsylvania government had 300,000 volunteer firefighters,” Vulakovich says. “Today, that number stands at less than 40,000. Meanwhile, many of our EMS personnel — the frontline of our healthcare system — are paid less than many in the service industry.”

With the release of a final report last month, township officials and fire and EMS providers are hopeful that the commission’s findings will prompt leaders in Harrisburg to pursue the recommended legislative and regulatory solutions. (See the box at right for a list of key recommendations.)

“We have been dealing with the crisis involving fire and EMS for far too long,” says PSATS’ Immediate Past President Shirl Barnhart, who is a volunteer firefighter and a member of the SR 6 Commission.

He urges legislators and policymakers to act quickly to make the recommendations in the report a reality.

“It’s time that our hard-working fire companies and volunteers receive the attention and recognition they deserve from Harrisburg,” he says.

As the General Assembly prepares to respond to the report, Rep. Gary Day believes it’s important for lawmakers to remember the role that volunteers play in keeping the costs of emergency services down.

“Municipalities are vested with the authority and responsibility to provide

As volunteers dwindle and costs soar, local emergency services are feeling the pinch. Townships and their emergency providers are hopeful that recommendations within the SR 6 Commission report will help to bring relief.



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— Rep. Gary Day



fire services,” he says, “and in many communities, volunteers are stepping forward and contributing as much as 80 percent or more of a fire company’s budget, which is labor and benefits.”

Therefore, any policy for reimbursing local emergency services should give special consideration to volunteer organizations and reward them accordingly, says Day, who serves as a member of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

“The state should focus its financial solutions on helping to support these volunteer systems, particularly in the less densely populated areas of our state where assistance with funding is especially needed,” he says.

Now that the SR 6 Commission report has been released, Day says, “Municipal officials and residents must stay engaged and reach out to their senators and representatives about the issues important to them.” ♦

Key elements of the SR 6 report

Following are some of the recommendations in the SR 6 report:

- Offer post-secondary education credits and loan forgiveness for volunteer first responders.
- Establish basic levels of training and expand on-line training.
 - Fund basic fire and EMT training.
 - Reinstate funding for community colleges to provide public safety training.
 - Adopt minimum standards for local fire companies and require free background checks on emergency providers.
 - Provide tax credits for employers who allow their employees to run fire calls or attend fire and EMS training during work hours.
 - Increase reimbursement payment models for EMS to allow agencies to offer higher wages and benefits.
 - Authorize payment when an ambulance is called and a patient is treated yet refuses to be transported. *(Act 103 of 2018, signed into law in October, addresses this issue.)*
 - Regularly review and adjust Medicaid reimbursement rates for EMS providers.
 - Allow communities to form regional or county emergency services districts.
 - Fund technical advisers assigned to the State Fire Academy, Fire Commissioner, or the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

- Close the loophole in the firemen’s relief tax collection and restore and expand funding to the Emergency Medical Services Operating Fund.
 - Review and revise the EMS Act to allow more flexibility and new delivery models.
 - Improve lines of communication and more closely link fire and EMS entities.
 - Develop a mental wellness and stress management program for emergency responders.
 - Adopt sprinkler requirements and give control to local governments to pass sprinkler ordinances.
 - Repeal or amend the recent fireworks law.
 - Exempt volunteer fire and EMS from the state Right-to-Know Law.
 - Educate local governments on ways to support their fire and EMS organizations. Encouraging regular meetings and enhanced communications will improve the relationship between municipalities and emergency responders.
 - Revamp the Office of Fire Commissioner and establish a new Fire Commission.

In the months ahead, PSATS will continue to provide updates on action related to the SR 6 Commission report and other news about volunteer fire and EMS issues.

A copy of the report is available at psats.org under “Legislation & Policy” and then “Issue-Related Reports.”