

# SAVING THE VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY



Townships Step Up  
to Help **KEEP THE  
VOLUNTEER FIRE  
COMPANY ALIVE**

BY AMY BOBB / CONTRIBUTING WRITER, PSATS

**THE ALARM HAS BEEN RINGING** for some time now in Pennsylvania: Our volunteer fire companies are facing a real crisis. As dwindling volunteers and escalating costs have put the crunch on fire companies, the future of the volunteer model is in jeopardy. To make sure it survives, everyone — from fire to municipal to state officials — are seeking creative solutions to save this vital public service.





# VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES



**W**hen Don Konkle was a boy, he would ride his bicycle to the local fire station to hang out.

"I'd go to pump air into my tires and stay until they threw me out," Konkle, executive director of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, says. He credits this early interaction with firefighters with sparking an interest in fire service. He started as a volunteer in South Williamsport before becoming a paid Harrisburg City firefighter for almost 37 years. "I always knew I wanted to be a firefighter."

Growing up across the state in Washington County, Bill Jenaway fol-

lowed in the footsteps of his firefighting father, who served as company chief.

"I got started going to fires and then became the chief myself," he says. After he moved to Montgomery County, Jenaway, who is chair of the Upper Merion Township Board of Supervisors, continued to serve as a volunteer firefighter and chief. He will soon celebrate a half-century spent in the fire service.

Such pathways to becoming a firefighter — commonplace decades ago — are not so routine these days as volunteer fire companies are learning to adapt to a new world order where volunteers are dwindling, costs are escalating, and fundraisers barely make a dent in budgets.

"What we saw as kids at our father's

**"When you drive by a fire station today, the doors are almost always closed, and no one is in sight."**



**Pennsylvania has a rich firefighting history, and fire companies and their volunteers are intertwined in the fabric of nearly every community. As volunteers dwindle, more townships are deepening their commitment to preserve local fire companies. (Photo courtesy of Cranberry Township.)**

and grandfather's fire department has gone away," Jenaway says. "The costs have increased, the training and other requirements have intensified, and the disposable time people once had to volunteer doesn't exist anymore. All of this has caused a crunch on volunteer firefighters."

Such realities threaten the future of the volunteer firehouse, which often serves as the hub of a community. "When you drive by a fire station today, the doors are almost always closed, and no one is in sight," Konkle says.

Today's world has changed in many ways, and as society has evolved, so too has the nature of firefighting. The good news is that nearly everyone — from the companies themselves to local governments to the state legislature — has begun taking steps to address the volunteer firefighter crisis. Legislators have introduced bills or passed laws to provide more funding and other feasible options to incentivize the fire service, and communities are exploring creative ways to avoid an all-out public-safety catastrophe.

### The crisis today

The reasons given are varied — smaller family sizes, an aging population, the rise of two-income households, the loss of manufacturing jobs, longer commute times, and even the demands of kids' sports — but the truth of the matter is clear: Volunteers at fire companies across Pennsylvania have dwindled, dropping from 300,000 in the 1960s and '70s to approximately 50,000 today.

"Firefighting is dangerous work, and more people have begun to question why they should volunteer for a job that could seriously injure or worse yet, possibly kill them," State Fire Commissioner Tim Solobay says.

Intense training requirements and



fundraising demands, too, have made volunteer firefighting less attractive to a society overwhelmed by family and work commitments and with less leisure time to volunteer.

"Where before you used to be able to go to weekend training and learn the basics for the tasks you need to perform as a firefighter," Jenaway says, "it now takes practically a year to complete. The thrill of being a volunteer firefighter is riding on the truck, and if you have to wait a year until you're trained, you may have found another outlet for your volunteer time by then."

Ron Horiszny, council president of Lower Saucon Township in Northampton County, agrees that the time commitment to firefighter training can be a deterrent. Training, often conducted weekly, takes volunteers away from their families, and that can make recruitment tough.

"Then again, I don't know if it's the time or the *times* themselves," he continues. "People may just be less inclined to serve their communities these days. All I know is that it's not an easy situation for townships and their fire companies."

With fewer volunteers, fundraisers

become tougher to pull off, and even when they are held, they don't bring in nearly enough money to pay for the escalating costs of keeping a fire company in business. These days, it costs upwards of \$10,000 to completely outfit a firefighter and between \$500,000 and \$1.3 million to purchase varied types of firefighting apparatus.

A fire company raising enough money to buy a million-dollar fire truck is a paradigm that doesn't work any longer, Konkle says. "You can't sell enough subs or barbecued chicken to raise that kind of money."

Volunteer fire companies are quickly learning that they have to change how

**"We realize we have an obligation to help our fire company as much as we can."**



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they do business. Many are pooling their manpower and financial resources through mergers and consolidations. More are asking their municipalities for financial help, and townships, tasked with ensuring that their residents have fire protection, are recognizing that if

they don't step up to help, they could face some rather dire consequences.

"Volunteer fire service in Pennsylvania saves municipalities and taxpayers almost \$10 billion a year in what would otherwise be a very large local tax increase," says Solobay, who estimates that going to paid firefighters would result in an average \$4 million tax bill for the approximately 2,500 municipalities now served by volunteer fire companies.

The reality of such a situation, he says, is that municipalities must either

"pay now or pay a whole lot more later."

## Sounding the alarm

In many ways, the fire service crisis in Pennsylvania has been studied to death. Over the years, statewide committees and commissions have released numerous reports outlining the problems and recommending solutions.

A 2004 report by the Senate Resolution 60 Commission may have helped to spur the most legislative action, with at least half of the commission's 23 recommendations enacted or followed up on in some way, says Jenaway, who chaired the commission.

Now, a "reboot" of this commission, established under Senate Resolution 6 of 2017, is calling for a comprehensive review of the state's volunteer fire departments and emergency service organizations to see where the commonwealth stands and what more can be done to help first responders. (See the box at left.)

"There is still a lot to do," says Jenaway, who will serve on the new SR 6 Commission. He sees the priorities of the new committee as sorting through feasible volunteer recruitment and retention initiatives, exploring more flexible training requirements, and seeking sustainable funding sources.

Solobay is advocating for a menu of options, from firefighter incentives to additional funding.

"There is no cookie-cutter solution," he says. "We are too diverse a state for that."

Any future initiatives must address what he sees as the three main issues confronting volunteer fire companies: inconvenient and time-consuming training, inadequate funding, and dwindling volunteers.

Take the demands of training, for example. Although the state doesn't mandate specific training, the industry standard for making sure firefighters are qualified and prepared to respond to various emergencies has intensified.

State Rep. Frank Farry, who is chief of the Langhorne-Middletown Fire Company in Bucks County, says training hours have doubled since he became a firefighter more than 25 years ago. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner, which oversees the voluntary certification program for firefighters, offers



**Surrounded by emergency responders, the leaders of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committees announced in January a renewed effort to assist Pennsylvania's first responders.**

## New commission to 'reboot' SR 60, study issues affecting first responders

A 39-member commission of legislators, first responders, and local government representatives has been tasked with studying issues affecting fire and emergency services in Pennsylvania and providing recommendations on easing the crisis. PSATS President Shirl Barnhart will serve on this panel.

Under Senate Resolution 6 (SR 6), approved in April, the commission will review a comprehensive study of fire and EMS issues completed in 2004 (under SR 60) and offer recommendations to the Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committees by June 30, 2018.

"Pennsylvania's first responders certainly face many of the same challenges now as they did back then, such as volunteers and the exorbitant costs of apparatus and training," says Sen. Randy Vulakovich, chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. "The timing is right to 'reboot' this process by reviewing the 23 recommendations made by the SR 60 Commission. We need to see what was accomplished and what remains to be done."

During the January press conference announcing the "reboot" of SR 60 and the introduction of a 16-bill package that will address such key issues as volunteer recruitment and retention, Sen. Jay Costa, minority chair of the committee, said, "Each and every day, in all corners of Pennsylvania, men and women answer emergency calls and save lives. Pennsylvania policymakers need to do all we can to support volunteer and professional firefighters and EMS personnel."



## BUCKING THE **TREND...**

While other fire companies struggle to maintain volunteers, the Adah Fire Department in German Township, Fayette County, has been able to buck the trend, increasing from eight fire-fighters when Chief L.C. Otto joined 18 years ago to 28 today. He attributes the growth to offering top-notch training, accepting members from outside the area, and covering their training expenses.

34 levels of certification, and the Fire-fighter I certification, usually required to ride on the fire truck and report to fires, takes close to 200 hours to complete.


Such training is important — “No chief wants to put his members in a situation that they’re not prepared to handle,” Solobay acknowledges — but both he and Farry agree that less burdensome and more convenient options, such as online training, should be explored.

Providing more funding to fire companies will help reduce the burden of fundraising so that firefighters can focus on training and responding to calls. Expansions in state funding options over the years have provided municipalities and their fire companies with access to additional money, including:

- A statewide 2-percent loan program for purchasing and modernizing apparatus, facilities, and equipment;
- The foreign firefighters’ relief fund (*funded with a 2-percent tax on fire insurance policies underwritten by companies incorporated outside of Pennsylvania*);
- Fire company/volunteer ambulance service grants, a \$30 million state program funded with gaming revenues (*Fire companies, which may receive up to \$15,000 a year, must apply annually to receive a grant. See the box on page 22.*); and
- Competitive grants funded with Act 13 monies available to fire companies in counties affected by unconventional gas well drilling.

While these resources help, more support is needed, Solobay says.

“Public safety relies on a successful partnership between all levels of government and local emergency service providers,” Rep. Farry wrote two years ago in a *Township News* article about



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how townships can come to the rescue of fire companies. He urged local governments to help preserve Pennsylvania's volunteer roles by working with their fire companies to tackle some of these issues.

"While an effective partnership may be difficult depending on the personalities involved and their sometimes-competing priorities, there must be some common ground to ensure the protection of citizens' lives and property," he says. "A little investment in a working partnership today could prevent a volunteer

## Check out this online cost savings calculator

Townships can determine how much their local volunteer fire company is saving the community with the help of an online cost savings calculator available from the National Volunteer Fire Council.

To calculate your township's savings, go to [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).



organization from closing its doors and costing taxpayers thousands tomorrow."

### Stepping up to help

More municipalities are hearing the message that it's much better to spend thousands of dollars now to help their

fire company than face hundreds of thousands of dollars later if their volunteer fire company goes away.

"We are seeing more townships stepping up to help volunteer fire companies," Holly Fishel, PSATS' policy and research manager, says, "and if other townships haven't figured out yet how to do it, they better soon before their volunteer fire company goes away."

The alternative would be both unacceptable and unsustainable

"A township is not going to accept the fact that it may take an hour for the closest fire company to respond to a fire," she says. "And there is no state entity like the State Police to fall back on for help."

Middletown Township, a community of 47,000 residents in Bucks County, for example, has calculated that it would cost between \$6 and \$7 million to go with a 24/7 career firefighting force, Farry says. (See the box at the top of the page for information on how to calculate your township's costs.)

With price tags like this, the only logical solution is to figure out how to sustain struggling fire companies so that they can continue to provide a vital community service at a fraction of the cost. Whether it's with funding, services, or incentives to attract volunteers, townships are stepping up to help.

In Centre County, Harris Township provides accounting services for its fire company, covers workers' compensation and insurance costs, and levies a 1.3-mill tax that brings in approximately \$250,000 a year for equipment and mortgage payments.

Since 2012, Lower Saucon Township in Northampton County has collected a .25-mill fire tax that generates about \$112,000 for fire equipment expenses. ➤

**Firefighters these days do more than fight fires.** They report to just about every incident, from traffic accidents to downed trees to the quintessential cat in the tree, and **townships have come to rely on them to help keep the public safe.**



**When Harris Township in Centre County was hit with a devastating storm in May that knocked out power for 24 to 50 hours, its fire company came to the rescue. Two-thirds of the roads in the township were blocked by downed trees and power lines, and the fire company responded to 26 calls. The firehouse, with its backup generator, also opened its doors for the township to operate a temporary office at the station. "We have a great relationship with our fire company," township manager Amy Farkas says. (Photos courtesy of the township.)**





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In Franklin County, Metal Township enacted a 3-mill property tax in January that amounts to about \$42,000 in new revenue, the majority of which goes toward fire services, including paying the salary and workers' compensation costs of a paid driver for the fire company.

"We realize we have an obligation to help our fire company as much as we can," supervisor and secretary Anna Swailes says. "Lately, we have lost a lot of good active volunteers because of age and health, and they are not being replenished as quickly."

The paid driver helps to ensure that the fire company has someone who can respond to calls during weekday hours when volunteers are in short supply.

Numerous townships around the state have decided to pursue tax credits in the wake of Act 172 of 2016, which allows townships to offer earned income and local property tax credits and rebates to qualifying, active volunteer firefighters. (See the box at the top of the next page.) Worcester Township in Montgomery County became one of the first municipalities in the state to adopt such a credit this spring.

"It's relatively simple," manager Tommy Ryan says. "We offer a tax credit on up to \$200,000 of earned income per volunteer per year."

With no precedent to guide them, Worcester officials worked with volunteer firefighters, the local tax collector, and its solicitor to develop a feasible system, including sensible and easy-to-use criteria for qualifying volunteers. His advice to others thinking of going down this path?

"Work closely with your volunteers and make sure they have a seat at the table," he says. He also suggests possibly expanding the tax credit to others within the fire company, such as the president of the relief association or the ladies' auxiliary, who perform vital non-firefighting functions.

The tax incentive works well in Worcester Township, where it translates into a credit of up to \$1,000 per year per firefighter, but in other more rural



## Act 172 Tax Credit Guidelines

PSATS has partnered with the State Fire Commissioner's office, the state Department of Community and Economic Development, and other statewide municipal associations to develop guidelines and a sample ordinance that will help walk townships through the process of providing tax credits to volunteer firefighters.

The documents were mailed to PSATS members in May. Townships may also download the Act 172 package by going to **[www.connect.psats.org](http://www.connect.psats.org)**, clicking on "Resources and Services," and choosing "Administrative Info."

communities, where the tax rate is low to begin with, a rebate or credit may not prove to be an attractive incentive.

"It's really a joke in rural areas where taxes are already low," L.C. Otto, a German Township supervisor in Fayette County, says. Considering that he pays around \$48 in township property taxes, a 20 percent tax credit would amount to a rebate of less than \$10.

"I consider that a slap in the face," he says. Another problem he sees is that volunteer firefighters who might live in other communities wouldn't be able to benefit from the tax unless their municipality also agrees to pass a similar program.

"I applaud the legislature for trying," he says, but a better option would have been a state tax credit. "Then you make the municipal boundaries go away."

Jay Wilkes, deputy fire chief of Back Mountain Regional Fire Department in Luzerne County, agrees that the local tax credit is not much of an incentive in communities where firefighters may only pay a couple hundred dollars in local taxes. ➤

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## PAID & VOLUNTEER: WORKING AS A TEAM...



**North Strabane Township in Washington County supports a combination paid-volunteer fire department made up of 22 paid firefighters and upwards of 27 volunteers. The department's \$1.78 million budget is funded with a 3-mill fire tax, half of the local services tax, and gas impact fee revenues. Money the township receives through the foreign fire insurance tax goes toward financial incentives paid to volunteer firefighters who report to duty. Volunteer and paid firefighters are treated as equals, training together and working side by side. (Photos courtesy of the township.)**

When you look at the tax base, municipal taxes are always the lowest, and any tax credit at this level may not be meaningful, says Wilkes, who also serves as chair of the Jackson Township Board of Supervisors. "The real problem as I see it is we don't do enough to recruit and retain volunteers beyond giving them a pat on the back and a thank-you."

More attractive incentives are needed, he says, such as providing amnesty on the most expensive property taxes — school taxes — or offering some kind of retirement funding for volunteer firefighters, all options that many hope the SR 6 Commission will explore.

Solobay acknowledges that the local tax credit isn't the end-all solution to recruitment and retention issues and it might not work for everyone, but he says, "it's a step in the right direction and another option to put in a municipality's toolbox of solutions." (See *article at right for additional incentive ideas.*)

### Pooling their resources

Across Pennsylvania, fire companies continue to explore mergers and consolidations that help them pool their volunteers and stretch their resources. Last year, the state Department of Community and Economic Development reported 80-some active merger and consolidation committees in 41 counties. Declining manpower and rising costs almost always drive these mergers.

Faced with fewer volunteers, three



townships and one borough in Luzerne County merged their fire services under the Back Mountain Regional Fire Department. The process began in 2011 and took two years to complete. The regionalization, while successful, was not supported by everyone.

"Anytime you regionalize, you lose people because of differing opinions," Wilkes says. "The best plan sometimes is not what someone feels is the best for them."

Through the process, he says, the fire department gained people while losing others.

"Did it balance out? Not really," he says. "On the volunteer level, it's difficult to lose even one person because you probably don't have someone else to take their place."

Merging or consolidating fire companies, whether within a single township or across municipal boundaries, can be bumpy. It takes time, effort, and patience. Squabbles are common, and fiercely independent fire companies, which have operated and funded themselves for decades, may be skeptical of a process that they fear will rob them of their identity.

"For years, the fire service never wanted government to be involved in their operations," Fire Commissioner Solobay says.

Townships, too, became used to fire companies doing their own fundraising and spending their own money. If any kind of partnership, merger, or consolidation is going to work, those involved must approach the process with an open mind.

"Any talk of consolidation really works best if it initiates in the fire company," PSATS' Fishel says.

As the fire companies in German Township, Fayette County, struggle to attract and retain volunteers, a possible merger or consolidation there is looking more attractive.

"The number of firefighters has dwindled and continues to drop," supervisor L.C. Otto says.

Informal conversations have begun among the township's five fire companies, but any move toward a merger or consolidation will have to be slow and calculated since many want to make sure the community vibe of their local fire company survives. ➤

# SMART IDEAS:

## Recruiting and retaining volunteers

As the ranks of volunteer firefighters decline, townships and fire companies continue to explore ways to recruit and retain volunteers.

At least 75 percent of fire companies are struggling with manpower at a time when the state's population is aging, Don Konkle, executive director of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, says. The average age of a firefighter is 50-something.

"One of our concerns looking forward is that we are losing this generation of new firefighters," he says. In the past, recruiting has almost always been linked to family tradition or friend to friend. "As we lose that tradition of volunteers, it's hard to get it back, and it will make recruiting even more difficult in the future."

When considering incentives, it's important to keep in mind that what works when recruiting volunteers in northern Pennsylvania may not work in the south-east.

"You need a large toolbox of options, and then you should sit down with your firefighters to see what they are interested in," Konkle says.

Some suggestions for attracting and retaining firefighters include:

- **School district/community college partnerships.** Fire companies can team up with school districts and community colleges to offer training to high school and college students who want to become first responders.

- **Housing for college students.** An initiative that has worked well at the regional Alpha Fire Company in State College, where Penn State students are trained as firefighters in exchange for housing, has spread to other college towns.

"Just about every college town has a live-in program to attract students at a critical time in their life," Konkle says.

- **College loan repayment or tuition assistance.** By taking a cradle-to-grave approach to attracting and retaining firefighters, Konkle says, fire companies should seek to pull in potential volunteers during those critical early adult years before family and job commitments intensify. Financial incentives, such as assisting with tuition or paying off school debts, can help to make the demands of being a volunteer firefighter more palatable for the volunteers and their families.

- **Pay per call.** Firefighters may be more willing to respond to calls if their fire company has a system in place where they can accumulate points every time they participate and then receive a lump sum at the end of the year.

- **Length-of-service reward.** Firefighters are more prone to stay with a company if they know they are building time toward a financial reward that will help provide extra income in retirement.

"Even if you get a couple of hundred dollars a month at the age of 65, it helps," he says.

- **Gas stipend.** "This is surprisingly popular in extremely rural areas, where they have to travel greater distances," Konkle says.

- **Tokens of recognition.** The many ways your township can show appreciation to its firefighters need only be limited by imagination.

Some ideas include free parks and recreation fees, complimentary pool or community center membership, waiving the cost of certain township services, such as trash hauling or building permits, and stickers that allow firefighters to park for free at parking meters.



**North Strabane Township Fire Department recognizes members with the most volunteer hours each month. (Photos courtesy of the township.)**

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"That belief is something we would have to overcome," says Otto, who serves as chief of one of the fire companies. "We don't want to ruffle feathers, and we want to ensure we maintain that sense of community."

The answer may be to keep the individual firehouses open as substations but centralize administrative and executive offices.

"That way, we would need only one checkbook, instead of five, and just four or five officers, instead of 20," he says.

For consolidation to be successful, Otto believes the township must be willing to step up its financial commitment.

"Otherwise, instead of five weak departments, you now have one weak, consolidated department," he says.

If the fire departments were willing to consolidate, he says, German Township would be able to provide \$25,000 to \$30,000 from the general fund and Act 13 impact fee funds for fire services. Down the road, Otto could see possibly placing the question of a half-mill

emergency services tax on a referendum ballot to raise even more money for the fire company.

"We township supervisors are on the same page that if we can get the fire companies to consolidate to some degree, we may be willing to step in and provide additional financial assistance," Otto says, "but until that happens, we will stay out of their way."

## Tomorrow's fire company

Ask almost anyone involved in the fire services industry what a volunteer fire company of the future is going to look like, and they will almost certainly say that the municipality must be involved in some way.

George DeVault, chair of Upper Milford Township, Lehigh County, a 30-year firefighter, and the author of a memoir, *Fire Call! Sounding the Alarm to Save Our Vanishing Volunteers*, predicts that the fire company will have volunteers well into the future, but it will take a toolbox of approaches involving federal, state, and municipal entities to ensure its success.

"There is no magic bullet where one size fits all," he says. "What works in my township probably won't work in the township next door."

As the volunteer crisis deepens, fire companies may eventually have no choice but to go to a paid model, says Tony Sherr of Sherr Law Group in Norristown.

"If you look at the dwindling number of volunteer firefighters, the system we've relied on for so long may no longer be feasible anymore," he says.

Certainly, a developing trend among some fire companies is to hire people who get paid to answer the calls.

In Washington County, North Strabane Township has stepped up in a big way to ensure that its fire department survives — by supporting a combination staff of paid and volunteer firefighters.

Like most fire companies, the department was experiencing a shortage of volunteers at a time when the number of fire calls in the rapidly growing township was increasing. Calls have exponentially risen from around 500 in 2007 to between 1,200 and 1,300 calls per year today.

Over the last 15 years or so, the township has made a commitment to its fire company by slowly increasing the manpower and financial support it provides. A solution that started with a paid driver and a .92-mill tax in the 1990s has continued to expand to the

## BECOMING THE VERY BEST FIREFIGHTERS THROUGH **TRAINING...**



**Cranberry Township, Butler County, made a financial commitment to fund its volunteer fire company 35 years ago. As a result, volunteers don't have to worry about fund raising and can concentrate on training and responding to calls. (Photos courtesy of the township.)**



current arrangement where the township supports a complement of 22 paid firefighters — 12 full-time and 10 part-time — and levies a 3-mill fire tax to help pay for it. A volunteer force of 25 to 27 supplements the career staff.

“The times are changing, and we must change, too,” fire chief Mark Grimm says. “We are willing to pursue just about anything we can do to make it easier for our firefighters.”

The combination paid and volunteer force is working well in North Strabane, he says. The full-time career firefighters man the department during regular weekday hours, and volunteers and part-timers step up in the evenings and weekends to make sure the township has 24/7 coverage.

“We get too many calls for just our career firefighters to handle,” Grimm says, “yet we can’t expect our volunteers to respond to all the minor calls either. We don’t want to burn them out.”

Attracting volunteers is always an issue. It helps that in North Strabane, they don’t have to fundraise and can concentrate on training and responding to calls, manager Frank Siffrinn notes. About four years ago, the township made a commitment to recruit and retain more volunteers by supporting a duty program in which trained volunteers who cover shifts and respond to calls may accrue points and receive a cash reward at the end of the year.

Grimm attributes the success of North Strabane’s combination department, where volunteers and paid firefighters work amicably side by side, to efforts to treat both groups equally.

“If you came in to our department, you wouldn’t know who is paid and who is volunteer,” he says. “Everyone receives the same uniform and is provided the same training.”

Another trend in the quasi-paid model is for townships to support their employees becoming firefighters. The townships of Middletown in Bucks, Upper Milford in Lehigh, and Lower Saucon in Northampton, among others, have encouraged their public works employees and others who are certified firefighters to respond to calls throughout the work day.

“Short of having a dump truck full of blacktop or clearing 14 inches of

**Back Mountain Regional Fire Department deputy fire chief and Jackson Township supervisor Jay Wilkes believes more tempting incentives are needed to attract and keep volunteer firefighters. (Photo courtesy of Wilkes.)**

snow, nothing is more important than responding to a house fire or an accident where someone is trapped in a car,” Rep. Farry says.

Attorney Sherr believes townships who support road crew members, building and code inspectors, and other employees becoming firefighters and responding to calls while on the job may be on to something.

“The model where firefighters sit around the station waiting for calls is not going to work much longer in today’s world,” he says. “Maybe it’s time to change the nature of our current system and turn employees into firefighters.”

### **Starts with a conversation**

When it comes to making changes in how fire companies operate, Don Konkle,



who has worked in a firehouse for most of his life, admits that firefighters are not always the easiest group to talk to.

“Fire companies have to start being more forthcoming,” he says. “They can’t expect a municipality that spends hun-

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dreds of thousands of dollars a year to help buy apparatus to say it never wants to see the books.”

Likewise, he says, municipalities can't keep their heads in the sand, avoiding spending meaningful dollars on fire services and ignoring the troubles facing volunteer fire companies, and simply hoping the situation gets better. One of the mindsets that elected officials must overcome is that fire protection should not cost the township anything.

“It can't be free much longer,” Konkle says. “We need to recognize that change is coming either through the fire company's collapse or through

some kind of cooperative partnership that will prevent that collapse.”

For a partnership to work, township and fire officials must start talking on a regular basis.

“The scariest time for elected officials is to look out at a supervisors' meeting and see fire chiefs and firefighters in the audience that they haven't seen in five years,” he says. “Immediately, they wonder how much this is going to cost them.”

Instead, he encourages firefighters and local officials to develop an ongoing relationship. “We tell fire officials to buy donuts and coffee on Saturday mornings and invite their elected officials to stop by to visit,” he says.

In the decade since Act 6 of 2008 amended the Township Code to make townships responsible for providing emergency services, Bill Jenaway of Upper Merion Township has observed that

“There is no cookie-cutter solution. **We are too diverse a state for that.**”

relations between townships and their fire companies have generally improved.

“There is more dialogue, and elected officials are better aware of the problems facing their volunteer fire companies,” he says. “There is more of a mentality that we are all in this together.”

Chapman and Union townships in Snyder County have greatly improved their relationship with the Port Trevorton Fire Company by attending the company's monthly meetings, keeping the lines of communication open, and directly participating in fundraising and other events.

“Our volunteer fire company's membership gets most of the credit for the improved relationship with us and with our entire community,” Chapman Township supervisor Wayne Biller says. He points to the company's willingness to follow its bylaws, undergo annual audits, make transparent decisions at public meetings, and provide accurate minutes and treasurer's reports.

In Butler County, Cranberry Township's relationship with its volunteer fire company dates back to 1982, when the township decided to dedicate a 2.75-mill tax to fire services to fund the company's equipment and operating expenses.

“We didn't want the fire company to worry about holding hot dog sales, chicken barbecues, and other fundraisers,” manager Jerry Andree says. “We told them we just want them to train, train, train to be the very best firefighters they can be.”

In the 35 years since then, the township-fire department relationship continues to evolve, and the township constantly seeks new opportunities to make the lives of its firefighters easier.

“We have an extremely productive relationship with our fire department, but like any relationship, we have to work at it,” Andree says.

The supervisors are in constant

## Grants, loans available to volunteer fire companies

Fire companies, emergency medical services, and volunteer rescue squads should apply for the non-competitive **Fire Company and Emergency Medical Service Grants** administered by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner. Organizations may apply annually for grant funding for a combination of up to two projects related to facilities, equipment, debt reduction, training, and public education and training materials.

The application will be available online the week of September 4<sup>th</sup>.

Fire, emergency, and rescue companies in areas affected by Marcellus Shale drilling operations

may apply for competitive grants to fund certification, equipment, and training projects. The application period for the **Act 13 Unconventional Gas Well Drilling Grants** is open May 1 through June 30.

Finally, volunteer fire companies, ambulance services, and rescue squads may apply for loans at a fixed 2-percent interest rate for the acquisition, rehabilitation, and improvement of apparatus, facilities, and equipment. The **Volunteer Loan Assistance Program** has distributed more than \$408 million in loans since its inception in 1976.

To access information and applications for these three funding sources, go to **www.osfc.pa.gov** and click on “Grants and Loans.”



Photo courtesy of Cranberry Township.



# VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

communication with the fire company trying to stay ahead of its needs and desires. For example, last year, an ad hoc committee developed a strategic plan that would, in part, address the volunteer shortage the fire company was beginning to see. While the number of active firefighters has stayed steady at 56, the volume of calls has greatly increased.

“We have a very well-trained fire company, and we are nowhere near a crisis level, but we saw the threat looming and wanted to jump on it,” Andree says.

The report identified issues and made certain recommendations, including:

- Establishing an associate firefighter membership so that people employed in the township who are trained firefighters in another community may respond to calls;
- Expanding support positions in



**“Volunteer fire services in Pennsylvania save municipalities and taxpayers almost \$10 billion a year in what would otherwise be a very large local tax increase.”**

the fire company to attract volunteers who want to help but don't want to fight fires;

- Adding daytime training opportunities to accommodate volunteers who work in the evenings;
- Restructuring the township's fire and emergency services department by adding more positions and increasing responsibilities to include member recruitment and risk reduction to minimize calls; and

- Renovating the firehouse to add bunk facilities that will attract college students and others interested in a live-in program.

“There is a great deal of pride, history, and culture associated with fire companies,” Andree says.

Township officials need to recognize that and be willing to sit down with their firefighters over a cup of coffee and begin to tackle solutions together.

“It's about relationship building and trust,” he says, “and if you make a commitment, follow through on it.”

## Not giving up yet

Statistics statewide on volunteer fire services can certainly paint a grim picture of the future of volunteer firefighters, but townships and their fire companies are not ready to give up yet. Most would agree that the local fire company will find a way to persevere, but the sooner townships and volunteer firefighters sit down to talk and address the crisis, the better it will be for everyone.

Upper Milford Township's experience with its two volunteer fire companies is indicative of most communities. For the first 70 years of the companies' 75-year history, they and the township had little to do with one other, supervisor and firefighter DeVault says. Only recently have the two groups begun to talk about ways to work together on volunteer recruitment and retention and the future of fire company buildings and equipment.

“Yesterday would have been a great time to start a discussion like this,” he says, “because the longer you wait to do it, the more expensive it will be.” ♦