

Legislative UPDATE

SUPPORTING OUR VOLUNTEERS

From Senator Mike Waugh

SEPTEMBER 2008



Dear Friend,

Volunteer emergency response services are rooted deep within Pennsylvania's history, beginning with the first volunteer fire company in the nation, started by Ben Franklin in 1736, to the first fire police officers and a horse-drawn ambulance in the 1890's. Today the state is home to over 2,400 volunteer fire companies – more than any other state in the nation – and 1,000 EMS squads, 650 of which are either fully volunteer-based or a combination of volunteer and career workers. We should be very proud of how far we have come over the years, but the truth is, the number of volunteer responders has declined dramatically, and the time is now to address this very important issue.

As you well know, volunteer companies are facing tough challenges – the rising cost of equipment and fuel, the personal demands on volunteers, the hours spent fundraising, and the difficulty in recruiting new members.

Fortunately, we are making strides within the legislature to provide incentives for you, our volunteer firefighters, EMTs, medics, and fire police, who tirelessly risk your lives and invest your personal time to protect our homes and businesses and to ensure our safety on a daily basis. As volunteers, you also save taxpayers billions of dollars every year.

This mailer will highlight some of the accomplishments we have made in our efforts to improve the delivery of services, help with volunteer recruitment and retention, and provide assistance for equipment and building needs. Among the initiatives you will read about are a new personal tax credit for our volunteers, as well as legislation I have introduced to provide a tuition reimbursement to volunteers pursuing an undergraduate degree.

If you wish to have additional information on any of the topics included in this mailer, please do not hesitate to contact my office. You can also access any of the bills mentioned by visiting my website at senatorwaugh.com and clicking on the Citizen Access Page button on the right. Also, if you'd like to receive future updates via email, feel free to click the Sign Up for E-News button on my website and submit the requested information.

As a former assistant fire chief with the Shrewsbury Volunteer Fire Company, I can appreciate the hard work you do to keep our communities safe. You make me very proud!

Sincerely,


Senator Mike Waugh

New Tax Credit for Volunteers

Tax credits have consistently ranked as the number one legislative priority of the fire and EMS community, and now volunteer firefighters and emergency service providers will receive a \$100 personal income tax credit for active service thanks to legislation approved and signed into law in July.

House Bill 377 was amended to include a measure providing the tax credit to bona fide active volunteers serving a local fire, rescue or emergency medical service company. Under the measure, \$4.5 million in tax credits will be available this year to volunteers.

While a separate piece of legislation that I co-sponsored (see the next page for more information) called for a graduated tax credit over five years, increasing the total credit to \$500 by 2013, the final plan does not include an increase at this time. However, I am pleased we were able to initiate a tax credit and will continue working to develop the program further with the hopes of achieving an increase in future years.

SR 60 Commission Seeks to Improve Pennsylvania's Fire and EMS Services

In 2003, I introduced and garnered legislative support for Senate Resolution 60, which established a special commission charged with studying and making recommendations for enhancing emergency services across the Commonwealth.

The following year the Commission issued a report outlining 23 recommendations to improve Pennsylvania's fire and emergency medical services through changes to statutory language, reforming the delivery of services, offering tax credits to fire and EMS workers, and establishing grant programs.

In addition to the tax credit we approved in July, the legislature has passed a number of bills that were introduced in response to the SR 60 Commission Report. Other legislation passed this session includes: **Senate Bill 1225** (currently in the House), which would create a statewide mutual aid agreement system to assist counties and municipalities in responding to disasters; **Senate Bill 987** (Act 31 of 2008) and **House Bills 1131, 1133, and 1134** (Acts 7, 8, and 9 of 2008, respectively), which establish uniform language in the municipal codes regarding the provision of fire and emergency services; **Senate Bill 218** (Act 7 of 2007), which reformed the Emergency and Municipal Services Tax, renaming it the "Local Services Tax" and requiring municipalities which impose it to allocate a minimum of 25% of the total revenue to support emergency services.

Legislature Reauthorizes Fire, EMS Grant

Last June, the Legislature unanimously approved Act 10, which extended a popular \$25 million fire and EMS grant program through 2012.

Since 2000, the General Assembly has regularly appropriated \$25 million to the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) to provide such grants to volunteer fire and EMS departments, however, this program was not guaranteed and had lapsed in the past.

The five-year authorization under Act 10 sets in place a mechanism for reliable funding that local volunteer fire departments and ambulance services can rely on. The program provides volunteer fire companies with grants of up to \$15,000 and volunteer ambulance services with grants of up to \$10,000 for construction and renovation of buildings, the purchase or repair of equipment, and debt reduction.

The online grant application is available at www.osfc.state.pa.us and applications will be accepted for 45 days beginning the first week of September.

Senate Approves Bill to Encourage Regional Fire Company Partnerships

Legislation to encourage regionalization and partnership efforts among volunteer fire departments has been approved by the Senate and is awaiting House action.

Senate Bill 96, for which I voted, would take advantage of money already in place as part of a \$100 million bond issue approved by voters in 2002 to en-

courage volunteer departments to work together in a cooperative and regional manner. SB 96 would not mandate cooperation, but rather it provides financial incentives for departments to be forward thinking – to look for ways to improve their response to emergencies and their capabilities once they arrive on the scene.

Package Would Provide Expanded Tax Credits

Together Senator Lisa Baker, Chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, and I introduced and achieved unanimous Senate passage of a three-bill package to provide tax credits to fire and emergency service volunteers and their employers, as well as to establish a tuition reimbursement program for our volunteers.

SB 1314 (Baker) – would establish a graduated personal tax credit over 5 years for active members of volunteer

firefighting and emergency medical service organizations, reaching \$500 by the fifth year.

SB 1315 (Waugh) – would create an undergraduate tuition reimbursement program for active firefighting and EMS volunteers with a 50 percent reimbursement for each course credit.

SB 1316 (Baker) – would establish a \$1,000 tax credit against an employer's personal income tax, corporate net income tax, or capital stock and franchise tax for each member of the volunteer fire and/or emergency services employed full-time, up to but not to exceed \$5000 per employer during a specific tax year.

In addition, the Senate passed **SB 1169** (Dinniman), which would authorize any municipality that levies an earned income tax to establish a local tax credit for volunteer emergency responders. The credit could be up to \$400.

Together, these four bills would provide nearly \$23 million in tax credits and tuition reimbursements by fiscal year 2009-2010. All of the bills are currently awaiting consideration by the House.

Senator Lisa Baker and I held a press conference on June 9th to discuss our fire and EMS legislation. Chief John Senft from York City and many York County volunteers were in attendance.



SENATOR WAUGH'S LEGISLATIVE OFFICES

218 North George Street, York, PA 17401 • (717) 846-2828 • (717) 637-7311 • (717) 382-9940 • Fax (717) 852-8478

Senate Box 203028, Harrisburg, PA 17120-3028 • (717) 787-3817 • Fax (717) 783-1900 • TTY (800) 364-1581

Email: mwaugh@pasen.gov • Website: senatorwaugh.com