



Joint Democratic Roundtable: Supporting First Responders

This Roundtable examines the lessons learned from recent regionalization efforts for local volunteer fire departments and explores future needs and next steps.

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, Pennsylvania has [1,770 registered](#) fire departments. 89% of those are fully volunteer, but even more are at least partially volunteer. Changing demographics, work habits and social calendars have created a time crunch for potential volunteers, among other issues. The result is delayed response or insufficient manpower, according to the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute.

Large cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have paid fire departments with starting salaries in the range of \$40,000 to \$50,000. The cost of switching to a paid department is not feasible for many suburban or rural municipalities. Consolidation or regionalization of services may be an option these suburban and rural departments can explore. First, let's look at the pros and cons to merging or regionalizing services.

Pros to merging services:

- There is a significant cost to running separate operations with how much equipment and uniforms cost. Consolidating firehouses helps multiple municipalities shoulder that burden, combines volunteer numbers and pools resources.
- Departments that merge can sell duplicate equipment to give the station a temporary bump in funding.
- Mergers can bridge gaps in knowledge and communication among fire departments and elected officials.
- Reduce administration costs; avoid duplication; strengthen purchasing power; achieve a better insurance rating; and provide better training programs.
- Merge and survive: a merger may be the only way to preserve access in some communities.
- In Allegheny County, Aspinwall and Sharpsburg merged in 2023 to create Southern Allegheny Valley Emergency Services (per [TribLive](#)). "It was a lifesaver," Chief Mike Daniher said. As a result, They optimized response times, enhanced training programs and streamlined administrative functions. "We have successfully recruited new members,



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formed committees that aren't all the same people on them, created more outreach in the community, started a youth fire camp and continue to grow," Daniher said.

Cons to merging services:

- A merger may not change the number of volunteers dramatically; groups the existing volunteers in a single department.
- Could impact department morale.
- Potential public outcry/resistance.
- Protracted merger considerations/debates could lower morale, create anxiety and further hurt recruitment efforts because it is difficult to attract volunteers to an organization that is perceived as having no future.
- Regionalizing a group of departments over a large geographic area may not result in improved response times due to the overall geographic distances between responding units. This is an obstacle that needs to be studied prior to a merger.

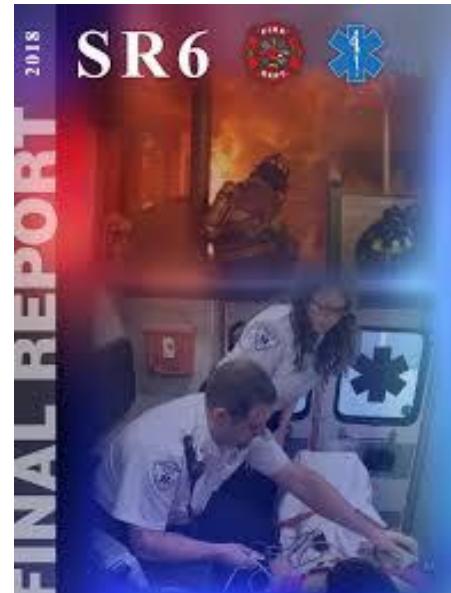
Key Fact - There are resources at the state level that local fire and EMS departments can and are encouraged to use if considering a merger. The Governor's Center for Local Government Services (GCLGS) provides technical and financial assistance to support Emergency Service Partnerships, including mergers and consolidations, within the fire and emergency services community. It offers feasibility studies on mergers and consolidations as requested. Studies can identify inefficiencies among each company, inconsistencies in policies governing them, and make improvement recommendations.

Volunteerism

"Fire and EMS are in a crisis – right now. Simply put, EMS is woefully lacking in funding – and the number of volunteer firefighters has fallen dramatically over the decades." That is the first sentence in the 95-page [Senate Resolution 6 report](#) released in 2018. There were about 300,000 volunteer firefighters in the state in the 1970s, a number that fell to about 38,000. The report highlighted the fact that recruitment and retention are the biggest challenges departments face.

It's not just an issue in Pennsylvania. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported that in 2020, there were 676,900 volunteer firefighters in the U.S. This is compared to 897,750 in 1984. The U.S. Fire

Administration's [says](#) this decline of over 220,850 volunteers took place while the United States



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population grew from nearly 236 million to over 331 million in the same time frame. This indicates that volunteerism in the fire and emergency services sector has not kept pace with population growth.

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, recruitment and retention challenges include:

- Time demands & competing activities
- Increased training requirements
- Increasing call volumes
- Aging communities
- Leadership problems
- Internal conflict
- Rise of dual-income households to make ends meet
- Lack of effective messaging, social media presence, community outreach, marketing, and creativity
- Older generations not being welcoming to younger volunteers
- Outdated gear
- Unable to take time off work for training or to answer calls for service

Recruitment ideas include:

- Professional standards and high expectations
- Junior firefighter programs
- Partnerships with local colleges and technical schools
- Effective, consistent social media content – show the training and professionalism of the department
- Become the local trusted agency providing “news” (e.g., accidents, road closures, weather alerts)
- Word-of-mouth (to friends but also on scene)
- Retirement accounts – establish criteria for participation
- Traditional advertising/marketing (when funding allows)
- Be visible in the community – parades, festivals, rodeos, sporting events



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County EMS Case Study Report

The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) partnered with the Department of Community and Economic Development on a [case study project](#) to evaluate the status of EMS in the commonwealth. This goal of the study was to provide information on the status of EMS in five counties (Butler/Mercer and Tioga/Lycoming/Sullivan). The study and report contain resources and strategies to meet community EMS needs and includes recommendations. Here are some highlights from the 2023 report:

- In many areas of Pennsylvania, the time needed for an ambulance to respond to a call for service is dramatically increasing. Ambulance services are being shuttered because they cannot afford to operate or cannot find sufficient staffing to stay operational. Potential responders are, at times in some areas of the state, finding it hard to find readily accessible training courses.
- EMS agencies that are managing to stay open are operating on razor-thin budget margins. Reimbursements through programs such as Medicare and Medicaid are not sufficient to cover the costs incurred by EMS to provide services. This is contributing to what has become an “EMS crisis” within the Commonwealth and throughout the United States. Without outside county or municipal support, EMS agencies are limited to Medicare/Medicaid/insurance reimbursement rates which are fixed and have not been updated to keep pace with inflation and the rising costs that EMS agencies face.
- EMS agencies are having trouble finding and keeping qualified personnel. Some agencies are finding that once a qualified candidate is hired and trained, they are leaving for better-paying positions with other agencies.
- Over seventy-seven percent of survey respondents indicated that recruitment and retention is an issue for their agency. However, over seventy-one percent of the respondents indicated that their agency did not have a recruitment program in place, and over fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they do not have some type of retention program in place.

The report contains 61 considerations/recommendations for counties, municipalities, and agencies to consider. They include the following:

- Encourage the PA Department of Health to develop a diversification plan to incorporate additional paramedic program training locations throughout the Commonwealth.
- Assist EMS agencies in outreach to schools.
- Provide assistance on integrating EMS training into curriculums.
- Facilitate discussions with EMS agencies to determine if a per-call incentive program would be feasible in terms of record keeping and funding.
- Consider funding a program with county funds.



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- Petition Congress to provide federal tax exemptions for any state or local benefits that volunteers receive.
- Consider paying for EMS training and certification for new hires in return for a service commitment.
- Provide financial support for retention programs to the extent possible.
- Support EMS agencies as appropriate in the development of recruitment media.
- Municipalities and counties could petition the General Assembly for an increase in the millage that is allowed to be allocated for EMS support under Title 8, Pa.C.S § 1302.
- Counties could request and support changes in legislation to increase reimbursement rates from Medicare and Medicaid programs.
- Counties and Municipalities could consider contributing funds to the start-up of regional EMS services.
- Regionalization should be inclusive of all EMS agencies, exploring and utilizing the best practices of each service to benefit patient outcome.

Response Times

A [report](#) prepared by Pennsylvania Department Health's Bureau of Emergency Medical Services analyzed response times for emergency 911 calls in 2021. Those times are defined as the difference between an EMS unit's arrival on scene and the time of dispatch.

The commonwealth's 90th percentile response time is 17 minutes. This means that 90 percent of emergency calls in the commonwealth are responded to, and an EMS agency is on scene in 17 minutes from the time that it was dispatched.

According to [KDKA](#), EMS operations in PA are in crisis due to understaffing, underfunding and increased response times. In 2023, KDKA reported that only one part-time ambulance was in operation in Forest County, with only two EMTs. Response times in rural counties can be as slow as an hour. "Not timely enough to save those in cardiac arrest or those in serious accidents."

The average response time in PA [increased](#) in recent years from 15 minutes in 2018 to 17 minutes in 2021 (most recent data available). Average [response times](#) varied by county from 2021:

- Adams avg response time: 9.62 minutes
- Allegheny avg response time: 9.66 minutes
- Bedford avg response time: 13.93 minutes
- Dauphin avg response time: 9.72 minutes
- Delaware avg response time: 6.98 minutes
- Forest avg response time: 27.46 minutes
- Lackawanna avg response time: 8.36 minutes



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- Monroe avg response time: 12.09 minutes
- Philadelphia avg response time: 8.80 minutes
- Pike avg response time: 15.89 minutes
- Sullivan avg response time: 23.64 minutes

Legislative Updates

Since the introduction of the SR 6 report in 2018, the legislature has passed the following laws:

Act 43 of 2017 - Provides funding for State Fire Commissioner for online training.

Act 45 of 2022 - EMS Compact in PA.

Act 54 of 2022 - Amended the Fiscal Code by providing for Recruitment and Retention positions in the Office of State Fire Commissioner.

Act 106 of 2019 - Online training for firefighters.

Act 22 of 2020 - Reducing barriers for junior firefighters (removed a DCNR training requirement for minors engaged in volunteer firefighting activities).

Act 108 of 2020 - Workers' compensation coverage for integral members of fire companies.

Act 10 of 2022 - Created a one-time \$25 Million EMS COVID-19 Grant Program

Act 74 of 2022 - Repurposed the funds collected from the sale of fireworks as follows:

- \$250,000 – Online Training Educator and Training Reimbursement Account
- \$1,000,000 for loan forgiveness and tuition assistance for students and graduates who are active volunteer firefighters
- \$500,000 for EMS training center capital grants via transfer to the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC)
- \$500,000 for career fire department capital grants via transfer to the OSFC

Act 55 of 2024 - Requires PDE to issue a Career and Technical Intern Certificate or a Career and Technical Instructional I Certificate to an individual seeking to teach State-approved career and technical education in public schools if they have requisite experience.

Act 91 of 2020 - Fire and EMS reform package. Authorizes additional uses of funds by a volunteer firefighters' relief association, including for a length of service award program; also expands current local property tax credit program for fire and EMS companies. Contains EMS company consolidation incentive.



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Act 54 of 2024 - Allows certain townships of the second class to institute annual taxes to go toward the staffing, equipment, and training costs of fire companies and emergency services.

Act 72 of 2022 - Amended the Emergency Medical Services System Act to extend the (Covid era) Ambulance Staffing Waiver until 2027.

Act 10 of 2022 - Permitted career and combination fire companies to apply for low-interest loans through Fire and EMS Loan Program (formerly VLAP).

Act 103 of 2018 - EMS Reimbursement for NON-Transport Services

Act 53 of 2022 - Amended the Tax Reform Code by stabilizing the revenues that go into the Fire Relief Program.

Act 69 of 2020 - Mental wellness and stress management program for first responders.

Act 121 of 2024 - Allows First Responders to file and receive Worker's Compensation for Post Traumatic Stress Injuries incurred in the line of duty within the past five years.



In addition, Governor Shapiro has recommended a fire company grant program in his most recent **budget proposal** to support our firefighters. His proposal creates a new, competitive funding stream of \$30 million in grants for fire companies. Specifically, \$30,000,000 from the Property Tax Relief Fund for competitive grants to fire companies for recruitment, retention, capital, and general operating needs.

Resources for Volunteer Fire & EMS Departments

There are numerous programs and grants that are administered and/or awarded by the Commonwealth to help volunteer fire & EMS departments in Pennsylvania.

- Volunteer Fire Assistance Grants- The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides financial, technical, and other assistance to state officials in cooperative efforts to organize, train, and equip local forces in rural areas or communities under 10,000 in population to prevent, control, and suppress fires. The program is administered by Department of Conservation



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and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry. The maximum grant for 2025 is \$15,000. Due to high demand and limited funding, there is a five-year waiting period between the years a fire company is eligible to receive grants.

- Fire Company and Emergency Medical Services Grant Program- Administered by the Office of State Fire Commissioner and is available for volunteer and career fire companies, emergency medical services and rescue squads. Eligible projects include facility upgrades, equipment, debt reduction, training and certification, education and public outreach, and recruitment and retention efforts. Additionally, fire companies were permitted to apply for construction savings accounts for the purposes of new facility construction. Most recently, \$37.5 million in funding was delivered to more than 2,500 fire departments and EMS companies across Pennsylvania.
- Federal Excess Property Program- Under the Federal Excess Property Program, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry acquires excess federal equipment and assigns that equipment to rural fire departments.
- Department of Defense Firefighter Property Program- The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry acquires excess military equipment and transfers the equipment to fire departments and emergency service agencies.
- Emergency Management Performance Grant- A grant program that encourages the development of comprehensive disaster preparedness and assistance plans, programs, capabilities, and organizations by the states and by county governments. Funds under this program are appropriated by Congress for allocation to the states by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The states, in turn, are responsible for subgranting these funds to county emergency management organizations for reimbursement of salaries and benefits. Grants are available on a 50 percent matching basis. The FY24 allocation to the state of Pennsylvania was \$9,737,634
- Unconventional Gas Well Fund Grant- The Act 13 UGWF Grant Program provides grants for volunteer and career fire, emergency medical services, and rescue companies throughout the 40 counties of Pennsylvania where unconventional gas well drilling has been permitted, or those counties that directly border the permitted counties and who respond to gas well related emergencies. \$229,343 was awarded to 108 entities in 2003.
- Fire and Emergency Medical Services Loan Program- provides loans at a fixed 2% interest rate to fire and Emergency Medical Services companies for the acquisition, rehabilitation, or improvement of apparatus, facilities, and equipment. Any career or volunteer fire



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company or EMS in Pennsylvania is eligible. The program is open year round. The annual [report](#) for 2023-24 (most recent) shows that 117 loans were approved totaling \$26 million.

- Municipal Fire Department Capital Grant Program- Municipal fire departments recognized by local ordinance can apply for \$25,000 to \$100,000 in grants. \$444,157 was [awarded](#) to six municipalities in 2024. Funds can be used to:
 - Establish/modernize facilities that house firefighting equipment, ambulances, or rescue vehicles.
 - Acquire/renovate existing structures to house firefighting equipment, ambulances, or rescue vehicles; or constructing/modernizing facilities.
 - Repair/purchase firefighting, ambulance, or rescue equipment to provide proper and adequate training.
- Emergency Training Center Capital Grant- This program provides funding for emergency service training providers to establish or modernize facilities, acquire or renovate structures, and repair or purchase equipment. Emergency services training centers, community colleges, county-owned facilities, municipal or fire department-owned facilities, and nonprofit associations are eligible. \$450,000 was [awarded](#) to six entities in 2024.



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