



Testimony for the House Appropriations Committee

February 21, 2025

Office of the State Fire Commissioner

Thomas Cook, Commissioner

Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Office of State Fire Commissioner's 2024-2025 budget request. Joining me today is John 'J.C.' Tedorski, Deputy State Fire Commissioner.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the Office of the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC), our office currently serves the needs of Pennsylvanians by supporting the Fire Service through four primary program areas that address core needs of the fire service. Those four areas are:

1. Financial Needs, which we serve through various Grant and Loan programs.
2. Prevention Efforts, which we serve by supporting Community Risk Reduction efforts.
3. Personnel Challenges, addressed by support of Retention and Recruitment programs.
4. Training of responders, which is supported by the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy.

OSFC serves one of the most vast and diverse fire services communities in the United States. Pennsylvania is home to the largest number of fire departments in the nation, representing over 2,000 fire departments, 30,000 volunteers, and 10,000 career members of the fire services.

The OSFC serves as the liaison to the General Assembly and Commonwealth agencies for matters pertaining to fire protection and the fire service, and coordinates with federal and Commonwealth agencies, private non-governmental agencies, and our State Fire Advisory Board in the development of rules, regulations, and concepts that promote fire safety.

OSFC's proposed budget for 2025-26 will allow the office to continue to provide direct support, coordination, and resources for fire prevention, training, and control activities to the fire service community, municipal leadership and other emergency services personnel.

Since our last appearance before this committee, the OSFC has worked to be more visible, responsive, and connected to the fire services community by engaging in a strategy that focuses on communication, collaboration, and access to OSFC services. With those goals in mind, last year was filled with meaningful accomplishments, key partnerships, critical hiring, and legislative progress that reflect our commitment to protecting communities and supporting the dedicated individuals who serve them. I would like to share with you some highlights from this year's journey.:

- In our Grants and Loans department, we were able to increase the number of approved loans from 33 during the prior year to 128 in 2024. We accomplished this by increasing staffing and modernizing internal procedures which allowed for improved efficiency. This dramatic increase allowed us to approve over \$27 million in loans to fire and EMS agencies. We also modified the grant application process to make applying for and receiving OSFC annual grant funds easier and more efficient than ever. We updated our grant system by tying it into the Keystone ID system to reduce the number of different login names needed by applicants. This change was rolled out with the OSFC's first-ever grants webinar, which offered over 800 attendees a direct connection to the OSFC.
- Our Retention and Recruitment Program filled open positions within our office, allowing us to have a greater presence in the field to assist fire departments, municipalities, and school districts in addressing the struggle underway to retain and recruit firefighters. Program staff also worked with the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) to roll out the PHEAA Active Volunteer Tuition and Loan Assistance Program to cover not only degree programs but also firefighter training. We have developed a stronger partnership with the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) to support fire department operations, through the Governor's Center for Local Government Services (GCLGS), reflecting our growing emphasis on interagency cooperation. Program staff have also continued trainings and begun rolling out retention and recruitment guides produced in-house by our staff.
- To support the effort of Community Risk Reduction across the Commonwealth we offered, for the first time ever, multiple free Community Risk Reduction (CRR) classes. We partnered with Vision 20/20, a nationwide consortium of leading fire service organizations developed to promote the concept of CRR, offering a three-day data analysis class in October. We also utilized a National Fire Academy Grant to carry out CRR best practices classes in various locations around the Commonwealth. A CRR Specialist was also hired to support our CRR efforts, including management of the PennFIRS reporting program.
- Our legislative efforts have been highly focused this year. The reauthorization of our Fire Company and Emergency Services Grant Program through 2029 was a significant achievement, providing sustained support for essential services and we appreciate the

collaboration of our partners in the General Assembly. We are continuing to work with stakeholders to refine the program to evolve with the changing fire services landscape.

- **Strategic Partnerships:** Collaboration with local, state, and national partners is a core strategic goal for the OSFC. Over the past year we have partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry to develop guidelines for junior firefighters. We solidified our relationship with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF), completing a new Memorandum of Understanding and developing revised Line of Duty Death policies. We have also worked closely with DCED to develop a guide to help fire departments undergo a merger. We expect that guide to be released this year.
- **PA State Fire Academy:** The Pennsylvania State Fire Academy has continued to expand and improve its offerings during a time of transition. We completed an extensive process to secure reaccreditation with the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and are working toward reaccreditation from Pro-Board, which is an international accrediting agency for fire training. We also put our new Mobile Live Fire Training Unit on the road, increasing access to live fire training to anywhere in the Commonwealth. New test sites and the formalization of online evaluator training were established as part of our ongoing efforts to maintain high standards for certification while shifting our training and certification processes online, when possible. Our Academy on the Road Program continues to grow, with the Flashover Recognition Program being one of the most popular offerings, and the program *Structure I* has been updated to the *Engine Academy I* with overwhelming success.

In 2025 we hope to achieve the following goals:

- OSFC will continue building pathways for better communication with firefighters, fire departments and fire service organizations, as well as municipal officials, legislators, and the rest of the Administration to ensure we are moving ahead on issues that matter to the Commonwealth's fire service.
- OSFC will continue building a coalition with organizations, associations, and other state agencies to meet the goal of providing better service to Pennsylvania's emergency services.

- OSFC will work to provide better access to our services and the issues that matter to Pennsylvania emergency services through innovative and modern methods.

As you know, in his budget address Governor Shapiro proposed three concrete steps to support the fire service:

- Creating a new, competitive funding stream of \$30 million in grants for our fire companies, allowing fire companies to purchase equipment, recruit and retain firefighters, and meet their unique needs.
- Creating a pilot program to help provide municipal fire companies with the resources they need to work together. Fire companies are stretched thin right now, and they want to collaborate and share services more – this pilot program will incentivize cooperation between companies.
- Ensuring insurance providers cover cancer screenings for firefighters every year. Last year, we reformed our Workers’ Compensation Act to ensure firefighters, first responders, and law enforcement with a post-traumatic stress injury get the coverage they deserve. Firefighters expose themselves to toxic chemicals while on the job – all to keep us safe -- we need to have their backs. That’s why this budget calls for legislative action to provide free cancer screenings for all firefighters, covered by private insurance.

In closing, on behalf of Governor Shapiro, I thank you Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and members of the Committee, for your support of OSFC and the fire service across the Commonwealth. This budget will allow OSFC to continue to provide cutting-edge training along with administrative and financial support to our brave First Responders. I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today, and I look forward to answering any questions you have.