

Report Highlights

The Feasibility of Regionalizing Pennsylvania's Volunteer Fire Companies

House Resolution 2003-148 directed the LB&FC to conduct a study on the feasibility of "regionalizing" Pennsylvania's volunteer fire departments and to present a plan for such regionalization.

Study Findings:

- 1. The Volunteer Fire Service in PA – About 96% of all fire companies in PA, or 2,354 companies, are fully-staffed by volunteers. With this number, PA has more volunteer fire companies (VFCs) than any other state in the nation. PA's 72,000 volunteer firefighters provide services with an estimated annual tax savings value of \$6 billion.
- 2. Problems and Challenges in the System – Many forces are creating increasingly serious challenges to the state's volunteer service system. These challenges include: declining numbers of active volunteer firefighters (down from 152,000 in 1985 to about 72,000 today); increasing difficulties in funding, with volunteers spending 60% or more of their available hours on fundraising activities; unnecessary and inefficient overlap and duplication of fire fighting equipment and resources; and the need for a closer working relationship between many local governments and their VFCs. As a result, many observers warn of a looming public safety crisis.
- 3. The "Regionalization" Concept in Fire Services – Various national reports and case studies document that mergers, consolidations, and other forms of cooperative service agreements among fire companies are feasible and represent a logical approach for dealing with many of the challenges currently facing the state's 2,354 VFCs.
- 4. Current Regionalization Efforts in Pennsylvania – The Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) has developed a regionalization technical assistance process, but lacks the authority and resources needed to implement it on a statewide basis. Between 1997 and 2004, a total of 20 successful merger and consolidation actions, involving 49 VFCs in 28 municipalities, occurred around the state with DCED involvement. Regionalization actions are pending in 104 other municipalities. Case studies presented in the report provide examples of successful

efforts that can serve as models for expansion of the process statewide.

- 5. Perspectives on Regionalization – While many fire service officials who responded to a study survey spoke positively on the need for and potential benefits of regionalization, some reacted negatively or urged caution, especially in terms of possible state-imposed merger or consolidation mandates. The State Fire Commissioner supports the concept of regionalization, but believes that a "bricks and mortar" inventory of what resources are available and what resources are needed must occur first.

Recommendations:

1. The Legislature and statewide fire services community should work together to enact a comprehensive statute to plan, guide, and coordinate the Commonwealth's fire services system. The report discusses suggested statutory provisions including, for example, designating the Office of State Fire Commissioner as the lead agency for the system, clarifying municipal fire protection responsibilities, developing a statewide fire services plan and statewide inventory of equipment and resources, establishing fire services regions and fire services coordinator positions, and creating a special consulting and technical assistance unit in the State Fire Commissioner's Office.
2. The Office of the State Fire Commissioner should develop a staff capability and an ongoing program to systematically promote regional partnerships and cooperative service arrangements among PA's 2,354 VFCs.
3. The Legislature should provide for the continued existence of the SR 60 Commission to assist in developing the proposed comprehensive fire services statute, statewide plan, and regionalization initiative.
4. The State Fire Commissioner should take the lead in formulating a cost estimate and funding proposal for implementing the proposed statute, strategic plan, and regionalization initiative; and should work closely with pertinent legislative standing committees throughout the process.