

**Statement for the House Appropriations Committee**

**March 25, 2015**

**OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER**

**Timothy Solobay, State Fire Commissioner**

Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek, and members of the Committee, I am Tim Solobay, the State Fire Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement and discuss Governor Wolf's 2015-2016 budget request for the Office of State Fire Commissioner (OSFC).

I want you to know that when Governor Wolf offered me the job as the State Fire Commissioner, he made it clear that his Administration would make a very strong commitment to the fire service -- both paid and volunteer -- across the commonwealth. As many of you know, I serve as the Fire Chief for the volunteer fire company in my hometown. Before becoming State Fire Commissioner, I served in both the House and Senate and was the Minority Chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee. So I do have a keen understanding of the issues that affect the fire service across all levels of the commonwealth.

I care deeply about the safety of our firefighters. In the two months since I have been Fire Commissioner, unfortunately there have been three firefighters lost in the line of duty - Edward Roddy from Somerset Volunteer Fire Department; Janice Livingston from West End Ambulance

Service of Johnstown; Jeffery Buck from Lawrence Township Volunteer Fire Company #1, Clearfield County. The losses were heartbreaking and gut wrenching. On behalf of the Administration and as a fellow firefighter, I attended the services to pay respect to those brave men. I'd now like to ask for a moment of silence in their memory. When we lose a firefighter it reminds us that every day across the commonwealth, we have citizens willing to put their lives on the line to save others. That's just what firefighters do. Because of that, we need to ensure that at the state level we do the very best we can to ensure they have the resources necessary to maximize their safety. Our goal -- as the motto of the program to prevent line-of-duty deaths says -- is to ensure that "Everyone Goes Home™" safely after responding to a fire.

The Fire Company and Ambulance Service Grant Program is one of the most important programs for the fire service. It will be up for re-authorization in 2016 so we will be starting work on it this year. The last time the General Assembly re-authorized the program it provided an additional \$5 million in funds to the grant awards, added career fire departments to the grant program, and provided additional funding to restore training programs.

The grant program has been very successful since its inception and this year is no exception. This past year we awarded 1,987 grants to fire companies and 487 grants to volunteer ambulance services. The average grant to a fire department was \$13,286.36 and the grants provided to ambulance services averaged \$7,444.80.

In addition to the grant program, a second major program that assists the fire services is the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP). The VLAP is one of the major sources of funding for our volunteer fire companies and volunteer ambulance services. The VLAP continues to provide essential help with construction of new buildings, acquisition of apparatus, and the purchase of equipment. OSFC processes and approves an average of 6 to 8 loans each month -- totaling an average of just over \$1 million -- in addition to managing the loans that have already been approved. During calendar year 2014, OSFC processed 62 loans totaling \$7,843,967. Since its inception in 1975, 7,049 VLAP loans have been approved totaling \$438,712,569. Even though the VLAP has been successful, the fire service very much appreciated the General Assembly making needed changes to the program. The loan amounts had not increased since 1990 and had become woefully inadequate because it had not kept pace with the rising cost of apparatus or construction. Simply put – the loan amounts were outdated. The new law basically doubled the authorized loan amounts and extended the re-payment period an additional five years. On behalf of the volunteer fire service and volunteer ambulance service, I thank you for making the much needed changes to the VLAP.

There are a several matters that I am reviewing and I would like to discuss with the General Assembly at a later date. One priority is recruitment and retention issues regarding our volunteer fire service. The number of volunteers keeps dropping year after year. We all need to assess how we can best address the issue since it is putting strains on our communities that rely on volunteer fire services. A second key matter is the Firefighter Relief Fund law has not been updated in some time. We may want to assess if we need to do so. The third item is whether we

can find a better way to promote regionalization or consolidation of fire companies that are wishing to do so. Again with the drop in volunteers, this is becoming a growing issue for the fire service.

As Governor Wolf has said -- public safety is core function of government. My office plays a very important role in ensuring that the fire service is prepared to provide this crucial public safety service to all the citizens of the commonwealth. Governor Wolf is committed to providing the necessary resources for this core governmental function. Without question, Governor Wolf's proposed 2015-2016 budget for OSFC provides the required resources that give a very solid foundation for us to accomplish our important public safety mission.

Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek, and members of the Committee, on behalf of Governor Wolf and the twelve million Pennsylvanians we serve, I thank you for your continued support of OSFC and the Pennsylvania fire service. I believe that with Governor Wolf's commitment and your continued support of our mission, the Pennsylvania fire service will continue to be one the preeminent fire services in the nation.

I am happy to answer any questions that you might have.