

Press Statement, Homeland Security
May 5, 2003

Thank you, Rep. Saylor.

The House Veterans Affairs and Emergency

Preparedness Committee, of which I am chairman, played a significant role in developing six of the bills in the Homeland Security package, including legislation establishing the Volunteer Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program.

Our firefighters and emergency responders need financial help so they can spend a little less time fundraising and a little more time training and responding to emergencies.

Under House Bill 8, sponsored by Rep. Larry Sather of Huntingdon County, grants will provide financial assistance to these organizations for construction or renovation of their buildings; purchase or repair of firefighting, ambulance or rescue equipment and support services, training; or debt reduction.

Further financial support will be available through the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), which provides low-interest loans to Pennsylvania's volunteer fire and emergency response departments. House Bill 900, which I sponsored, shores up this valuable program by doubling the bond debt level and making more funds available to our volunteer organizations.

Emergency response will be easier and citizens will be safer under a bill I sponsored that creates a wireless E-911 emergency telephone system. This system will enable cell phone users to be located by satellite for emergency response, and it will create a reverse 911 system, allowing 911 call centers to notify individuals in the event of an emergency in the community.

Just as important as financial assistance and up-to-date technology is the need for training. It helps these dedicated first responders do their jobs even better. So Rep. John Taylor of Philadelphia sponsored legislation requiring all newly hired municipal firefighters to complete a basic instruction course established by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner.

The state would reimburse municipalities for 100 percent of allowable tuition, necessary living expenses and travel expenses, as well as 80 percent of the regular salary for firefighters while attending training. This means that – although the program would be mandatory – we’re not going to place any additional undue financial burdens on our municipalities.

My House Bill 780 amends the Hazardous Material Emergency Planning and Response Act to include specific requirements for training and equipment necessary to respond to biological or chemical emergencies that are a result of terrorist activities.

The current law does not adequately prepare these teams to respond to incidents where biological agents or “weapons of mass destruction” may be involved.

The final bill reported from the committee goes to the heart of preparing Pennsylvania for unforeseen future acts of terrorism by creating the Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security and elevating the position of Homeland Security Director to a cabinet level position, to be confirmed by the Senate. This new office will be the state’s direct link to the federal government in securing federal homeland security money and it will serve as a clearinghouse to coordinate state, local and regional resources for homeland security and terrorism prevention and response measures.

Finally, the House is considering a resolution sponsored by House Speaker John Perzel directing the committee to hold additional hearings to comprehensively evaluate the state's homeland security preparedness status.

The resolution calls for a bipartisan effort to identify Pennsylvania's security-related needs and communicate those needs directly to Washington. Our findings and recommendations will help Pennsylvania leverage new federal homeland security investment dollars for critical infrastructure like seaports, airports, bridges, tunnels and rail lines.

Thank You
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