



Testimony for the House Appropriations Committee

February 26, 2026

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 fiscal year (FY) 2026-2027 budget request. Joining me today is John 'J.C.' Tedorski, Deputy State Fire Commissioner.

The Office of the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) 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, through various Grant and Loan programs.
2. Prevention Efforts, by supporting Community Risk Reduction efforts.
3. Personnel Challenges, addressed by support of Retention and Recruitment programs.
4. Training and voluntary certification 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 2026-27 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.

Over the last year, OSFC has become more visible, responsive, and connected to the fire service community by engaging in a strategy that focuses on communication, collaboration, and access to OSFC services. I would like to share with you some highlights from this year's journey:

- In our Grants and Loans department, we were able to eliminate our loan backlog which has led to a 41 percent increase in applications from 2024 to 2025. We accomplished this by filling vacant positions and modernizing internal procedures which allowed for improved efficiency. This dramatic increase allowed us to approve over \$25 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. Our grant system, which is tied into the Keystone ID system, reduces the number of different login names needed by applicants and allows for electronic signatures on grant agreements. This change simplified the process for fire and EMS agencies to complete their applications and receive their funding. In FY 25/26 we have awarded \$37.5 million in grants to Fire/EMS companies.
- Recruitment and Retention is a top priority for OSFC and the fire service. We have four full-time advisors in 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 are working with Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) to promote the PHEAA Active Volunteer Tuition and Loan Assistance Program to cover not only degree programs, but also firefighter training programs required for entrance into a specific career, e.g., State Fire Academy courses. 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.
- To support the effort of Community Risk Reduction across the Commonwealth we have expanded offerings of free Community Risk Reduction (CRR) classes through our Academy on the Road program. Additionally, OSFC transitioned its data reporting software to meet new federal reporting requirements. We are working with our new software vendor to create a statewide dashboard of fire data to identify areas of risk. This initiative will enhance the accuracy, accessibility, and strategic use of fire incident data throughout Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania's career and volunteer firefighters and first responders bravely put themselves in harm's way to protect their neighbors and serve an essential role in ensuring the safety of their communities. As noted, fire services face recruitment and retention concerns as well as a growing need for equipment updates and other capital expenditures. The Governor and I have seen firsthand fire companies who are struggling to keep the heat on for their staff. As you know, in his budget address Governor Shapiro proposed concrete steps to support the fire service through a new, competitive funding stream of \$30 million in grants for our fire companies, allowing them to purchase equipment, recruit and retain firefighters, and meet their unique needs. While the Commonwealth already provides funding for fire companies, the current system doesn't allow departments to make major investments – these competitive grants would change that.

We have also seen fire departments like the one we visited earlier this month in Dickson City that were able to execute a heroic coordinated effort to protect lives and property during the Lehigh Valley Hospital fire. In fact Fire Chief Richard Chowanec himself described the effort as, "pulling off the impossible". He went on to say that funding for PA fire departments is vital to the fire services in PA. This new grant program would double the funding available to our fire service each year.

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 providing 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.