

CAN WE TALK?

New Law Encourages Communication Between Townships and Their Emergency Services Providers

Fire and ambulance services are essential to any community, but the lines of communication between local government leaders and these providers are not always open. A new law aims to make sure each party understands the other's needs — for their own good and, ultimately, for the good of the residents.

BY JENNIFER L. HAWBAKER /
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Susan Williams is new to township government, and it might just be her outsider's perspective that is helping to bring the township supervisors and local emergency service providers together to talk about the future.

Williams, who was appointed secretary-treasurer for Genesee Township in Potter County in January and be-

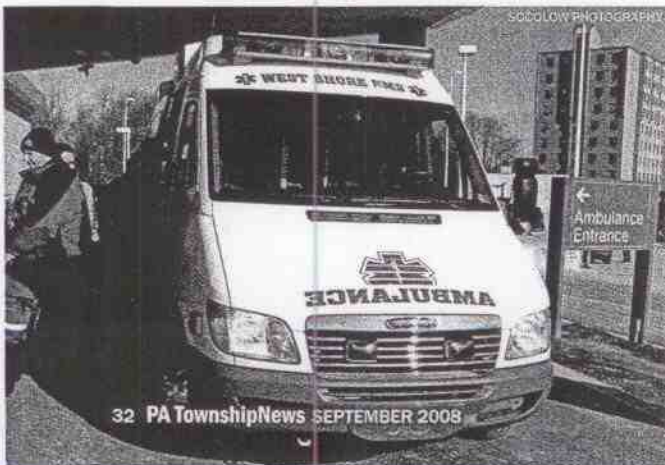
gan volunteering with the ambulance service in March, got the idea to have the groups meet after learning about a new state law. Act 7 of 2008 requires townships to consult with their volunteer fire and emergency medical services providers to determine appropriate levels of service, funding, and other assistance.

Also, fire and EMS providers must now give the township an annual itemized list of all township funds spent before the board of supervisors may consider allocating more money.

Act 7 does not require townships to provide a minimum level of financial assistance, nor does it give emergency services the right to demand a specific amount or withhold service. It is meant to encourage dialogue between townships and emergency organizations to ensure that public safety needs are met.

"It's calling for more of a partner-

Townships need fire and ambulance services, and in many cases, the reverse is true, too. A new state law is meant to encourage communication between the groups to make sure everyone's needs are met.





Act 7 requires township officials to sit down with their fire and emergency medical services providers to determine what the township needs from them and how it can help these emergency volunteers in return. It does not require the township to provide any specific level of funding.

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ship," PSATS Assistant Executive Director Elam Herr says. "Townships still have the final say on the services that will be provided and the monetary contribution they will make."

While such a partnership is nothing new for some townships, in others, the relationship between the board of supervisors and the fire and ambulance services is less apparent. Bridging any gaps, however, can be beneficial to the township, the providers, and most of all, the residents.

"I had heard there was tension in the past between these two groups," Williams says. "Using this amended code, I have been able to convince everyone that we all need to meet and

discuss things to ensure that we can be a united front. It will be to everyone's benefit."

She's hoping the meetings will be a learning experience that leads to better understanding. "Maybe the fire and ambulance side can educate our township officials on their expenditures and the money they bring in," Williams says, "and the supervisors can educate them on how things work in the township."

Opening the door

Although some townships are afraid the new law is going to take another bite out of their budgets, its sponsor says it is meant to be a bridge to communi-

cation, not an unfunded mandate.

"It keeps the decision-making power at the local level," says Rep. Anthony Melio (*D-Bucks*), who introduced the original bill in April 2007. "We're not trying to force anything down anybody's throat. We just want them to talk to each other."

State Fire Commissioner Edward Mann agrees that communication is the biggest component to the law. "I think this opens the door for discussions that historically have never taken place," he says.

Act 7 can be traced to what is known as the "Senate Resolution 60 Commission," a bipartisan group of legislators, emergency service officials, and local

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FIRE AND EMS

government representatives formed in 2003 to propose solutions for the funding, delivery, and support of volunteer fire and emergency medical services.

"Everybody felt that it was never clearly defined who was responsible for providing fire and emergency medical services in a community," Mann says. "People had always hung their hat on the wording [in the Township Code] that 'township officials shall be responsible for the health, safety, and welfare of residents.'" The new language, he says, guides the parties in working together for the benefit of

the community. The same provisions have been added to the administrative codes for cities, boroughs, and townships of the first class.

Both Melio and Mann see the law as a good system of checks and balances. "It creates some accountability not only for the emergency services providers but also for the elected officials," Mann says.

Taking action

Clearly, Act 7 is already having the intended impact. Genesee Township, with less than 800 residents, was planning to meet with its local fire and emergency services representatives as the *Township News* went to press. On a much larger scale, Cranberry Township in Butler County, with more than 27,000 residents, has done the same

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FIRE AND EMS

with that community's independent ambulance corps.

"We always had a good working relationship, but it was still at arm's length," township manager Jerry Andree says. "We wanted to become more closely integrated and knowledgeable, and their response was very positive. They were very receptive."

As a result of the township's outreach, the board of supervisors donated funds for the ambulance service to hire a consultant to review its operations. The goal is to make sure the township's needs will be met well into the future. The improved partnership has had

some unexpected benefits, too.

"It has opened doors," Andree says. "Because of this cooperation, they now can get fuel through the townships' fuel stations."

"We understand the ambulance corps is having increased difficulty maintaining solvency, and that's one way we can help."

Mann hopes others will follow the lead of these two townships. A good place to start, he says, is with a meeting where the township states its needs and the emergency service providers do the same. That small step, he adds, can have a big impact.

"If the relationship between the emergency services and the local government is better because of this legislation," Mann says, "the citizens are going to directly benefit." ♦

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ACT 7: What it means for townships

Act 7 of 2008 (House Bill 1131) requires townships to work with local fire and emergency medical services to determine appropriate levels of funding and assistance.

The amendments to the Township Code require the board of supervisors to consult with their volunteer fire and EMS providers on the township's needs to determine the appropriate level of financial and administrative assistance for these services. Both fire and EMS providers will be required to give the township an annual itemized list of all expenditures of township funds before the board of supervisors may consider budgeting additional funding for the organizations.

Act 7 does not require townships to provide a minimum level of financial assistance, nor does it give emergency services the right to demand a specific amount or withhold service. The act is meant to encourage communication between townships and emergency organizations to ensure that public safety needs are met.

The Act 7 provisions have also been added to the administrative codes for cities, boroughs, and townships of the first class.

For a copy of Act 7, log onto www.legis.state.pa.us and choose "Legislation Enacted Since 1975" under the heading "Law Information." Enter the act number (7) and the session year (2008).