

**Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Emergency Management Agency**

**Testimony Presented by
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**Before a joint hearing of
Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee
Senate Transportation Committee**

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Good Morning. On behalf of Governor Rendell and this Administration, I would like to thank the chairpersons and members of both committees for this opportunity to discuss progress already made, as well as work underway, to address issues that grew out of the state's response to the February 14, 2007 winter storm response.

Effective community disaster preparedness and response is as much art as it is science. The history of emergency management and public safety in Pennsylvania is one of evolution and change, based in great part on municipal growth, land use decisions, industrial development and advances in technology. The events of September 11, 2001 and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina flooding in the Gulf States triggered a national review of our federal, state and local plans, policies and programs. The significant and on-going changes that grow out of these tragic events challenge emergency managers and elected officials at all level of government to enhance and improve our ability to provide for the public protection. Over the past six years, we have collectively made great progress toward implementing new federal policies and, at the same time, enhancing our local preparedness posture. But speaking for emergency managers and first responders statewide, we understood that this is a work in process.

An unusually severe winter storm which impacted a portion of the Commonwealth on Valentine's Day of this year revealed that we still had work to do.

It is important for Pennsylvanians to understand that their statewide public safety program is not broken. Local police, fire and EMS units respond daily to emergency situations. County-based 9-1-1 centers are staffed and equipped to receive and respond to calls for help round-the-clock in a timely and effective manner, applying state-of-the art technology to support appropriate dispatches. We have also effectively responded to numerous life threatening floods in all corners of the state.

But on February 14, 2007, the system failed to properly identify a significant weather related condition problem on Interstate 78 and motorists were stranded for far longer than acceptable or necessary. Recognizing the complexity of this situation and the need to correct deficiencies, we welcomed the opportunity to work with James Lee Witt and his team when they were retained to provide an independent assessment of our preparedness posture.

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss progress made to implement the Witt Report recommendations. In all, the Report made numerous recommendations that affect PEMA and were intended to help ensure that our policies, plans and procedures are current and adequate to support incidents of this type and magnitude. We have either completed or have initiated steps

to address the Witt recommendations, to include: Developing procedures to escalate the staffing level within the state's Emergency Operations Center when there is advanced warning of major weather events like the February winter storm; meeting current federal requirements for National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliance; filling key management positions within the agency such as appointing a new Director of the Bureau of Operations and Training, creating a new Bureau of 9-1-1 Programs and naming a director, and creating a new Deputy Director of Administration position. We also received interim approval of the agency's re-organization plan and successfully conducted the agency's first Open House and Job Fair where the Civil Service Commission conducted Civil Service testing at PEMA on a Saturday for more than 100 interested applicants.

Several report recommendations address on-going agency initiatives that are in process. One such recommendation is the adoption of a resource and logistics software program that will help us manage and track state, county and local capabilities. We have met with several of our neighboring states to explore what they are doing and have asked the Office of Administration's Information Technology staff to review available products. We have also been told that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is about to select a compatible software program. We are working with our federal partners to ensure compatibility as we build out this resource. By the end of this calendar year, we plan to select a product to address both improvements in incident reporting and a comprehensive resource management tool.

Effective disaster preparedness and response is based on planning, training and communications. We are working with our partners at the state and county level to ensure that our all-hazards plans are current and comprehensive. These plans and procedures are regularly tested through a series of drills and exercises. We just completed a major winter weather exercise and plan another for December. I want to personally extend an invitation to both committee members to attend the next exercise to see our team in action.

Interoperable communications remains a challenge, given the size and topography of the commonwealth. Most municipal first responders depend on existing legacy radio systems for daily operations. This frequently limits their ability to communicate with neighboring units and the state.

We are working with the Governor's Office of Administration, Office of Public Safety Radio Services to build-out a statewide interoperable network taking advantage of a substantial federal Department of Commerce grant. Several years ago we installed 800-MHz radio systems in every county emergency management agency and 9-1-1 center. This provides yet another redundant communications network between the counties and our 24/7 state Emergency Operations Center in Harrisburg. We are in the process of completing a project proposal that will allow all first responders within a county to talk to each other through existing radio legacy systems utilizing the statewide network as the common bridge. When complete the legacy radio systems at the municipal level will assume a significant enhanced capability.

In summary, I don't want to suggest that all our problems have been solved. In reality, we must constantly strive to identify ways to improve. In the emergency management world, preparedness is a continuous process of moving forward, recognizing limitations and reducing the margin for error. But because we are preparing for the unexpected, there will always be challenges.

Let me close by saying that when emergency management works, it is transparent. It is taken for granted. When it does not work, it is painfully obvious and becomes a significant cause for

concern. Over the years, Pennsylvania's emergency management program has worked extremely well. It is our goal to complete the course corrections necessary to put this essential public safety program back on track. I think we have moved in a positive direction since February.

And one final personal note if I may. On the occasion of his announced retirement from the State Senate, I would like to recognize and thank Senator Roger Madigan for his many years of dedicated service to the Commonwealth and the residents of the 23rd Senatorial District. In particular, our thanks for your years of service representing the Senate as a member of the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Council.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to discuss our progress and would be happy to address questions.