

**Tom Olewnick, Clearfield County firefighter, testimony for Senate Community, Economic and Recreational Development Committee Hearing**

Oct. 4, 2023

Thank you, chairmen and committee members, for allowing me to come here today to talk about how important skill games are to my volunteer fire company.

My name is Tom Olewnick and I have been a member of the Penfield Volunteer Fire Company for 35 years. I was 18 years old when I joined the fire company. I believe you should be involved with your community, and this is my way of doing that.

Our fire company covers a territory of 64 square miles and protects a population of 1,500 residents in Huston Twp., Clearfield County. It is a rural stretch of central Pennsylvania that reaches from Interstate 80, north into Elk County. While protecting our residents, we are also often called upon to aid travelers along the I-80 corridor.

It is hard work for our 25 active members. Not just physically but emotionally. Just two months ago we were called to a house fire. Tragically, a 14-year-old boy died in that fire even though we and other fire companies worked our hardest to save him. We are still dealing with the terrible trauma of that night.

As you can imagine there are endless challenges a volunteer fire company deals with, not least of which is finding recruits who are willing to jump out of bed in the dead of a freezing night and rush to the scene of a massive car crash or a house fire. Add to that the time required to do firefighter training and take care of all the equipment and the fire hall itself.

And then there are the costs. Even though we are a small company, we need the same equipment as bigger, wealthier fire departments. The boots, helmets, fire pants, fire coats, self-contained breathing apparatus, and other things. In 2019 we bought a tanker truck. The price tag was \$380,000. Now we are saving for a needed fire engine and by the time we have the money to put a down payment on it, the cost will be nearly \$1 million.

That, senators, takes a lot of chicken barbecues. Gone are the days when fire companies could pay for their equipment by holding regular hoagie sales, soup sales, and raffles.

About eight years ago we decided to try installing skill games to make extra revenue. It changed everything. Last year the games provided us with \$15,000. That was enough money to pay for maintenance on our vehicles, fuel for our trucks, cover the electric bill, and help us save for a new truck.

In addition, we received \$14,000 this year from a fundraiser that Pennsylvania Skill does annually in partnership with Nittany MinitMarts. We also have gotten other donations from Pennsylvania Skill in the past couple of years for specific needs.

You have no idea what a difference all this funding makes for us, especially the revenue from the skill games in our fire hall. Sometimes as volunteer firefighters in rural Pennsylvania, we feel forgotten. We appreciate the grants we receive, especially for fire trucks. But there are not a lot of opportunities for us to make money to pay for equipment and upkeep. I mentioned the chicken barbecues. We had one recently and sold nearly 380 chicken dinners. That is helpful but, it doesn't make a huge dent in the overall funding we need.

Our skill games revenue does.

If skill games went away, it would be a true hardship for the Penfield Volunteer Fire Company. I don't know off hand how we would make up that funding.

In keeping with my theme today I just want to end by sounding the alarm for our elected officials that skill games do more for volunteer fire companies than you may realize.

We need to do whatever it takes, including regulation, to make sure skill games stay in place in Pennsylvania.

Thank you.