



News for Immediate Release

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Auditor General DePasquale Calls for Further Investigation into West Hazleton Volunteer Firefighter Relief Association Spending

Audit revealed nearly \$22,000 in questionable expenses

HARRISBURG – Auditor General Eugene DePasquale today asked the Luzerne County District Attorney's Office to investigate nearly \$22,000 in questionable spending at the West Hazleton Volunteer Firefighter Relief Association (VFRA).

To date, the affiliated fire company has reimbursed the VFRA \$14,260 of the \$21,942 in questionable expenses involving the VFRA's former secretary, who also served as the local fire chief.

"I am asking the district attorney's office to probe whether what my audit found was the full extent of the problem and whether legal action may be warranted," DePasquale said. "State aid to VFRA's is meant to help ensure the safety of volunteer firefighters and first responders – and not to pay for cell phones and turnpike tolls."

The [recently completed audit](#) found \$21,942 in questionable spending, including the potential misappropriation of VFRA assets, undocumented expenses and unauthorized expenses dating back to 2016, including:

- **\$945 in turnpike tolls.** Auditors found that the former association secretary/fire chief paid for his family's turnpike tolls using VFRA funds in 2016 and 2017. The former association officer reimbursed the fire company which, in turn, reimbursed the relief association in October 2017.
- **\$5,630 in cellular wireless provider charges** in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Auditors determined the former association secretary/fire chief used VFRA funds to pay monthly charges for his and his family's cell phone plans. The affiliated fire company reimbursed the VFRA \$705.
- **\$6,039 in undocumented expenses.** The affiliated fire company reimbursed the VFRA \$4,659 for the undocumented expenses and provided documentation to support \$1,030 in expenditures.
- **\$9,328 in unauthorized expenses,** which include \$4,486 in bank payments for the former fire chief's emergency vehicle and \$2,144 to distribute candy at a holiday parade. The affiliated fire company reimbursed the VFRA \$7,951.

DePasquale said the audit shows why it is important for all VFRA's to follow spending guidelines established by state law.

"I'm glad to see that leaders in the fire community and West Hazleton seem to be taking the audit concerns seriously and are working to rebuild the public's trust," DePasquale noted. "I will continue to monitor the situation to make sure things keep moving in the right direction."

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