

Legislation Text

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Honoring the 150th Anniversary of the Philadelphia Fire Department.

WHEREAS, The Philadelphia Fire Department's roots go back nearly three centuries, when on December 7, 1736, Benjamin Franklin joined more than two dozen other Philadelphians to establish the first volunteer fire company in the nation, the Union Fire Company; and

WHEREAS, The Union Fire Company, which was sometimes called Franklin's Bucket Brigade, was formed after a series of publications in the Pennsylvania Gazette by Franklin and others pointing out the need for more effective handling of fires in Philadelphia, remained active until approximately 1820. Although modeled after the Mutual Fire Societies of Franklin's native Boston, the Union Fire Company protected all members of the community rather than only the members of the company; and

WHEREAS, The number of volunteer companies grew steadily over subsequent decades, and eventually, the City of Philadelphia decided to consolidate this loose network of independent firehouses into a single municipal agency with paid, professional employees; and

WHEREAS, 150 years ago, at 10:00 AM on Wednesday March 15, 1871, the Philadelphia Fire Department officially went into service; and

WHEREAS, Three hundred and fifty-five men gathered at Spring Garden Hall, 13th and Spring Garden Streets, to be sworn in as members of the newly organized paid fire department in Philadelphia. They were assigned to twenty-two engines and five truck companies under the supervision of five Assistant Engineers; and

WHEREAS, Since City leaders had made no appropriations for the turnout gear issued to each newly hired firefighter, gear was provided and the cost of the equipment was deducted from each worker's salaries in installments; and

WHEREAS, Today the Department has 60 engine companies, 27 ladder companies and 60 ambulances housed in 63 stations across the City; and

WHEREAS, The mandate of the Philadelphia Fire Department encompasses all traditional firefighting functions, including fire suppression, as well as specialty and support units deployed throughout the City; specialized firefighting units for the Philadelphia International Airport and the Port of Philadelphia; investigations conducted by the Fire Marshal's Office to determine the origins of fires and to develop preventive strategies; prevention programs to educate the public in order to increase overall fire safety; and support services such as: research and planning, management of the Fire Communications Center within the City's 911 system, and operation of the Fire Academy; and

WHEREAS, The delivery of emergency medical services now generates more than seventy percent of the department's total calls for services; and

WHEREAS, The Philadelphia Fire Department is the largest fire department in the Commonwealth and also has the busiest Emergency Medical Services division in the United States with a single ambulance, Medic 2, responding to 8,788 calls in 2013 and Medic 8 responded to 9,011 calls in 2018; and

WHEREAS, More than 3,000 dedicated men and women provide firefighting, emergency medical care and all-hazards response for Philadelphia's 1.6 million people; and

WHEREAS, The first African-American to work in the Philadelphia Fire Department was Isaac Jacobs. He was hired in 1886 as a hoseman at Engine 11, but in reality, he was relegated to caring for the company's horses; and

WHEREAS, For decades, African-American firefighters could only work at the all-Black companies: Engine 11 and Fire Boat #1. That changed in 1949 when 11 Black firefighters were assigned to stations throughout the city. Engine 11 and Fire Boat #1 remained all-Black companies (except for white officers) until 1952; and

WHEREAS, The city's first female firefighter to die in the line of duty was Joyce Craig, an African-American woman who had served in the department for 11 years. She died while responding to a house fire in 2014, and was posthumously promoted to lieutenant. She was 37; and

WHEREAS, Three Black women are among the trailblazers who continue to work in the department: Fire Code Unit Lt. Diane Mercer was one of the first three women hired by the PFD in 1985; Engine 44 Capt. Lisa Forrest is the first Black female firefighter promoted to that rank and the first woman to lead Club Valiants; and Paramedic Crystal Yates is the first black woman promoted to the rank of chief. She now serves as assistant deputy commissioner for EMS and is the highest-ranking African-American woman in the department; and

WHEREAS, These women's service and leadership will set a standard for further equity and inclusion within the Fire Department, where currently 95% of firefighters are men, only 115 are women, and just 50 of those women are Black; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE CITY COUNCIL OF PHILADELPHIA, Recognizes the history, tradition and dedicated service provided by the Philadelphia Fire Department to the City of Philadelphia.

FURTHER RESOLVED, THAT THE CITY COUNCIL OF PHILADELPHIA, Offers sincere congratulations and appreciation to the men and women of the Philadelphia Fire Department on the occasion of their 150th Anniversary.