



Testimony of David Heath on Behalf of Aerium *Catalyzing Aviation Innovation & Shaping Tomorrow's Workforce Before the Pennsylvania Senate Transportation Committee Hearing on "Rural Crossroads of Economy and Infrastructure" May 28, 2025*

Chairwoman Ward, Chairman Flynn, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is David Heath, and I represent **Aerium**, a nonprofit aviation innovation and workforce institute headquartered at the Johnstown–Cambria County Airport. On behalf of our partners across education, industry, public safety, and military aviation, I want to speak about how rural transportation — particularly aviation — must be recognized not only as infrastructure, but as an engine of resilience, equity, and economic transformation.

RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IS AVIATION INFRASTRUCTURE

In many rural parts of Pennsylvania, **airports are the only fast lane left** — linking our communities to trauma care, commerce, training, and military readiness. Yet these assets remain underfunded and overlooked. Aerium is working to reverse that by restoring aviation as **core rural infrastructure** — not just concrete runways, but smart, connected systems that deliver jobs, services, and emergency support.

SUMMIT AS A SIGNAL OF MOMENTUM

Today, as I testify, Aerium is actively hosting its **third annual Aviation Infrastructure and Innovation Summit** in Johnstown — featuring 200+ attendees, flight demos, and panels on workforce, drones, and resilience. This fall, with the **Aviation Council of Pennsylvania**, we'll host the **PA Aviation Education and Ecosystem Summit** — a student- and teacher-focused gathering to drive the next wave of state education alignment and industry collaboration.

This isn't just a conference. It's a **manifestation of momentum**.

AERIUM'S MODEL: BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP

Aerium began by modernizing Johnstown Airport. Today, it is catalyzing a statewide aviation innovation ecosystem. Our focus is on integrating unmanned systems, deploying real infrastructure, and preparing the workforce that will design, build, test, fly, and maintain them.

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

We've helped launch and provide ongoing support to aviation programs serving **52 schools** across 32 districts, investing **over \$ 267,000** in equipment, curriculum, and certifications. We've led the creation of six state-recognized CTE pathways — from Remote Pilot to Aircraft Maintenance. Through partnerships with AOPA, USI, and the FAA, we're ensuring that students graduate with the credentials and opportunities they need.

Our postsecondary partners include:

- **Saint Francis University** – A&P and flight pathways
- **CCBC** – Flight and air traffic control pathways, remote tower curriculum, dual credit
- **IUP, PIA**, and others – drone, flight, avionics expansion

We also operate **teacher training institutes**, with 14 educators trained in 2024 and 40 expected in 2025.

DRONE814 AND ELSA-M3

Drone814 is our life-saving drone initiative — delivering **Narcan, EpiPens, and AEDs** across Cambria and Somerset. In its first phase, it will save **over 40 lives** and reduce emergency costs by more than \$700,000. Powered by a US DOT **SMART Grant** and FAA test site support, we're building a **UTM sensor network** to manage this next-gen airspace.

Drone814 isn't about drones — it's about **access**. Rural areas deserve fast and scalable emergency response. Drone814 proves it's possible and provides a blueprint for implementation statewide.

AARCHIEE: CROSS-SECTOR INNOVATION

The **AARCHIEE consortium** — led by Aerium and institutions such as **Pitt, CMU, IUP**, and partners including **Lockheed, Navmar, Compass**, and the **PA National Guard** — is pioneering CASEVAC, blood transport, ICU drones, and triage systems. The planned **Aerium Innovation & Training Center** at Johnstown Airport will serve as the state's hub for advanced aviation deployment and training.

POLICY NEEDS: THE PA AIR ACT

Aerium works closely with **PennDOT** and the Commonwealth — from SMART corridors to drone testing and workforce alignment. But despite agency support, we lack a **reliable, sustainable state funding source**.

The **PA AIR Act** would change that — delivering up to **\$120 million/year** to support infrastructure, workforce, and innovation.

It earmarks:

- **10% of the Aviation Restricted Account** for **aviation workforce development**
- **15% of the Aviation Trust Fund** for **emerging aviation projects**

This Act ensures rural airports don't just survive — they lead. It supports students, saves lives, and positions Pennsylvania as a national leader in advanced aviation.

FINAL THOUGHT

Chairwoman Ward, Chairman Flynn, and members — Pennsylvania's aviation future is already in motion. But it needs the fuel of forward-looking policy.

Support the **PA AIR Act**. Fund the future. Let's make aviation the engine of rural prosperity.

Thank you.