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McCain in Phila. greets firefighters, defends Palin

By Peter Mucha

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Inquirer Staff Writer

Republican presidential candidate John McCain made a brief appearance at a fire station in Philadelphia this morning, where he also defended the selection of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate.

"The vetting process was completely thorough, and I'm grateful for the results," he said in response to a reporter's question.

Since Palin was added to the ticket Friday, reports have surfaced that her 17-year-old daughter, Bristol, is five months pregnant, and that a state official may have lost his job for resisting pressure from Palin to fire her state trooper brother-in-law.

The McCain motorcade pulled into Engine Co. 56 at Rhawn Street and Verree Road in Northeast Philadelphia shortly after 10:30 a.m.

Carrying a large Dunkin' Donuts bag, McCain shook hands and exchanged greetings with a line of firefighters, before heading to a backroom to chat about funding and equipment with station and city fire officials, including Dep. Chief Thomas Garrity.

Firefighters said they were honored to meet McCain.

"I just thanked him for coming, and I was proud to shake his hand," said one.

About 50 people gathered along the station's parking lot to gawk at the presumptive Republican nominee. Among them was Jessica Posner, 31, who held her daughter Mischa, who is almost 2.

"We just came out to show John McCain that there are young Republicans out here, even though when you look out at Pennsylvania and Philadelphia, it doesn't seem like that," said Posner, who said today was her birthday, and meeting the candidate was "birthday present."

After the meeting, McCain addressed the assembled media and firefighters.

"I just stopped this morning to thank all the folks at Engine Co. 56 who have been here in serving this community for many years, since 1949," he said. "... They and I express our appreciation to all of the first responders who are now reacting and helping out throughout Louisiana, the Gulf Coast, Mississippi and the other states that have been hit by this hurricane and I'm grateful for all their great work, which has minimized casualties."

After responding to the Palin question, McCain then greeted the crowd outside.

"God bless you! I wanted you eight years ago!" shouted Jack Green, 76, a Korean War Veteran who lives in the Northeast.

McCain arrived in Philadelphia early yesterday afternoon, and met privately with Cardinal Justin Rigali afternoon for about a half-hour at the Catholic leader's residence on City Avenue.

He dined with staff members last evening at the Devon Seafood Grill on Rittenhouse Square, McCain's staff confirmed.

After heading to airport and boarding his "Straight Talk Express" jet just before noon today, McCain was off to Cleveland, where, after at least one more event, he will stay tonight, according to his staff.

On Thursday night, plans call for him to give his acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn.

Yesterday morning, he was in Ohio, where he helped pack goods intended to help Gulf Coast hurricane victims.