

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



By Brittan Bolin
IAFPD Lobbyist

Lawmakers Look to Support Volunteer Firefighters

There are 745,000 volunteer firefighters across the United States serving in over 26,000 fire departments. The monetary value of these donated services is estimated at \$46.7 billion dollars; services that would otherwise be paid for by local tax dollars. Yet the number of people willing to serve their community as volunteer firefighters and emergency workers is dwindling. There is a growing awareness of the problem among lawmakers, who are taking a variety of approaches to find solutions.

One incentive enacted by the Maine legislature is a Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP) to award firefighters and EMS personnel with a retirement benefit based on years of service. While the program has been established in Maine, it has not been funded making it difficult to evaluate its impact on firefighter retention. The Maine State Fire Marshal says lack of good data impedes efforts to identify the reasons for firefighter shortages and appropriate solutions. The state of Maine is conducting a survey of to collect information from fire departments and establish a base line to measure how proposed incentives impact participation.

Providing tax breaks to volunteer firefighters is a solution offered in multiple states and has been proposed here in Illinois as well. In 2020, legislation was filed in the Illinois Senate to provides individuals who serve as a volunteer firefighter or a volunteer EMS provider during the taxable year a credit in an amount equal to \$500. Four additional bills were filed this year: Senate Bill 3027, Senate Bill 3135, House Bill 4346 and

House Bill 4328. House Bill 4346 would provide an income tax credit of \$1,000 per year for volunteer firefighters who have served in that capacity for at least six months of the tax year. House Bill 4328, Senate Bill 3027, and Senate Bill 3135 would provide income tax credits to volunteer firefighters and EMS workers of \$500 per year. While the language of the bills varies slightly, the intent is to provide a benefit to those who volunteer their time and service as a first responder.

As is often the case with legislative matters, the devil is in the details. As introduced, these bills would only apply to firefighters who receive no compensation or very minimal compensation of no more than \$240 annually. This will disqualify the many "volunteer" firefighters who receive small amounts of compensation and may not incentivize additional volunteer firefighters into the workforce. IAFPD is currently communicating with the sponsors to clarify their legislative intent and offer amendments to the bills to broaden their scope.

In addition to bills intended to recruit and retain volunteers, the Illinois General Assembly is looking at ways to make it easier for volunteer departments to meet statutory requirements. Legislation was passed last session to address shortages of emergency workers in rural areas. House Bill 2864 (Public Act 102-450) would allow EMS system medical directors to make exceptions to the credentialing process to allow registered nurses, physician assistants, and advanced practice registered nurses to apply to serve as volunteers who perform the same work as EMTs.

House Bill 628 was a related bill that would allow rural ambulance services to apply for alternate rural staffing authorization from the Department of Public Health to authorize the ambulances to be staffed by one EMT licensed at or above the level at which the vehicle is licensed, plus one Emergency Medical Responder in circumstances where there are not enough licensed personnel available.

As awareness of the volunteer firefighter shortage grows within the General Assembly, we can expect to see more bills intended to address the problem filed in the House and Senate. IAFPD is actively weighing in on these measures and working with legislators and stakeholders to craft policies to support volunteer first responders throughout the state. ■



The new **2021 Edition** of the **Trustee's Handbook** has arrived and is available for purchase \$50 each. The authors revised about 30 pages of the previous 2018 version. This exceptional resource is a breakdown on the duties and responsibilities for the administration but also explains the fire laws in layman's terms. Contact IAFPD to order at 217-525-6620 or email info@iafpd.org.