

Hello Senator Boquist --

I am writing in support of SB0471, scheduled for hearing today in Salem.

As the paid chief of an otherwise all-volunteer fire department, I have first-hand experience with volunteer responders who are called to emergencies during hours normally committed to their work for a variety of employers.

I can attest that some employers do not make it easy or possible for volunteer responders to leave their jobs for the purpose of serving the public, in a capacity which the public fundamentally relies on for safety and health.

The continued health of volunteer emergency services agencies faces many challenges which have only risen in the recent past.

State laws now require volunteer responders to train and certify to the same standards as career professionals. The time commitment alone imposed by this requirement poses a significant obstacle for many volunteers. While most career responders are trained and certified during working hours, a volunteer must find the time outside of working hours, and balance this commitment with his or her personal and family life, educational goals, church, and so on.

Where once an organization like my department could rely on a deep pool of lightly trained but dedicated volunteers, these days it is exceedingly difficult to find, recruit, and retain volunteers who can afford the time and attention to reach certification.

We then find out that many of those rare volunteers are told by their employers that the vital service they have been certified to provide is not an excuse for leaving work.

Imagine how frustrating it is for those volunteers. They have dedicated a huge part of their lives to meet State requirements for providing a vital service, largely without compensation (some volunteers receive a token award or mileage reimbursement). Their communities do not have another mechanism for providing that service, and on the whole cannot afford the cost of a fully professional department. And yet the volunteer responders are shut out of the opportunity to save lives and property, because their employers have the choice to deny them leave.

That discourages the volunteer responders, which makes it more difficult for their departments to find, recruit, and retain the next generation of volunteers.

SB0471 takes an important step in the right direction of ending that downward spiral.

I have read the draft bill, and though I sympathize with employers, a business with more than twenty employees is not irreparably harmed by accepting a policy which reasonably allows a volunteer provider of emergency services to leave work under defined circumstances in order to save lives and property. Objections to the bill should focus on improving those defined circumstances, not on outright opposition.

I urge our representatives in the legislature to vote in favor of SB0471.

Jim Appleton
Mosier Fire Chief

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