



Statement of Support: HB 3075
Oregon Fire District Directors Association
Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association
Before the
House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
March 23, 2017 – 3:00 pm; Hearing Room E
Genoa Ingram

The Oregon Fire District Directors Association (OFDDA) was formed in 1950 and serves the elected public officials of over 200 Fire Protection Districts throughout Oregon, all Special Districts formed under ORS Chapter 478. The five-member governing boards are responsible for the financial and management oversight of the districts. They serve without compensation.

The OFDDA is the voice for these fire protection districts, most of which are small rural districts operating on an all-volunteer basis or with minimal paid positions, usually an office administrator and/or a chief.

The Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association (OVFA) represents volunteer firefighters across Oregon. Our membership is comprised of both volunteer and combination (volunteer responders working alongside paid firefighters) fire agencies. Some of these are special fire districts while others are city fire departments.

HB 3075 proposes to grant a \$250 income tax credit to firefighters who provide 100 hours of volunteer service (including training) to rural fire protection districts (formed under ORS 478) or rural fire departments. Both the OFDDA and the OVFA strongly support this legislation and are grateful to Rep. Hack for bringing it forward.

Step outside the I-5 corridor and, with few exceptions, you will find that volunteer firefighters are the driving force for public safety in our rural communities. They provide fire and life safety, EMS/EMT, search and rescue and other vital services. They risk their lives without the promise of compensation and, in fact, often expend their own funds to cover equipment, mileage and other related costs. They are the most selfless people I know.

Those of you who have served in the legislature any length of time have heard the discussions regarding attraction and retention of volunteer firefighters. There have been endless testimonials, examples, FEMA reports, and nation-wide studies. Nearly every

one of our fire service conferences includes a session on how to attract and retain volunteers and those sessions are always well attended. Attraction and retention of volunteers continues to be a problem in Oregon, as it is nationwide.

Because volunteers are considered public officials under the ethics statutes, a tax credit incentive is one of the few ways to reward our volunteers without violating the ethics laws. However, the subject of tax credits is nearly always a controversial and touchy subject. There are those who argue that we already have too many tax credits as it is and we should be thinking about eliminating some rather than adding to the list. I would counter that argument with one word: leverage. There is simply not enough money in the state, particularly in the rural areas, to fully fund a staff of paid career firefighters for every jurisdiction, complete with benefits and PERS. Fortunately, there is a group of people who are willing to step up and provide these vital services at no charge. A credit of \$250 for qualifying volunteers is a small price to pay to leverage the hours of service they provide.

By way of comparison, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council, South Carolina and Maryland both offer credits of \$3,000; Louisiana offers \$250, and Pennsylvania offers a \$100 credit. NVFA's representative estimated that there are approximately five other state that offer smaller income tax credits.

The Oregon legislature has gone far too long without recognizing and celebrating our volunteer firefighters. It is time to correct that oversight. Again, on behalf of the Oregon Fire District Directors Association and the Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association, we urge your support and appreciate you taking the time to hear the bill.
