

APPRENTICE FIREFIGHTER TESTIMONY 4/17/2021

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. We are asking for your support for HB 2373, Firefighter Apprenticeship. This program will have an immediate effect on our area which was devastated by the ALMEDA FIRE. It will allow us to simultaneously train and utilize firefighters on the fireground it will also put community members, such as qualified military veterans and underrepresented groups to work performing a much needed and vital service.

WHY

When individuals enter public service they generally do so out of a **legacy sense of obligation** or by making a choice among **competing priorities**.

OBSTACLES

Providing for basic needs is often the deciding factor when embarking on a fire service career. The sheer number of hours that the rigorous physical requirements, consensus standards and regulations require of entry level firefighter candidates, make a fire technology curriculum daunting. **Many become discouraged or dropout.** This is especially difficult for high school graduates, disadvantaged community members, underrepresented groups or working parents contemplating a career change. The pressure to “make a living” often overrides the desire for a rewarding career and serving the community they live in. Coupled with the financial shortfalls experienced by fire agencies in Oregon, there are very limited opportunities for paid training programs. Typically only those that can afford to go to school full time or have the support and resources to attend night school are successful.

ABOUT

The Firefighter Apprenticeship Program allows apprentices to work while training and attending college courses. They earn a paycheck and attend college courses and earn vocational certificates all while learning a usable skill. Much the same as an electrician, plumber or other member of the trades. They also provide an invaluable benefit to the organization and the communities they serve as **they learn on the job**. They will be serving as firefighters on active duty companies responding to fires and emergencies. Fire agencies in Oregon are sorely lacking in depth, with only approximately 1100 firefighters on duty to serve 4.2 million people and 95,000 square miles.

TRAINING

An apprentice will attend a skills based 636 hour orientation academy. This provides contextual training, allowing the apprentice to work safely and legally alongside veteran firefighters on fire companies. This in-service training consists of elements of the firefighter position including structural and wildland firefighting, hazardous materials and transportation incident response and emergency medical care and specialized rescue. In the normal course of business a firefighter works long hours and is confined to their place of work. This makes regular attendance at a community college or university difficult. The apprentice will be provided time off to attend relevant college courses.

VALUE

Some agencies are uniquely poised to host the apprenticeship program and others will reap the benefits of a fully trained candidate that is ready to embark on a permanent career as a lateral employee or Journey Level Firefighter. The Firefighter Apprentice program would help the Oregon fire service drastically by boosting daily staffing levels and providing uniform standardized training. Another byproduct of the apprenticeship is the wildland component. These apprentices would be trained to fight wildland fires. They would participate in controlled burns on high risk forest landscapes and help mitigate the potential for a larger wildland urban interface fire. All the while honing their skills. Our forest agency partners have previously pledged to include local departments in their training. There are usually financial impediments and daily staffing requirements that limit participation in these cooperative opportunities. The apprentice position would be free of many of these restrictions as they do not replace permanent firefighters but augment the system. In short, we would be providing jobs and job training and filling a gap that is ever widening in our fire protection system.