

## Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Proposal

1.26.23

There is no question that Oregon needs to increase the recruitment of new volunteer firefighters and retain our current workforce who do an incredible job combating fires. A \$1000 income tax credit per recruited volunteer in SB 728, as in HB 4079 last year, however, is not the best way to attract and retain volunteer firefighters and EMTs. We feel there is a better solution to encourage recruitment rather than resorting to the usual tax credits that are cumbersome to administer, deprives the state of future revenue, and requires a long wait period by the recruit to receive the tax benefit. And it does not address the main reasons research has shown why fire departments are seeing reduced volunteerism, and these are **training funding** and **time commitment barriers**.

FEMA reports that 90% of Oregon's fire departments are composed of all volunteer or mostly volunteer firefighters, and only 10% composed of career or mostly career firefighters. Most fire departments are combined departments, but rural areas especially rely almost entirely on volunteers, yet have a far wider service area to cover. The **Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association** website cites the problems they face are *"funding, legislation requirements without adequate funding, and the time required for individuals to continue volunteering...Local tax revenues are not adequate to allow for ample paid staff. Time demands placed on volunteers, both within their agency and outside, are being felt nationwide."*

After completing firefighter surveys all across Oregon and other detailed research, a legislatively appointed **Firefighter Capacity Workgroup** and our own Legislative and **Policy Research Office**, (LRPO) [completed a study](#) *"Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Firefighters in Oregon"* just last November and has made recommendations. We suggest following their "Options for Impacting Retention". Four of the nine recommendations are issues which can be addressed by the Legislature. These are:

- Provide financial or scholarship compensation
- Improved resources for department
- More flexibility in training or requirements
- Reduce/increase the training hours or physical requirements

By far, the greatest impediment to increasing volunteers is the cost of training. Training requirements and regulations have greatly increased over the past decade with the complexity of firefighting and the ever-increasing calls for service. New recruits undergo extensive initial training of approximately 370 hours of firefighter training (NFPA 1001) and then an additional 144 hours of training to become certified EMT's (OHA), just for the opportunity to risk their lives to protect Oregonians and their property. At the current time, these trainings, and very expensive PPE costs must be borne by either the individual recruit or paid for from the small budgets of individual fire departments. In many cases, volunteers must pay for their own EMT classes which typically costs \$1,500 to complete.

We recognize the financial restraints that rural communities are under to fund local fire district service that relies on a crew of nearly all-volunteer fire-fighters in a combination fire department system. Most taxpayers pay for their local fire protection through an assessment on their property taxes, which is used in part to pay for initial and ongoing training.

**We believe a direct appropriation is a better and more equitable way to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters by using state revenue to reimburse new recruits for their training costs and for financial**

**support to fire departments that provide training from their small budgets as required by law.** This funding will also provide a much-needed boost to the fire service which suffered greatly in recruitment and retention in the past few years due to COVID.

## **PROSPOSAL**

We suggest that the General Fund or Other Funds provide a compensation package that would consist of a reimbursement to the volunteer or department for the hours of recorded training in a fire academy of up to 370 hours at the current Oregon Minimum Wage of \$14.75, for a total of no more than \$5,500 per firefighter. This compensation package could be given to the fire department directly if they already have a funded line-item budget for academy training. Volunteer Firefighters who complete a recognized fire academy and are cleared to respond to calls, would also receive funding to outfit their personal protective equipment (PPE) for both structural and wildland firefighting operations. This PPE cost would be limited to \$4000 per new firefighter. **The total would be \$9,500 per recruit. If 500 new firefighter recruits were to complete their initial training and receive the proper PPE to become active firefighters, the maximum financial impact would be no more than \$4,750,000.** With this funding, we would anticipate a 10% or more annual growth in new volunteers, and far better retention of the firefighters we have. The benefit of this funding helps both extremely rural areas where population and resources are limited, where departments must send their personnel out for continued academy training, as well as in more suburban locations where initial training may be local, but it would help academies bear the costs of new members.

**You may ask why the state, rather than local property tax assessments should compensate fire departments and recruits for training and their equipment?** The answer is that the increase of new volunteer firefighters to the workforce helps offsets the growing costs of wildfire mitigation with rapid boots on the ground intervention. In Oregon alone, the benefit of a stronger volunteer workforce saves taxpayers millions annually in both personnel expenses as well as by preventing huge property damage losses. The State might be eligible for reimbursement from the federal government by FEMA or from one of several buckets in the IRA. This system would be far more efficient and equitable than fire departments each applying for individual grants.

We feel that it is in *all* taxpayers' best interest to have a strong volunteer fire force.

**Matt Aalto, Captain and Trainer Officer** for the Gaston fire department put it this way: “

“We all have a mutual enemy in fire, regardless of location. The major fire storms of 2020 all began in rural communities and this was the first time in memory that they transitioned into the neighborhoods of major populated areas causing millions in destruction and costing the lives of at least 9 people in the state as reported by OPB. Oregon is following the trend that California has been seeing. Think of Paradise and Megalia in 2018 for example. Additionally, rural areas do not have the population to get the same tax dollars as highly populated areas have IE: professionally-paid career firefighters in populated areas, combination departments in between, and volunteer departments in the extreme rural areas. Because there are fewer people, and less funding, but greater fire potential and concern that will reach the populated masses as it spreads, this is where the prevention to enhance protection model exists with efforts that will immediately impact the rural but will save the populated masses millions in property, state conservation, and lives. It's important to remember that career departments have similar recruitment issues that volunteer departments have, as volunteer

departments are the number one recruiting resource for career departments. Finding volunteers and providing the essential training they need to become career is expensive, takes time, and when not shared among both volunteer and career pools, would be impossible. So this isn't just about those who pay a higher or lower tax rate on a personal or geographic basis, this is a statewide concern that benefits everyone in a direct or indirect method. This is about the men and women who choose to do this to protect not just their communities, but any community they are asked to mobilize to. In Oregon, under the direction of the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office, Oregon firefighters will deploy anywhere in the state where the need is the greatest. This includes the major populated areas where volunteers set up tents in fields or rodeo grounds and provided fire service so that the existing members of their local departments can continue to meet the needs of their existing calls for emergencies. Support for volunteer firefighters and their communities is also support for career departments and those they serve.”

We believe this package will more than pay for itself in reduced firefighting costs, property damages, saved lives and insurance premium increases as the climate continues to increase wildfire potential.

The financial package could expire after four or five years and then be evaluated as to its effectiveness. Additional incentives could be considered that may include a length of service bonus for volunteers who have maintained their certifications who help support the retention of Oregon’s volunteer workforce.

In addition, we think the funding should be contingent upon at least one community engagement by the department, plus 20 hours per year of public education service delivering information about home hardening, fire safety, and prevention.

We hope you will consider this solution as an alternative to an annual tax credit to the recruit, because it is simple and direct and eliminates both delayed benefit to the recruit and DOR administration costs and solves the biggest impediment fire departments face in attracting and retaining a qualified firefighting workforce--training costs.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide comment.

Matt Aalto, FO, MFO  
Captain/Training Officer  
Gaston Rural Fire District  
(W) 503-985-7575  
(C) 503-932-7875

Josie Koehne  
Small Woodland Owner  
Gaston, OR  
Member of Tax Fairness Oregon  
503-866-3346

