

Submitter: Josie Koehne

On Behalf Of: Gaston Fire Department

Committee: Senate Committee On Veterans, Emergency Management, Federal and World Affairs

Measure: SB728

For the record, my name is Josie Koehne. I live in Gaston, in Washington County. I have been working with Matt Aalto, Captain and Training Officer at the Gaston Rural Fire Department. Matt has testified before Congress on fire fighter recruitment and training. We have an alternate proposal to attract recruitment and have submitted detailed written testimony.

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. However, a \$1000 income tax credit per recruited volunteer in SB 728, we feel is not the best way to attract and retain volunteer firefighters and EMTs. 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 that research has determined are why fire departments are seeing reduced volunteerism, which is funding for firefighter training and time commitment barriers.

FEMA reports that 90% of Oregon's fire departments are composed of all or mostly volunteer firefighters, and only 10% are 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 that 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." Using surveys from firefighters all across Oregon, the Firefighter Capacity Workgroup and LPRO completed a study "Recruitment & Retention of Volunteer Firefighters in Oregon" just last November and its finding agree with this assessment. We should act on their recommendations. We believe a direct appropriation is a better and far more equitable way to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. by using state revenue to reimburse new recruits for their training costs or support fire departments from their small budgets that provide the training that is required by law. We suggest that the General Fund or Other Funds provide a compensation package for the hours of recorded training in a fire academy of up to 370 hours at the current Oregon Minimum Wage of \$14.75, up to a maximum of \$5,500 per firefighter and EMTs to compensate the recruit for the many hours of required training. This compensation package could be given to the fire department directly, if they already have a funded line-item budget for academy training. In addition, personal protective equipment is extremely expensive. Trained volunteer firefighters who are cleared to respond to calls would also receive funding to outfit

their (PPE) for both structural and wildland firefighting operations, This PPE cost could be limited to \$4000 per new firefighter, for a total of \$9,500 per recruit.

Although it would be more expensive than a tax credit, this would be a far more meaningful for the recruit and effective way to attract and retain firefighters than a tax credit. 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.

You may ask why the state, rather than local property tax assessments should compensate fire departments and recruits for training and 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. Because of our new climate conditions, fires